

The Phantom Player

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The announcer called the game-ending drive with a passion:

“Trench takes the snap, steps back, looking, looking – and there it goes! He let it loose to Triumph at the 20 – no one around him, he’s dancing into the endzone and that’s it! The Stingers pull another rabbit out of their hat in the 4th quarter. No one is cooler in the pocket than Randy Trench, they were all over him and yet still no one has a better eye for seeing the open man. It’s as if he willed Triumph to be there where he wanted him! Beautiful! The Stingers win a spot in the playoffs, 27 to 24 over the San Diego Chargers!”

Trench took off his helmet, and smiled. In a half second, he would be jumping up and down with his teammates, screaming and delighted - but that half second he had to himself was all his own. *That one’s for you, Joanna*, he thought.

WHAM! The expected slam and hug from linebacker Terry Bucharme caught him off guard, but fortunately tight end James Devon was coming in from the other side and tossed him back toward upright. He got his legs under him and he joined the jostling, jumping, overjoyed mob.

Lights flashed everywhere as usual. He once felt like he would never get used to the afterflashes – any normal person would put up their hand to block lights that bright - but he had learned to look like he was completely in control, even when flashbulb afterimages were burned on his retina. His legs knew the way to the coach, and after the coach to the locker room – he could have done it blindfolded.

The next day usually started with films of the game the day before, and films of the next team they were to face.

“Rand,” said coach Bedimer, tossing a set of glasses with wires dangling off to Trench, “we want you to start working with some Augmented Reality. We’ve got some new technology which would let you simulate playing against other players from other teams – like the Look Team, but with real data from the individual players – shown right over their bodies as you’re seeing them. It’s not legal to use it in the games yet, but it would be great training. And fun - hell, you could play virtual fantasy football if you wanted. I know you’re not a fan of virtual, but you’ve got to try this!”

“No, I’m not a fan of virtual, you’re right. It’s not realistic enough...and the information is too distracting. Wait -” he put up his hands, knowing that Coach would tell him how close to real the sim was. “I know, it’s close, and the information is good. But those ever

so slight, unrealistic delays - they throw off my timing. You know, I did look into it. I know the Air Force proved that the basics of flight can be learned by using a box with a stick, but we're not talking about the basics of football here. And the pilots – they go on to the real thing for a reason.”

Bedimer had a good sense of the pace of a conversation, the progress of a new idea. He knew when to listen and let his star quarterback, in particular, work something through. No one else would talk to their coach like that, nor would he accept it in the same way. But they had a tacit agreement, that whatever magic mix of skill, instinct, emotion, preparation – and luck – had brought the team with these leaders to this successful season – their relationship was part of it. Trench was free to express himself – and then do what Bedimer said. He would, but Bedimer knew enough to let Trench get there on his own. The balance in their relationship was a part of the special mix.

Trench rewound the film he was reviewing of the recent game. “Here, see - run the play we just did. Watch the viewer. In real life, I made the throw and he made the catch. Put that in the program and the delay would make Triumph miss it – but I threw it just that much harder to get it to him. You just can't get that refinement in the helmet, even with great sensors taped all over my arm. We're talking about the thousand factors I don't even consciously know about, which my brain integrates in telling my arm exactly how to throw. You can't give me *that* with this,” he ended, tossing the AR setup back to the coach.

“When you can, *then* give me a call.”

Bedimer waited a beat, knowing Trench's gentle curiosity would out eventually.

Trench started to walk out, then turned back, softened. He believed in encouraging new thinking, in supporting innovation – supporting everyone on the team to pull their weight and put out their best effort. Balancing the new with a grounding in reality was important, too, though.

“Listen,” he started, “use it for the rookies, teach them our basic plays that way, fine – but then give them to me on the field. I don't want them forming bad habits, and I don't want to mess up my timing.”

“Defense wants it.”

“Fine – let them have it.”

The rookies loved it, especially. They learned the plays faster, they knew more information about the other team than ever before. There was no substitute for taking that knowledge to the field, but it made the off-field time a lot more enjoyable.

“It's like my SNAP app,” said Jinio, one of the up and coming defensive ends. He was leaving a training session, sweaty and glowing. He wasn't likely to play this season, but

he was studying hard and practicing hard and just happy to be in the game. “*Something New About Pics* - every city we go to, I get my own virtual tour. I walk around and take pictures, and as I upload them, and the app tells me everything about the building or tree or person or whatever I uploaded. Having it for the opponents here – it’s making me a better player, man.”

Trench nodded, “That’s great – keep it up,” and watched as the rookie returned his focus to the app, a little more spring in his step after the positive encounter.

Trench wasn’t opposed to technology. He had the same app on his phone. But he sure didn’t want it in his head.

The newspaper cover under glass on the coffee table looked at first like the other photos in the office. The whole room was covered with faces and emotions - shock, joy, surprise, relief, calm. But the newspaper cover showed a composed face: Jamie Scheck, sports photographer, Sports Photojournalist of the Year (“like the Pulitzer,” he explained to his parents) for the close-ups of athlete’s faces at crucial moments. No one took *his* picture at the second he found out he had won. He smiled at the irony, put his mug down on the table and pulled the viewer back onto his lap.

“Congratulations on your prize, Scheck” called out the editor of the sports page as he walked past the open door. Though he could have gotten a job at any sports magazine, Scheck had chosen to stay at *The Boston Globe*, not only covering the major league teams but sometimes showing up at local teams and high school games, even elementary school games as well. He was fascinated by emotion and sports, and had developed a specialty in capturing incredibly tight close ups of athlete’s faces at crucial moments – wins, losses, tie-breakers, little moments that in retrospect make the game. His next assignment was a comparison of Randy Trench with a young child at baseball playoffs and a senior in the Over 50 soccer league, all at critical moments in their season or in a single game. The Stingers were obliging him by making it further and further into the post-season, having just clinched a spot in the playoffs. He had penciled in the Superbowl, blocked off entire weeks for the playoffs. He had his pictures of the child from the prior spring baseball season – a pitcher as he watched his pitch knocked into eternity by the opposing team for the winning run. It was anguish and resolve and a hundred complex emotions all expressed by what seemed like a hundred muscles. He had been intrigued by that old psychologist’s line – it takes three muscles to smile, and ten to frown – he strove to see every one.

The prize money enabled him to upgrade his camera, to a new digital with an ultimate zoom. He wanted to see those muscles even more closely, to see the shadows thrown by the smallest one, to catch corner eyelashes crossing or splitting as someone reacted. He always aimed to capture the *right* millisecond of emotion, and took enough shots to be able to pick exactly the picture with the reaction he wanted. He could read people, and he could read events. He had learned to listen to his gut long ago, and when instinct raised his camera, he just followed and opened the shutter.

He did do posed photographs for athletes themselves, or magazines, to make some additional money as well. One of the things he liked to do was let the athletes take pictures of him, first. He let them feel the camera, look through the lens, see the result. Most players liked his photos, once they got used to the idea of the inner workings of their feelings being revealed to the nation. They were used to the idea that emotion was an important part of sport, and that part of their toughness was an ability to go on despite strong feelings. What they didn't like was the way emotion was simplified – happy at a win, sad at a defeat. His pictures allowed the complexity of emotions to be expressed, more than the words sometimes. When they liked his pictures, that was what they liked. When athletes hated his pictures, that was what they hated, too. Fortunately, he wasn't taking pictures of the prize committee, and *they* had liked the pictures regardless of what the subjects thought.

Most people were not as attuned as he was, but he knew about that half-second of privacy which Randy Trench had before the mob, could see how much it meant to him. His job was to capture emotion about the game, not a private life, and he respected that half-second, leaving it to Randy. He had the pictures, of course. But he would never show them to anyone.

Another tough practice. Trench looked over to the sidelines and tapped his helmet in frustration – he couldn't hear a thing. No time-outs left, he called the play.

Someone in the front office had decided it would be a great idea to have the team participate in the latest football gaming upgrade, and to get the quarterback's point of view recorded as closely as possible, to be sure the simulation had verisimilitude. So he had a small camera on his helmet – a day or two was all they asked, and he'd relented.

The balance was a little off in the helmet. He hated that. But he got used to it. An exquisitely fine-tuned sensory system also had to know how to exclude the irrelevant and focus on what was important.

Keith DePau jumped up and down in front of his computer screen, pumping his fist in the air – “Yes!” He danced the confident prance of success, posing at the end to the approving gaze of his mirror. Jerry Langford had just caught more passes than any other receiver that week, thanks in part to Randy Trench's last pass being dropped in the most recent game. Keith's Fantasy Football Team was at the top of the pack for the week, and he'd racked up quite a bonus. If it was a bunch of money on the line he'd have been even more excited, but he only played penny-ante. It was a challenge of finesse and of pride. He played in a league where each player had to crunch their own numbers, and no one used the online services.

He typed into his open chat.

HOW'S THAT? 17 POINTS! I'M THE KING!

KING OF A VERY SMALL WORLD, SHRIMP

I DON'T CARE WHAT U THINK, JERK

But he did.

PLAY FOR REAL SOMETIME.

LIKE THE COLLEGE POOL IS BIG LEAGUE? YOU WISH. NO SKILL INVOLVED AT ALL.

GTG

Keith looked away from the screen and into the mirror. Deflated again. But a small smile crept into his cheeks as he watched himself in the mirror – his brother had actually been tuned in, watching how he did. Dente did care, after all.

He felt a little guilty at being so happy. If Trench's receiver hadn't dropped the pass, his best friend would have beaten him. He started to look at his line up for the next week, and heading into the playoffs.

He had done well in the virtual draft, gotten most of the players he wanted, and through a few waiver acquisitions had made some post-draft adjustments as the season started to play out. He didn't go for the highest ranking players, he went for the slightly lower but more steady, reliable producers. He had proposed a trade with one of the other players, but it was rejected, and he'd ended up happy anyway at this point. Other guy's loss.

The league not only played during the regular season, but if he had players from the real-life teams that made it through the real-life playoffs, there was a bigger prize to be had. He wasn't ready for a keeper league where he would keep the same team year to year, but he liked having to make long term bets on individual people – he liked picking a team of people he could believe in. He almost was to the point where he didn't care which team won in the real-life football world, he just paid attention to all the games to see how his own 17 players were doing. He knew almost everything about them. Now that they were into the playoffs, there were fewer of them left – he had players from three of the teams in the playoffs, and by the time the Superbowl came around, he might have only one player – but so would the other people, probably. It would be a matter of a few points to win the big pot, if he got that far.

People misread nerds so much. He chose to share his life with others who cared about the same things as him, used the same language and ways of analyzing the world. They had likes, dislikes, love and friendship, but the currency of those relationships just didn't revolve around fashion or athletic prowess. The currency was measured in cleverness, kindness and fun, in equal measure.

His brother played real life college football, and entered the NFL pools there. He didn't really understand Keith, or why Keith liked all the math that went into the fantasy calculations. Really, what he didn't understand was that it *wasn't* just math. Keith had to know what was going on with the players, and with his opponents' players. Entering the playoffs, there were fewer people to keep track of. And with Trench throwing dropped balls, Keith wanted to know what was going on with him. If he could downgrade the expectations for Trench's point output, his own outlook would get better and better.

He started to take a look at the news feeds on the players. There were some striking close ups, and he paused to scrutinize them and see if he could get inside Trench's head.

Inside Trench's head was usually a pretty straightforward place. He could size up complexities faster than most, and that was what gave him his edge. It wasn't that the world looked simple to him; it was that he could see the thousands of little details, assess their impact on his goal, and adjust in an instant. Others studied those decisions in hindsight, and he often was fascinated how they could lay out in elaborate charts and prose what he knew in his gut. They were, in effect, helping him use his rational brain to understand his gut more. He had always trusted his body to throw the ball, to run, to dive or even tackle when need be. What made him a great quarterback was that he had learned to trust what it told him about what he should decide, as well. "Feeling it in his gut" was the common expression, but he "felt" in many spots – he mapped the world onto his body, he coded information viscerally, and then he processed it there too. It almost felt like he was thinking with his body, and all he had to do was listen with his brain. There was barely a moment of approval in every action he took, but it was there – his brain was in charge. But it listened quickly to reliable advice from the body.

At least, that was how it usually worked. He was starting to doubt, now... and doubt was the biggest danger to him. Others had questioned his capabilities in the past, but that had never shaken him. He knew his own way through every situation. Most of the time he could follow through and make it happen. When there was a fault, it was a fault of execution, not of decision. But now doubting hesitation threw off his carefully calibrated judgment and timing...even without augmented reality.

He was used to being observed, and he knew that the few missteps that had happened so far were not going unnoticed. Well, maybe something useful would come from all the unsolicited help which was bound to come. Then again, maybe not.

Frank DeSoto, well known sports commentator continued the media speculation: "We're here with the post game show. What is going on with Randy Trench?" He turned to his co-host, football great Joe Namanta.

"Well, Frank, it could be stress, he's had a big loss in the last few days. As most of you know, his sister Joanna died two months ago, and just two days ago, his mentor, George

“The Rock” Dormier also passed. They were by all reports still very close, and he’ll be heading out to the funeral tomorrow.

“Of course it also could be that big hit he took in the second quarter – knocked his helmet right off! Or maybe the shoulder is acting up again. You have to remember, he’s actually playing great – if he weren’t such a consistently stellar player, we wouldn’t be talking about this so much. On a conventional scale, he’s still at the top of the field of course. But on the standards he himself has set, he’s simply a little off.”

DeFord jumped back in, “As always, we have our go to specialists – sports psychologist Marina Gianco, and of course, Vyra, our sport psychic.” An almost imperceptible grimace tried to pass as a smile as he turned to the woman next to him, “Vyra?”

Vyra looked like a sport psychic, with a mix of island voodoo and modern style. “Well, Frank, I have to say that I’m not sure what’s happening with him. I can’t get a clear vibe. It *may* be someone trying to contact him from the beyond. Sometimes the link between the here and the there is patchy. But I can tell you one thing – this will keep happening until it is dealt with. The beyond never gives up.”

“And Marina?” A breath of relief.

“Frank, I can’t answer for the beyond, but as for the here and now it certainly wouldn’t be surprising if these personal losses were on his mind. The metaphoric here could be very important – he used to throw to his mentor while they worked together, and he once said ‘I see him in every receiver I throw to.’ If he’s off, it could be that with Dormier dead, he is simply no longer ‘there’ in every receiver Trench sees. Maybe he just can’t see the receivers like he did. And for once, I agree with Vyra – this probably will keep happening, if he doesn’t deal with it.”

“And the question is,” Frank continued her theme, “does he have to reach inside to deal with it or all the way to the beyond – and who pays for *that* phone call? Or is something else going on. Thank you, Marina and Vyra.” He turned to the camera, “We’ll keep you up to date on what’s happening in this developing story. But now, to some ducks who excel at mini-golf...”

Focusing on what was important wasn’t working for Trench. A dropped pass, thrown a foot too short. Add that to a pass thrown too long two games ago. It had passed the point that others wouldn’t put it together. He covered the best he could – the wind, a mild injury, the sun in his eyes. But sometimes he saw things that just weren’t right.

At first he had thought he was just misjudging a shadow’s indication of a player’s position. This last time, though, he was sure he had seen the receiver in one spot, thrown the ball there, only to find that the receiver just wasn’t in that exact spot. Others might accept that a series of chance, but explainable, reasons led to these errors. He knew

better – it wasn't the sun. It was him. He was seeing things that just weren't there. But who on earth do you talk to about something like that when you're famous and a leader?

Finally, he'd told the coach the minimum he could. It had not gone well.

"Hallucinating???" You've got to be kidding me," it had begun. "Now, I know it can't be drugs," his coach had said with a sharp look, "because you're playing too well overall." He paused, to be sure that the weight of that consideration sank in. Trench met his gaze silently, and coldly. He continued, "And you don't do that stuff anyway." But he had been checking. That point satisfied, he went straight to action.

"All I know is we've got three weeks until the Superbowl," his coach had said, "and we can't really assume you can just hang on and get through the Divisional and Conference games either, so solving this problem sooner rather than later would be optimal. We have to pull out all the stops. Are you willing to try *everything*?"

So he had gone to the neurologist, and the psychic, and the past life regression specialist. He'd had a battery of medical tests, and the statisticians had crunched all the numbers to see if sunspots could account for what was happening. He'd listened to the advice of elementary school children and hard-core fans. He had mango massages and new underwear. He had even tried VR simulations of the games.

No one had the full information of course, just knowledge that he was miss-firing occasional passes. And though he'd had a few good tips from the middle school students, nothing had made him feel like he had a handle on what was happening. He'd eaten some of his mom's stew, which used to be the cure for anything that ailed him. So far even that had not fixed the problem.

Things *seemed* normal at practice, but he still felt like something was off. It was gnawing at him. More than just the few times he missed his target because of the visions, he was not comfortable in his own skin anymore, never really sure if what he saw was real or not. It was affecting his whole game.

There was one last meeting he had to go to in order to satisfy the coach, and himself, that he had tried *everything* they could think of.

Trench had been sitting next to the potted plant in the waiting room, studying the branching of the leaves. Everything was patterns to him. He saw them fast, assessed them faster. His brother was a plant breeder and used those same skills to identify flora, seeing patterns not only in plants themselves, but in relationships of species. It was in their blood. Trench couldn't find a pattern in this experience yet, but he would.

Sports psychologist Sandra Stubing was smaller than Trench expected, but she radiated the kind of confident presence he recognized in a fellow athlete. She had been an

Olympic precision iceskater, prior to a career-ending injury. Her husband was a physical therapist, and former skater as well. “Each of us believes in helping athletes perform to their own best, on and off the field” said their brochure.

She met his hand with a firm grip of her own. He sat down on the couch – soft at first but solid underneath - and looked her in the eye.

“What do you know so far?” he asked.

“I know what the team doctor and your coach told me: that your performance is being detrimentally affected by what you report as occasionally ‘seeing people who are not there.’ So - tell me how you know they are *not* there.”

He was puzzled by her question and responded with a quip, “Because when I throw the ball to them it lands in the dirt. And they are gone. And no one else saw them. The other players, the coaches, the whole audience of millions of viewers – none of them saw what I saw.”

She matched his delivery in speed but not in dismissive tone. “But sometimes – rarely, I admit - you throw the ball and it lands in the dirt even when there is an intended receiver who other people *can* see. So I’d state your experience a bit more precisely as: you’re occasionally seeing receivers that other people can’t see.

“I’m not sure I understand the distinction,” he said. “Is there something you know that I don’t?”

“I don’t even know what *you* know yet...we have to get there, first. But I have found that the more precisely I can name the issue, the more often I find the clue in the name.”

“Look, just tell me - am I hallucinating?” he asked.

“We don’t know yet.”

“Is it a ghost then?” he asked with challenging eyes. “Because that seems to be the popular explanation.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” she answered directly, still holding his gaze. “Let’s pin down the ‘occasionally’ part. Do you see anyone-who-others-don’t-see when you’re off the field?”

“No.”

“How about when you are on the field, but not in a game?”

“No.”

“Okay. Maybe it has to do with specific situations then. Let’s follow up on that difference. We’ll explore what it’s like for you in practice and in a game.”

“What do you mean, ‘what it’s like’?” he asked with some skepticism.

“I mean two kinds of things: do you wear different gear, do you play facing the sun or not, do you prepare differently, do you eat differently, do you have any rituals that are meaningful to you – all the physical elements of the two situations. But I also do mean the squishy part – how do you feel in the different situations, who and what are you thinking about.”

“I’m not crazy,” he said; part statement but part question, too.

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” she laid an even, solid voice as the road for them to tread. He didn’t step on.

“But I see things that other people don’t – how could you not think I’m crazy?” he pushed against the evenness, challenging again but also wishing, hope against hope, that she didn’t think he was losing his mind. His favorite aunt had been diagnosed with a mental illness when he was a small boy. She had started to act “funny,” at first forgetting people’s names, then calling objects by the wrong name, then dressing oddly, showing up unannounced late at night or early in the morning. But she was still herself, still kind, still his biggest supporter. Then she was gone. He never knew where she went. But he knew he didn’t want to go there, too.

“Some people who see things that others don’t are called savants, insightful, brilliant,” she offered, curious about his response.

“And some are crazy.” He was almost adamant.

“And some have a neurological issue…” she continued.

“We’ve ruled that out. Well, it’s being tested, but doesn’t look like anything so far. So the alternative is *crazy*, right?”

She knew his focus on the word was from somewhere deep; and just as much she knew he wasn’t ready to share that with her. She chose her approach carefully.

“Well, yes,” she answered, “Some have a different reality.”

He was surprised, but relieved she agreed with him, and when she saw that release, she continued. “But I’m a big believer in evidence.” His eyebrows furrowed ever so slightly, but he was intrigued. Evidence?

She leaned forward deliberately, her energy and positive bearing pulling him along out of his focus on the word. “Let’s see what we have so far. Tell me exactly what has happened. Is it the same every time?”

He met her gaze, and deadpanned: “Well, I see a receiver, I throw the ball, and they tell me there was never anyone there.”

“What happens then?”

“What do you mean?” It was hard to take this seriously – this was psychology? Where were the questions about his family, about his past? He had allowed himself the briefest of hopes that she might take him somewhere helpful, and was ready to retreat into disappointment.

“I mean,” she said, patiently, but firmly, “Is the outcome of the throw always the same? In terms of the flow or who wins the game?”

“Uhh, well, we won most of our games – we are in the playoffs, you know,” he quipped. Then his cynicism softened. He decided to just answer the question; it was easier than the mango massage. “I guess we lost once when it happened. But no, the outcome isn’t the same.”

“Is it the same emotionally?” Ah, the emotions.

“Yeah, I get angry every time.” Easy answer, hard not to use it as a retort.

“I mean, beforehand. When you are getting ready to throw the ball, is it any different than other times you throw?”

He paused to consider the question. He was used to viewing video of his work, pausing it to examine the physics of every move, the strategy, what each player could see. He tried to replay an emotional recording and freeze it before each throw.

He spoke. “No different. I mean, there are pieces that are the same, and pieces that are different, in every moment of every game.” But he hung in the moment a little longer, in his gut. There was something he couldn’t put words to.

Saundra caught his internal pause, and let it sit. He didn’t say anything else, and in a moment she went on. “How often has this happened?”

He was quiet, looking aside and studying her plants. Then he looked at her straight in the eyes.

“It’s happened four times. My coach only knows about three, but I know it happened another time.” He looked like he had just confessed to a crime. In a way he had, because he had never kept a secret from his coach.

“This has only happened 4 times?” He was surprised by the optimism in her question.

“Yes. I thought you knew that. Does it matter?” Hope peeked around the corner again.

“You would have to have a very, very specific kind of craziness if that is what it is. It happens only occasionally, not all the time; it happens only in one setting, to which you clearly do not have a phobia. It’s not even every game, right? You’ve played 17 games this season already?”

“Right.”

“Now look. You’ve been through a rough time off the field – I know about your sister’s death, and now Dormier. There is a remote possibility that could have something to do with these false visions. You probably could use some help handling it in the context of the playoffs anyway. I’m happy to help you with that. But I think we should keep an open mind about other explanations.”

Other explanations? What was left? “Don’t tell me you think the psychic might be right – that it’s a ghost? I thought you don’t believe in ghosts.”

“I still don’t believe in ghosts. But I don’t believe that you’re seeing something that is not there. There has to be some way that it *is* there, even if the rest of us can’t see it. That’s what we have to find out.” She was sure – he could see it in her bearing.

“And how do you expect to do that? You can’t get inside my head.”

“Let’s just start with your experience. We have to start with your reality. Even if the rest of world says you’re wrong, that is where we have to start. What is it like when you throw a pass, and it’s completed? What’s it like when you see the options, choose the receiver, take your arm back, throw and watch the ball? What’s it like when it’s caught?

Trench thought for a moment. These were things he felt all the time, sometimes going through them so fast there was nothing to do but experience it, sometimes so slow he was aware of every breath and heartbeat, every blade of grass waving in the wind he had assessed. He began.

“I look downfield to get the options, but then while I’m deciding who to go for I’m also checking to see how much time I have, how well the line is doing against the rush, can I move to get to the receiver I pick. The arm goes back by itself, but I can almost feel the receiver out there,” he moved his right arm across his body to tap his left bicep, softly moving up and down his arm, “right here.” He stopped, looked at her puzzled. “You know, yesterday when it happened, I saw Triumph – I *saw* him – but I never felt him move.” He looked past her, at the wall, getting back in the memory. “Just before I got hit, I saw the ball flying toward where I wanted it to go, I *felt* the ball flying. I didn’t realize it until just now, but I didn’t feel *him*.”

That was the thing that he couldn't put words to. He looked back at her. "I suppose that's crazy – feeling someone you are not touching."

She looked at him intently. "Great athletes, and some others, have a very special sense of proprioception – an awareness of where your body parts are. Sometimes this sense extends to teammates on the field, as if they were an extension of yourself. And mapping your surroundings onto your body – plenty of people code information that way in their everyday lives. It's not crazy. It's important, and very specific.

"I'll have to look into what can disturb those processes – can I call your neurologist? In the meantime, pay attention to when it is happening, who you can sense in the usual way and who you can't. When you're looking back over your film, see if there are any other times that come back to you when it just didn't feel right in the same way. And think about whether there was anything else different."

"Anything? That's a lot of things."

"Anything that matters to you. That's all I'm looking for."

"Okay. You really think *this* is worth following up?" She nodded.

He got up to walk to the door. She cocked her head and asked, "And it's never happened in practice?" He paused, his back to her, his hand on the knob. "No," he said, and turned to look at her. "It hasn't."

He walked out to the car. He didn't know why he lied to her. She seemed like someone he could trust, and didn't seem like she was gunning to make a name as the shrink who diagnosed him a nutcase. If anything, she more than anyone else seemed to believe there had to be a real explanation, something other than nerves or a ghost or karma.

But it *had* happened in practice. It was near the beginning of the season, one of the early practices. A wild ball thrown away. He pretended that a gust of wind had caught it, but the truth was that for a second, just a split second, he had been sure that Triumph was about a yard ahead of where he was. Just as he let the ball go, Triumph was there, but in the jolt of being tackled, he saw the ball go short and Triumph leaping forward to try to reach it. He replayed the moment in his mind – he had wondered why Triumph had stepped back so far he had to do dive, figured Triumph's timing was just off or the sun had gotten in his eyes. Trench assumed he had missed seeing the step back as he was tackled. But now he started to think that Triumph was never where he thought he was the whole time. He hadn't felt Triumph then, either, but he had ignored the aberration, and just chalked it up to getting back into the season. Now he was paying attention.

Trench spent the next three rest days replaying video of games and practice. Known for his disciplined work ethic, no one thought it odd, especially given his recent wild throws.

They had just squeaked out a win in the last game, securing a wild card spot in the playoffs.

He watched the season backward, and as he got back to the first pre-season game, he paused at the moment where he saw himself tapping at his helmet. The communications had gone out and needed to be repaired, and he had worn his alternate game helmet to practice the next day – which was the day he threw short to Triumph. That was a “difference” and it certainly mattered to him – nothing was more personal than the helmet...but he didn’t wear that helmet all the time anyway. They’d fixed his communications, and he was back in his regular helmet for the next practice.

All the teams could get defensive communications systems now, too – one defense helmet could get sound, as the one quarterback helmet could on offense. All this was the result of teams protecting against their hand signals being read by the opposing teams. It changed the game, because it effectively cut off all the defensive players but one from the defensive call, and created an extra step, an extra pause in the execution. He didn’t like it, and neither did the other players. Todd had had some trouble getting the sound right, getting the words clear, figuring out how to spread the call to the other players fast enough. They were still working on it. It had added a bit of weight to his helmet, but the defensive moves were so hard hitting that a few extra ounces wasn’t much to adjust for.

Trench went into the engineers. “How’s that defensive system coming?” he asked.

“All set,” replied Gandorin, the tech. “Quadrophonic sound.” He was stuck in the 1970s, but he could fix things.

“So long as it’s clear. Todd said he couldn’t hear every third word last practice. That’s not good when the third word is ‘don’t’, you know.”

“I know. We rerouted the wire away from the face mask – some interference thing going on caused the buzzing. Same thing as on your helmet at the start of the season.”

Just another red herring...He went back to watching film.

Sandy Todd was one of Randy’s friends from high school; in fact they had been on defense together. They used to mess around pretending to be quarter backs, partly trying to see how they could best get at a quarterback in order to mess him up, partly to get a feel for the glory afforded that one position. Randy knew what it was like not to be the quarterback, let alone The Quarterback.

It was during one of those messing around sessions that the high school coach had first approached Randy about trying it for real. He spent a good chunk of the next summer at football camps, and a good chunk of the next two years as a backup quarterback for an arrogant, power-hungry kid with a great arm. Randy developed his self-disciplined,

independent improvement habits then, because he wasn't learning anything from the first string quarterback. He learned from observation, but also from practicing with everyone else, and from his mentors outside the team. He also learned not to dismiss anyone as if they were unimportant, to really know and value his teammates and show that to them.

That was why he had such a solid relationship with all the defensive players as his career progressed – with everyone that made the team work. He never wanted anyone to feel the way he had felt at first. He and Todd had kept practicing together in the odd moments. Todd always said, “You never know – an interception on defense and suddenly I'm in line for a pass.” Of course it had never happened. On an interception, you always run the ball – why give it a chance to get taken back? But in practice, he was always there, on the money.

Jamie Scheck was working on a study of frustration: the moment the pitcher knows the pitch is wide, or the moment the bat cracks and the sound means that it was hit hard enough to be a run. Or the moment the quarterback knows his pass is incomplete or intercepted.

This was why he took so many pictures. He could go back and look for new angles in old material, like finding treasure. He was setting up a contrast between the moment of release, when hope and expectation are still alive, and the flicker of recognition that hope was dashed. Did it come as suspicion which was then confirmed? Or did it come as a full fledged conclusion – the pitch is wide, the game is lost?

Coordinating the time clock on the video of the game with his camera's own timestamp, he had found the moment at the end of one of Trench's rare incomplete passes. He worked his way backward to the setup for the pass. As he enlarged his choice for the “before” picture of Trench getting ready to throw, he swore. There was an artifact, looking like a gleam of light from the face guard. Too distracting from the expression on his face.

It would be easy to wipe out the artifact with software of course, but he had an ethic of never touching up his pictures. Sometimes it was hard to live by a code, even if it was his own. But it was his belief and it had served him well. He knew, and his audience mostly believed, that everything in his pictures was real. He moved back one frame in the series, a millisecond later as Trench's elbow started to come forward moving the ball past his head. That would work well enough.

The AR company came to pick up their files and remove the recorder from his helmet. He hated having his helmet in anyone else's hands. He was also surprised the coach had agreed to let anyone record anything during a practice. And then he thought... *a way to get in his head.*



Raw footage had been edited to delete anything which might give an edge to an opponent, should the recording get into the wrong hands. Of course the company had almost a bigger stake in keeping the recording from getting into one of their opponents' hands – their corporate competitors were just as fierce as his football opponents and had less camaraderie. In addition, part of the contract included a huge fee if the recordings left the control of the company or were copied. Nevertheless, it was the only recording he had of *his* point of view.

He needed a copy of that recording. Really, he needed a copy of the raw footage. He had thrown a dropped pass at practice once in recent practices, during the last three days the recorder had been on. If there was any “evidence” to find, it would be there.

“Saundra,” he said. “I have a way for you to get in my head. But I don’t think it is going to help us. All it shows is that my memory doesn’t match what my eyes saw.”

“What do you mean?” she said. He brought the video over, ran through the part with the dropped pass.

“He wasn’t there. That’s all I can say. I put that ball where I wanted it, and he was three feet further back than this shows. I can’t explain it. But I’m sure.” With her belief in him, he had regained some of his confidence in what his finely tuned instrument told him. He knew he didn’t have the answer, but he also knew that he was sure of his facts.

“What did you say?” she said, walking past the lifesize video projection.

“He wasn’t there.”

“No, before that – you said that it shows that your memory doesn’t match what your *eyes* saw. But it doesn’t show that.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. It shows that your memory, your experience doesn’t match the recording. It does not show us what your eyes saw.”

“But the camera was set up to show my point of view!”

“All I’m saying is that we have more evidence that your experience is different than other points of view, even one really, really close to you, not one that is far away in the audience, or one not paying attention to what you see, like the other players.”

“Back to me being crazy, or back to a neurological problem, then.”

“Just keep strong in your own experience. We haven’t proved it is invalid yet, only that we can’t yet confirm it.”

.....

THE SUPERBOWL

.....

Elena Ramdira watched from the sky box with her husband, Stewart. All the investment came down to one moment. It didn't matter whether the team won or lost – all that mattered was that Randy Trench not complete this pass. Stewart was a mess – he was sweating. She found it disgusting. But she was cool and collected. She knew that either way, *she* would be fine.

He paid her no attention, as usual. He thought she didn't know how much he owed in the high stakes fantasy football game against his competitor. But she was no longer the trophy wife he had married for the way she completed his suits by hanging on his arm and smiling.

He had not noticed how she had changed in the last five years. He had asked her to find volunteer work in order to buff his image as a rich community contributor with a heart. She had dutifully followed suit, but on the advice of another wife, she had picked something she was interested in, which her husband disdained – children. Volunteering at a hospital, reading to children, she had started to ask the medical personnel about what their conditions and treatment. Over time, she began to follow up with research on the web to deepen her understanding. One of the patient advocates told her she was asking good questions, and that one moment was pivotal for her - she had realized she had a brain. Given the opportunity, she used it well.

She finished up her undergraduate work, and completed an online MBA program without Stewart even suspecting she was doing anything more than shopping online. But what to do next? How could she do more and get more experience without giving away to him how she had changed? He would never have liked the changes in her, and she knew that she would need to have some career success in order to leave him and stand on her own.

She played on his cheapness, pointing out that if he gave her a job, he would keep more of his printer company's money in the family – and if it was a fairly senior job, he would keep more money. "I'm bored," she had said, "can't you give me something to do?" He suggested the laser research department, as she expected he would. He was always describing it as a money-loser he used to offset earnings. He did not pay much more attention to that department than he did to her, and she knew he would pick it as the perfect place to put a token leader.

She was more than ready. At first, she let the staff resent her, and think they were sneaking around to keep things going the way they had been before her arrival. She arranged for each team leader to give her a presentation on their projects. She slowly started to make suggestions, and focused her interest on a projection technology. Able to project images right onto the retina, it eliminated the mess of papers and the dangers of your slide notes being displayed to others; and there was no need for a prompter. Just a small beam of light from the side, in front of your eye. In the past, the key potential users

of this kind of technology had balked – surgeons and pilots didn't like anyone messing with their vision, no matter how many safety tests had been conducted. She knew that the technology needed to be made completely unobtrusive, so much so that the projector and the light itself wouldn't even be noticed. She focused the team on those goals, and set about looking for the right test setting.

As the team made the projection device smaller and smaller, and worked on improving the remote control, she had found the perfect way to make a splash display of technology *and* to get back at Stewart. Stewart played in a new fantasy football league every year, watched every game of the season he could, and used company resources to make up for what he could not see himself by purchasing research and crunching statistics.

Although he had always had a tendency to view her as an object and ignore her as a person, Fantasy Football had been the last straw. She joined an "I Hate Fantasy Football" online group with an anonymous name, and drew some comfort from the fact that she was not alone. She wanted more than shared misery, though. Before she divorced him, she wanted him to really pay attention to her and realize what he had missed. And so she decided to attack him in the place he seemed to care about the most: his fantasy football winnings.

The idea actually had come from watching him. He often leaped off the couch toward the life-sized screen, yelling face to face at the underperforming object of his anger, reaching up to try to knock a pass out of the air when his opponent's receiver was about to catch it. It was just like the "Fantasy Football Widows" chat talked about – the FF players wished they could control the *real life* games so that their fantasy teams earned more points. That was what had given her the spark. She was going to make that dream of affecting the real life game come true - only she was going to make sure he *lost*.

She learned everything she could about Fantasy Football. She drove the technology development to create smaller and smaller projection devices, narrower beams, and to allow remote control from further and further away. Instead of projecting a transparent image, as most similar devices did so that the user could see the real world, she enabled a full, opaque image. She tried it herself – and it looked real to her. It had been ready for the first test.

By the point that the device was ready, she knew who she could trust – those who hated her husband, who really wanted to succeed at something instead of being in a losing division every year. A small team of 3 people were ready to follow her on this task, and into whatever she chose to do next. One programmer, to create the images; one to manage the hardware; one project manager. They would implant the projector in the helmet of a player, and then make them see things that weren't there – a receiver seeing the ball a foot ahead of where it was, a quarterback seeing a receiver a few feet off. It required covering up the real life receiver with a repetition of the background, and projecting the image of the receiver in the new position. It was easy on a still picture – much more tricky in real-time video. They had to eliminate editing and transmission delays. By the time they were done, she had more than just a projection system for

presentations. She had the basis of a whole company, or a whole defense-related technology system with Hollywood spinoffs. But she needed a proof of concept, and she needed to be independent of Stewart.

She had planned to make minor changes to the scores of multiple players so that no one would suspect what she was doing, until she revealed in private screenings to key investors exactly what she had done. She would try to only affect players late in the game, when it was clear what the score would be. She wanted her revenge, but not at too many people's expense. She knew that people betting on the spread would lose money if she influenced the score, and she knew that other Fantasy players would lose, too – but she had little sympathy for people betting on the work of others. She hoped not to affect the players' bonuses much, but that could not be helped. She rationalized her project a bit, but deep down had made the decision that her independence and well-being were worth a little bit of suffering of those who had made it big in life already.

The full team was never able to miniaturize the transmission of the huge amount of data it took to project the image – it required a line-of-site microwave transmitter. This limited her to influencing plays at one stadium only, and she had retooled her strategy. Luckily, her husband had misguided loyalty and had chosen the home-town quarterback for his Fantasy Team. The quarterback was the easiest position to manipulate points – throwing a fake receiver in here and there would allow her to just shave enough off the prolific quarterback's total points that he would fall short of Fantasy expectations even if his team continued to win games. They usually won by so many points that she did not expect to be changing the outcome of the season.

The security around football teams' equipment seemed a huge obstacle to her plan, but she knew how to get a hold of the helmet long enough to insert the projection instruments. The last member of her team, the inside woman, had taken a job in the IT group with the team. It had been easy to get at the back-up helmet, so often not in use. But to get at the game helmet had required a plan. By aiming the microwave at the helmet, she disrupted communications in practice enough times that the quarterback took it in for repairs and used the spare temporarily. She arranged a tour of the stadium for the children she volunteered with on the same day, and arranged for the kids to be shown the equipment repair room. On the day of the children's visit, she slipped the device to the woman when they shook hands, and when the helmet came in to be worked on, the woman embedded it in the faceguard. A small, pinpoint hole was the only evidence of the device – it tracked eye movement, received the transmissions, and projected the appropriate image. The one extra device, which would not be on a final product for distribution, was a camera which would transmit back to them images with the quarterback's point of view. No one would notice unless they looked very carefully, and knew what they were looking for. The chance of that was slim, unless she made a mistake, or someone very observant started paying attention.

Jamie Scheck saw that same artifact again. He was a study in frustration himself – once was just a nuisance, but twice – in his book twice was a pain in the neck pattern. He

hated to not be able to take the picture he wanted. Luckily, these were not the key moments of the game – they were the moments just before the ones he wanted. Still, he needed his system to be reliable *every* time he wanted a shot. What could it be?

He looked over the photographs again, enlarged them even further, almost to the point of pixilation - and realized that the light was not a random reflection off the cheek of the player, nor an artifact of the technology. It was a light going from the faceguard to the player's face. In the first artifact he had seen, it was just the shortest dash of light, which was why he'd thought it was a reflection off the faceguard or a problem with his new camera. But the second picture showed a slender tendril of light directly connecting the player's eye and the face guard. He didn't know what it was, but he knew it was something.

He took it to Lune, a scientist he had met at a conference on popular imagery. The woman took amazing pictures of science in progress. They could illustrate concepts and convey the key elements even to a lay person. She had been working with a laser specialist most recently, and Jamie knew he needed someone who specialized in light.

She projected the shot on a large screen, the line of light almost as tall as Scheck himself. It looked like giant kid-friendly straw, graded coloring from green to blue to yellow as it stretched from Trench's eye to his face guard.

“What is it? A defect in my camera? Or is there something there?” he asked.

She walked over to him, running her fingers along the streak which now covered her wall, from down low on one side of the screen to near his head as it turned yellow. “At first I thought it might be a thread, we get some beautiful refractions from spider silk sometimes. But it's too straight. In the middle of a game, it would be waving around more, or at least have some curve. Besides, you said this happened another time? That's a lot of spiders in what I assume is a fairly well-used and well-cleaned object.

“Yeah. Very well-used, very well-cleaned. So...?”

“So I don't think it is a thing. I think it is a beam. It's a beam of light.”

“Man, a reflection? I'm sorry I wasted your time. Usually I can tell. It just didn't line up with any of the light that I thought could be a source, and I couldn't figure it out.”

Lune didn't respond. He thought she was actually mad at him, though he was a bit surprised by that. She had seemed fairly even-tempered, and eager to dig into a visual mystery. But still she didn't say anything.

“Hey, Lune, really, I ...” he started.

“It's not a reflection,” she said firmly.

“Are you trying to tell me he’s shooting rays out his eyes? You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not kidding, and no, it’s not rays coming out of his eyes. But you’re quite right that the sources don’t line up. I checked that before you came over. And look how the beam is even the whole way. A reflection captured even digitally has a spark to it, it looks like a twinkle. This is just uniform – like a colored steel rod just lying between the guard and his eye.”

“You keep saying ‘beam’, not ray or some other generic word. I know you, Lune, you’re a very precise person. What are you not telling me? Are you trying to tell me he’s got x-ray vision or something and I captured it on film?”

“Took you long enough to notice.” Her back was still turned to him, but he could hear the smile in her voice. Before he could think about that, she went on. “See that dark spot around the end of the light? That’s not a defect, or an artifact. That’s a point source.”

“A light source? In the guard?”

“Yes. And it’s pointed right into his eye,” she said, tracing the line back down the wall diagonally to the left, till she was kneeling on the floor near eyelashes the size of tissue boxes.

“If it was just a reflection, his eyelids would have closed automatically in response to the brightness, no matter how disciplined he is. He wouldn’t have been able to throw the ball at all, or at least not with any control. This is, like me I suppose, a very precise thing,” she said, smiling at her self-description. Then she returned to the problem at hand. “What did you say happened after this?”

“Dropped pass. Fell short of the intended receiver.”

“Huh. Too bad, I guess, at least for him. I’ve seen something like this, but never this small.” She paused thoughtfully for another minute, then pulled back, sitting on her heels. Then she seemed to dismiss the thought.

“But then again, everything is getting smaller these days” she said, waving her hand at the nano-tech images that had just won her another cover of Science magazine, and then adding as he glanced over, “yeah, that ... and our budget. Lucky I have a scrappy intern looking for exposure in a real science lab. It’ll help his college applications, too – though he wouldn’t need any help, smart as can be. What game did you say this was?”

He could barely keep up with her ability to follow two threads at once. It was like being in a chat with multiple people. He shook his head and answered the last question.

“The 23rd.”

“Hey, Keith – tell me the highlights of that game on the 23rd!” she shouted into the next room.

A stunned teen appeared in the doorway, button down shirt half untucked from the slightly wrinkled khaki pants. Expectant eyes shone above a slightly nervous voice, which cracked as he said, “You mean the one I was telling you about? Where they won and I won too?”

“Your young assistant bets on football?” asked Scheck skeptically under his breath to her. “I thought more of you, Lune.”

“Not exactly. Just wait,” she said to him in an aside, then addressed Keith with a smile. “Yes, that’s the one. You said there was something that happened near the end of the game – didn’t change the outcome for the team, but gave you a boost in your side endeavors.”

“Oh, yeah, okay,” he started, and Scheck could tell there were a lot of words about to spill into the room from the doorway where the boy held himself back, waiting for permission to enter the queen’s domain. Only the words were admitted for now. She liked to play with power sometimes, Scheck noticed. Or maybe just with respect. But why was she doing this?

Keith was talking, and Scheck realized Lune was expecting him to be listening too.

“...so, when Terry realized that *he* wasn’t going to win, and *I* was, all because of that one dropped pass, he was like, ‘man, I should’ve bet the game straight on, forget all this fantasy stuff,’ and I was like, ‘yeah, I know, it’s so great for me’ but my brother didn’t really get it still although I tried to explain it to him and you know I –“

“Yes, yes, I do,” Lune interrupted him. “Thank you, Keith. Come on in. Take a look at this. What do you see?”

“Umm, well, it’s a coherent beam of light, entering this opening over here and transmitted from that block over there.” The section of the image was so enlarged that it was not clear that it was part of a face in a helmet. He had no idea what he was looking at.

“Thank you again, Keith. That’s all. How are the renderings coming?”

He jumped and started for the door. “I’m about three quarters of the way through. Well, five-sixths really. Well, anyway, if I stay another hour I think I get them almost all the way finished. Is that okay?” he said as he almost ran out the door to get back to the project.

“Yes, that’s fine. Thank you for all you’re doing,” she said as the last wisp of his hair cleared the doorjam. “Sweet kid.”

“So what was the point of that?” asked Scheck.

“The point was, the only time I’ve seen a beam of light like that entering someone’s eye was a demo at a conference I went to. Giant transmitter thingy mounted on glasses, supposed to project your presentation onto your retina and eliminate the whole need for ever facing away from your audience.”

“So, something is projecting images into Randy Trench’s eye? What is this, new virtual information projection or something? Wouldn’t we have heard about it? Is it some secret new trick?” The story was writing itself in his head. *The Stingers’ offense has implemented a heretofore unknown football technology, providing information to its quarterback in realtime.....*He was going to break the news of some new AR/VR technology that had been giving the Stingers their edge.

Lune didn’t care about the football implications. “I’m not saying that’s what it is for sure. You’ll have to ask him.”

He had already begun planning his questions.

Randy Trench was not up for another interview. It was the end of a long day of more and more questions about exactly what he thought the Stingers’ chances were. Many questions about the role he would play in their success, and his consistency. He was tired of deflecting. He was tired, period, at that moment. Not his usual state.

The PR coordinator had told him there was a last minute add-on for the one-on-ones. At least it was Scheck. Unusual for him to come for one-on-ones; pictures not words from that one. Good, expressive pictures, usually. What could he want? Maybe he was trying to make a switch, hedging his bets as the newspaper business continued to consolidate and spiral into nothingness...well, he’d know soon enough. Just one more and done.

Scheck was not carrying his camera.

Scheck was not carrying a notepad.

He was carrying a portfolio briefcase.

Scheck never got approval for photos from his subjects. What was up?

He stood up to shake the photographer’s hand, and as he crossed the room, he tried to get his bearings on Scheck’s mood. Something about the look in his eye said he *knew* something - something he thought no one else knew. He was not there to ask the usual questions. He was not there to ask. He was there to get a reaction...

“What can I do for you?” he asked as their hands met in a firm grip that took a probing half second too long to end.

“I’d like to you take a look at few shots.” They sat in chairs beside each other.

“What am I looking for?” Trench leaned into Scheck’s space, trying to throw him off balance. No luck.

“Tell me what you see. I want to know if you see what I see,” was the reply.

Scheck pulled out prints of the shots with artifacts, and laid them on the table. He let them sit for a full three seconds, then slowly his index finger led Trench’s eye to the first light burst in one shot, to the line from the faceguard to his eye. Scheck was not watching the photos at all. He had practiced the move, so that he could do it without looking down. He wanted the raw moment, the millisecond of recognition before a veneer of denial fell across the quarterback’s face. From that one millisecond he would be able to follow up with questions about the projection device, from a place of certainty that the team was hiding something.

But that millisecond passed, and the one after that, and all he saw was puzzlement. Trench did not know what he was looking at. Now, what could that mean? All the questions he had planned would not work if the quarterback was in the dark.

“Looks like I have the light of my brilliance shining forth from my eyes – or maybe I’m possessed,” quipped Trench. “Must’ve messed up your series to get an artifact like that.”

Scheck went in another direction. “I don’t think it’s an artifact. I don’t know what it is.” He was back to square one.

Trench heard those words differently, and had had enough. After all the interviews on this long day after the long weeks – he had just, finally, had enough.

“Geez, Scheck. You of all people! ‘I don’t know what it is.’ I don’t need more mystery hawkers in my head. Just take your pictures and get out. I play a game based on very real physics and a lot of practice and very human instincts. Take your Area 51 imagination and just leave. Man, I thought better of you – is the news business that bad? You looking to sell those to a rag and tell them I’m possessed? Well go ahead!” He got up to walk out, took three strides and then paused. Scheck could see from behind Trench’s shoulders tensed, then relented, almost with resignation. He looked up to the corner of the room, then turned a quarter turn, not quite facing Scheck.

“I’m sorry man. It’s been a long day. Just don’t sell some cockamamie story, okay?”

“Was never my intention.” Scheck kept it short, forcing Trench into one more sentence. “I just didn’t know what it was – really – it just *is*, and I can’t explain it yet, so I’m trying to figure it out. I don’t go for supernatural explanations when I don’t know. I sit with the not knowing, and I ask questions. That usually works – at least in journalism. Sometimes I never know – but I’d rather be curious and not know, and work with the evidence I have, than be a confident fool. Even if the evidence isn’t talking, so to speak. I thought you might knew.”

Oddly enough, those words seemed to soften Trench even more. “You sound like a ...friend of mine. She keeps saying the same thing – just focus on what is, and don’t go beyond that.” He paused again, took one more short, hesitating breath, then seemed to decide and move down field.

“This friend - she’s been looking for any...evidence...of any kind about what it’s like for me on the field. It’s just a longshot, but if your angle or your artifact can tell her anything - about unusual lighting, or something else - it might help.

Trench entered the stadium with new eyes. He searched the empty stands, the empty club seats, for the lingering glint of someone he couldn’t even imagine. Someone or something – a memory, a ghost, a goblin who could get in his head without the help of clinical training.

He went through his usual routines. Whatever it was, most of the time he was just fine. The odd moments were few, almost too few to have seen any pattern at all. He might get through this whole game without one of those odd moments. But something in his gut said this was not just the Superbowl for him – whatever had been going on, this was the final playoff in that other ethereal and surreal game as well.

All he knew was that as much as someone or something wanted him to occasionally fail, they still needed him to succeed most of the time. Someone with that much power could have just taken him out completely. So he would use it to his advantage – as long as he was playing, whether on his own terms or someone else’s, he still had a chance that he could take control, somehow.

Saundra Stubing greeted Scheck with reserve – all firm handshake, no disarming charm. He was put off, but still curious about whatever it was Trench wanted her to see.

“This line of light – see here – I don’t know what it is. I took it to a friend of mine, a scientist, and the closest thing she could think of was a projection device – like those Google live glasses but projected right on your eye.”

The mention of a scientist brought out a tiny ember of warmth in her cheek. “Scientist?”

“Yeah. Lasers and that stuff. I thought the team had a secret weapon and were using it to feed him information about the opponents. I was ready to write the expose – but Trench really doesn’t know what it is either.”

The ember iced as soon as he mentioned Trench using a secret weapon to cheat.

He tried to coax it back. “But we don’t know of anything as small as this looks like, and no way all the image processing power to project information about another team would

be that small even with the rate of miniaturization that's going on. So I have no idea what it is. I don't believe he has laser vision, and I don't believe he's possessed. Hell, I don't even know if these photos show anything *at all* at this point," he threw the pictures down, deflated. He had to get to the stadium soon to be ready for the game, and this was going nowhere.

"Tell me more about this scientist," Stubing asked. Straightforward, no warmth. Still, it was engagement. He described the visit, and the image projection technology, and his conversation with Trench.

"The only person I know who's been influenced by these errors with a good outcome is the kid in Lune's lab. Said his Fantasy team was going to do well, better than his brother's live pool at college." He was still deflated.

She looked at him. First time, directly at him, not just fleetingly glancing up from the pictures, but directly, holding his gaze. "His Fantasy team benefited?"

"Yes."

"That used to be a side thing, but it's big money now. Real money, not fantasy money. More than real gambling for all I know – well, you know what I mean. And it's spread to all kinds of sports."

He held her gaze as well, his thoughts extending through the unseen bridge between them to follow where her idea was taking them both.

"Are you thinking that someone is trying to deliberately manipulate the real players, in order to change their stats in fantasy leagues?"

"So far, that's the only concrete thing anyone has said that has any potential real weight behind it, crazy as that sounds."

"You use the word 'crazy'?"

She smiled ironically. "When it fits a situation. Never about a person."

"So you never thought he was out of his mind?"

She stiffened. "I don't discuss my clients." He regretted his remark as the bridge collapsed.

She was all business now. "We need to get to see this scientist you mentioned, and find out whether this light you found really might be a projection system – and if so, who could be using it? And how? If there's any time there might be a motive for manipulation, it is at the Superbowl..."

They met Lune at her lab with Keith. Keith, that brilliant, confidence-challenged, verbose kid, who had put it together first and just hadn't known it. They combed through the Fantasy Football records for the biggest wins resulting from Scheck's dropped passes. But no one had won particularly much and no one had lost particularly much so far. It all came down to the post-season and the Superbowl. And there was indeed one person who stood to lose the most if Scheck didn't perform a miracle tonight. All they could find were screen names of course, but BigMan1000 fit the bill.

“If this is real – and I'm not saying that it is – but if it is, all that processing power really can't be achieved in something that could be carried all over the field without being noticed. It would be bigger than a helmet or shoulder pads. There must be a huge computer somewhere in that stadium, and some way to get a signal to the helmet - a transmitter of some kind. But it would have to be direct line of site. We are going to have to go and look and see if we can figure out how it could be working.”

Scheck looked at his watch. “You can't get in there now – whole place will be shut down waiting to open to the public. I can get in – I have to get in, in fact I can't be late or I'll miss my spot. I can get you some passes to standing room but you'll have to come in with the crowd. I can stay down on the field and use my zoom to watch for that light, but you'll have to look for that computer, if it exists. And if it exists, you'll have to try to stop it...”

“If we find it, someone's got to tell Trench he's not crazy. Can you get to him?”

“No – he'll be completely isolated from anyone outside of the organization. And if it's someone in the organization, we can't tip them off. What if they panicked? He could get hurt. So far it's just his pride that's been damaged.”

“It's not just his pride – his confidence affects his ability to perform. If he has doubt in a critical moment, it could throw him off more than any image. We'll just have to hope he believes in himself enough...and at this point I don't know.”

The stadium was starting to buzz as crowds filled the hallways and spilled out into their seats, splattering colorful coats and hats and signs across the gray of the seats that filled the stadium from the lowest row to the nose-bleeds.

They knew the device had to be within the stadium in order to be close enough to transmit to the helmet. It was not portable, so it had to be in one of the places which no one goes into – the maintenance closets which were being renovated. Scheck had been surprised that the renovations were not completed by the time of the Superbowl – usually this organization did everything perfectly. During the first half of the game, they checked the side of the stadium closest to the standing room area. It was easy to wander in and out of the back end of the crowd, keeping an eye on the game via everpresent televisions at food stands. At halftime, the Stingers were trailing by 3 points, but not due to any problem with Trench – injuries and some errors had led to him being sacked twice.

But in the middle of the fourth quarter, Trench threw long and almost was intercepted. Scheck texted that he had seen a miniscule flash. Trench was angry, pacing back to the huddle shaking his head and whacking his hand against the side of his helmet.

Lune, Stubing and Keith had been scouring the stands from their seats looking for something metal that would be the microwave transmitter that looked like it was aimed at Trench. But nothing. The huge screen showed a sweeping shot from Trench's face as he through the ball, following it to the receiver as they tried to move down the field. Then Keith dropped his popcorn. "I see it! It's not aimed at Trench – it's aimed at the camera! Look!"

Stubing saw the flash of reflected sunlight off what looked like a pipe, tracking the movement of the camera as it swept back across the field to its neutral position. "When he's about to throw, the camera is always going to be aimed at his face, always! That's the money shot."

Lun said, "Someone could be using that angle to target the microwave. We have to get over there to see."

Stubing, Lune and Keith dashed through the halls. Alerting security that they had seen a flash of metal, they got to the first floor closet, unlocked the door – nothing. They ran up the stairs to the third level, unlocked the door and burst through.

Monitors filled the far wall. A large dish was aimed at the field through the window. A technician, stunned by the sudden entry, paused in the middle of an adjustment to the dish. But a large man with dark, thick-rimmed frames lost no focus at all as he continued to type into a console at the back of the room.

"Shut that thing down!" yelled Lune, pointing to the console. Keith ran over to Mr. Frames, momentarily at a loss for the mismatch in size, then kicked Frames in the shins and shoved him out of the way on his rolling chair. Other security officers entered the room and held Frames back as he struggled.

"Not today, you don't!" Keith said as he punched a button and ripped out a cord. But he stopped midstroke. It was too late. "He's already sent the file! I stopped it as soon as I could but I can't say if it got there or not."

Stubing ran to the window. She shook her head looking down at the field and up at the monitors on the wall as they showed closups of Trench's frustrated face.

"He doesn't know - He can't know if what he's seeing is real or not. Even if you did shut that down, he won't know. Come on, Randy, trust yourself...don't get fooled into not trusting yourself!"

They were down 17-14, 60 yards to go with time for one play left. Too far for a field goal to tie things up. A touchdown would win. It would have to be a pass, and everyone knew it.

Suddenly Randy had an idea – a crazy idea, but the only way to maybe cheat the cheaters or the ghosts or his own internal demons. He called a time out to settle the team and walked toward the sidelines. The coach started to move toward Randy, but stopped in his tracks as Randy headed directly to the defensive coordinator. He leaned in to say a few words and the coordinator nodded with a puzzled look on his face. The coordinator spoke into his microphone, and the coach's head snapped up – then he caught himself. He focused intently across the field at the opposite stands, hiding his lips with his clipboard as he talked into the microphone.

Randy stopped to get some water, took off his helmet to get a good drink, hoping no one noticed him casually pick up his spare helmet. The one with no communication equipment. But it was the only way. He led the team back on the field, not stopping for a huddle.

Frank DeSoto started the call as they ran back on the field. “Back on the field, they’re not going for the field goal, of course, though Reggie has hit a 55-footer in practice. In the huddle, break. Lining up as usual, but – huh? – that’s Todd in there at right tackle – Oh, just got word that Sandy Gawande was injured on that last play. Bad bit of luck there...and an odd choice to put Todd in.

“Trench’s helmet must’ve gotten banged up on that last sack, he’s got his backup on – maybe that will bring them luck. Now, with the new defensive communications, Todd will have changed his helmet, too – can’t have two members of the offense with hi fi now – another wrinkle of those new rules. Not every team has adopted defensive communications for just these reasons, it’s one of those little things you can forget in a swift-moving crisis – actually, now I do wonder if they remembered, looks like Todd’s got a pretty banged up helmet on. That could be cause for a penalty if they forgot.

“Now, two-way players who can swing offensively or defensively – well, they’ve been out of favor for a long time now – it takes a special player to be able to handle that switch. Todd’s specialized in defense for an awfully long time. Of course, Todd is a special player, and he’s got a long relationship with Trench...” He went on.

The defensive coordinator spoke into his mike again, and on the field Todd’s head jerked almost imperceptibly. No one would have noticed, but Trench saw the straightening of Todd’s back, the toes just a little more dug in and the heels just a little up. Message received. “Flapjack...”

DeSoto continued the call: “Trench pulls back- the linemen are hitting hard and the fullbacks have come in to protect him, he’s definitely going for a pass, he’s got little time and – whoa. Look at that, Todd’s broken through the rush and is heading downfield!”

Trench took two steps back as usual and reached up to his chinstrap. He ripped it off and racked his helmet off backwards.

“Trench took off his helmet! What’s he thinking?? He’s been sacked twice already! The guy’s risking his life!”

Trench saw Todd clearly, *felt* him - and pulled back his arm.

Scheck snapped the shot – confidence, no doubt at all, as the arm passed Trench’s face. Three milliseconds later, confirmation, and the usual slight nod. Completion! The private half second was a mystery of relief and renewal through Scheck’s lens.

But it wasn’t private with his helmet off. The entire world could see his whole face this time, and it morphed into a triumphant smile as he leapt in the air with both arms raised and was held aloft, caught by Bucharme and Devon from each side. The rest of the team swarmed around the eye of the storm and the swirl traveled up the field like a hurricane coming up the coast, gathering steam as people ran from the sidelines and joined in.

“Let me down, man, let me down!” shouted Trench when as they finally reached Todd and his own swarm, the two swirls merging. The two men beat a path to each other, and with arms aloft, both were lifted up anew.

Scheck was snapping pictures of the two men who would grace the cover of Sports Illustrated that week. Three floors and a thousand feet away, Stubing and Lune both leaped in the air. Keith had been madly pulling out cords and typing at consoles, and didn’t see that it was over until the two women burst up and shouted. He ran to the window and the massive celebration below confirmed that the shouts were pure joy.

The security officers had already gotten confessions from Mr. Frames and the technician, outing Stewart Ramdira’s company as the source of the technology, and Elena Ramdira as the developer. But Stewart would never know, and Elena would never go to jail or be sued by the NFL or Trench; a nice, confidential, defense department contract was going to allow her to spin out the division and divorce Stewart, while he lost the rest of the company in his Fantasy bet. Someone else in a powerful position had seen the same flash as Scheck, and had been waiting for the mover behind the manipulations to reveal themselves, or be revealed.

Trench finally knew that he wasn’t crazy. He had proved it to himself.

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