

# Encounter in a Small Town



by Linda M. Lanzi

Jerry had to wait in the doorway of the Information Center, his eyes adjusting to the dimness within. Once that was done, he could see Questor sitting at the main console, intently observing the lone screen that was in operation, in direct contrast to the multitude of images and sounds that usually spilled from every corner of the Center. Without turning, Questor increased the room's illumination, commenting, "Have you sufficiently exercised your body, Jerry?"

Jerry grinned and walked to the console, leaning on it and wiping drops of perspiration from his forehead. "If you mean did I have a good game of handball, yes, I did."

"You indicated that you were participating in the action for the exercise it afforded you, not the improvement of your technique," Questor informed him, most of his attention still on the screen; he was watching, Jerry noted, the movements of a middle-aged Oriental man in the midst of what looked like the conclusion of an uneventful business meeting.

Jerry sighed and replied, "My exercise was sufficient, Questor." He nodded toward the screen. "Who's that?"

"Samuel Miyasaka."

"The president of Rising Sun Aircraft? Isn't he the one running for a seat in Congress this year?"

"The same. My sources show that Mr. Miyasaka will be an excellent legislator for the underprivileged of the country, and also a calming force on the more suspicious minds of Congress. In fact, at the conference you see just concluding, he outlined a plan to his board of directors. It involves increasing the tax on corporations and using the profits to set up educational opportunities for children of the ghettos, and this will be his primary objective if elected. With Miyasaka's leadership, chances of this legislation passing are 96%; the chance of it succeeding, 89%."

Jerry nodded approvingly. "Good. So, why are you monitoring him?"

Questor briskly punched two buttons on the console, and the view on the screen shifted to two men whispering between themselves at the end of the conference table. One was a rugged-looking fiftyish, with tanned, weather-creased skin, whose clothes showed a Western motif. The other was a black man in his thirties with a sharp, scholarly face.

"Howard Pulaski, Marvin Dale," Questor told Jerry. "Principal stockholders in Rising Sun. They fear that Miyasaka's plans will cut their share of the profits. They plan to terminate his life."

Jerry looked incredulous. "They're going to bump him off?"

Questor's precise blue eyes snapped on Jerry. "If I understand that colloquialism correctly, I believe I said that."

"Well, we can't just sit here and let him be killed, can we? Let's call the police."

Questor seemed to sigh. "What do you propose that we offer them for proof--an examination of the Information Center?"

Jerry winced. "Sorry, I didn't think. What do you suggest?"

Another image appeared on a second screen, and Questor continued. "This is Emilio Scarpelli, a close friend of Miyasaki. He has uncovered evidence of a conspiracy, but is presently in London and will not return until Monday. Therefore, it seems sensible to predict that Pulaski and Dale will attempt to end Miyasaki's life some time this weekend. I suggest that it might be helpful if we mount a surveillance of Mr. Miyasaki during that time."

Jerry groaned inwardly; he could think of better things to do with a weekend than follow a Japanese businessman, but he realized the importance of the mission. "Where's he spending the weekend?"

"He will be visiting his brother and family in a town in Northern California, called Twin Forks."

"This is some one-horse town," Jerry commented, after he and Questor had strolled the streets of Twin Forks for the second time.

Questor tilted his head, puzzled at the expression. "I see no equine species..."

Jerry interrupted, "It's another colloquialism, Questor. It means the town is small."

"You could have said that," Questor answered, and Jerry could have sworn that he sounded injured. He merely said, "Sorry," and turned his attention back to the town's main street. He and Questor were standing in front of a small bookshop set between a grocery and a filling station; across the street was an arcade of small shops, a fire station, a small office building, and a fruit stand. It was still early, and not too many people were shopping, although the street was spotted with parked cars. Most of the people were in the grocery store, and the only one on the sidewalk besides Jerry and Questor was a shaggy brown-black-and white dog sitting patiently outside the hardware store next to the grocery. As Jerry amusedly watched, a man thrust his head out of the hardware store door, handed the dog a piece of something that looked like cake, and went back inside. Wagging, the animal was enjoying the treat when Questor alerted Jerry. "Here comes Miyasaka, my friend."

He snapped to attention. Miyasaka was on the opposite side of the street, walking with a small girl about eight years old, who looked like an Oriental doll, but wore overalls and a T-shirt. She was skipping ahead of him, then waiting until he caught up, waving a can of tennis balls in her hand like a baton. They were laughing and talking together.

"Granddaughter?" Jerry asked briefly.

"Niece," Questor replied, eyes riveted on the scene.

The animation of the girl sent the can tumbling out of her hand, and the yellow balls were freed, bouncing into the street. She started to run after them, but Miyasaka stopped her, then proceeded after them himself.

The sleeping driver of a blue sedan suddenly came to life, sending the car barreling out of its parking space and heading for Miyasaka at breakneck speed. In a split second, Jerry realized what was happening and let out a shout as Questor jumped forward. Miyasaka's head shot up, but he was frozen at the sight of the speeding car, coming out of his shock only when something struck him from the side and sent him sprawling, out of danger as the blue sedan sped past him and vanished down the road.

Jerry hurried to comfort Miyasaka's shrieking niece, while the android expertly felt for broken bones or injuries on the shaking man. Questor finally said, "You are unharmed, sir."

"What happened?" Miyasaka asked dazedly, sitting up and staring at Questor's unfamiliar face.

"Something singularly startlin, Mr. Miyasaka," Questor began, just as a dog, the same collie Jerry had noticed outside the hardware store, thrust its muzzle at Miyasaka's face and began licking him. "This animal pushed you from the path of that vehicle."

"Good dog," Miyasaka murmured, stroking the collie's ears.

"That's Jody Carter's dog, Uncle Samuel," the little girl informed, still sniffing. "The one I told you about."

Jerry and Questor helped Miyasaka to his feet. The man swayed a little, and Jerry suggested, "Maybe you ought to have a doctor check you out."

"We'll go see Dr. Stephens, Uncle Samuel," insisted the little girl.

"Perhaps I'd better, Sue Lee," sighed Miyasaka. "Thank you, gentlemen--I do not even know your names."

"I'm Jerry Robinson," Jerry introduced himself, affectionately petting the dog, who was sniffing at Questor with interest. "And this is my friend, Mr. Questor. We're on a... weekend fishing trip."

"Sir," Questor spoke up, interrupting. "I would suggest that you inform what law enforcement organization there is in this area of this incident. It is apparent to me that the driver of that vehicle intended you bodily harm."

"Me?" Miyasaka blinked, disbelievingly, also startled at Questor's formal diction. "Who would want to hurt me?"

"Well," Jerry said hastily, "We know that you're a candidate for Congress--there are always a few crackpots around..."

Miyasaka looked anxiously at Sue Lee. "Perhaps you are right, gentlemen. Sue Lee, please take me to Dr. Stephens' office--he may be in."

The child took his hand and led him toward the brick office building, as Jerry and Questor watched. Then Jerry bent at the dog's side.

"You're a good boy, aren't you? Good boy," Jerry praised. The collie wagged its tail and licked Jerry's face.

"Do you believe that the dog understands what it has done?" Questor asked curiously.

"He certainly acts like it," chuckled Jerry. "You'd better go home now, boy. Go ahead, go home!"

The collie wagged its tail once more, then trotted off in the opposite direction in which the car had disappeared. Jerry rose.

"Beautiful dog," he commented. "Wish he were mine."

"Its actions were quite unusual," Questor said.

"Mmmm. Questor, don't you think we ought to go to the police ourselves?"

Questor considered momentarily. "No, my friend Jerry. We will be available for questioning, however. Volunteering our suspicions may involve us in unwanted queries.

Jerry shrugged.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. A Deputy Sheriff Schutz, tall, graying hair, with an accent that spoke of being transplanted from the deep South, interviewed them informally about the events of the morning. He seemed startled at the clarity with which Questor recalled the license plate number, but jotted it down just the same. He also relayed a dinner invitation from Miyasaka, which they accepted.

Conversation between the three men, Miyasaka's brother and sister-in-law, and chatty Sue Lee was confined to small talk, with the 'accident' carefully averted, and Jerry ended up being invited to go fishing next morning with Miyasaka at the quarry lake, which the younger man accepted.

"Do you think that is wise, Jerry?" Questor asked later, as they drove back to the small motel outside Twin Forks.

"Well, the whole point of this weekend is to keep an eye on Miyasaka," Jerry replied, leisurely steering with one hand. "I don't think Dale and Pulaski will try anything with a stranger present."

"Do not be so assured," Questor advised. "People tend to use desperate measures when their security is threatened."

Jerry smiled. "Are you worried about me, Questor?"

"I cannot...feel worry," the android said soberly. "But I am concerned for your well-being."

"Same thing," and Jerry smiled broadly now. "Thank you for being concerned."

Jerry found Questor missing when he woke up at five a.m. next morning, but was not surprised, since his friend had expressed an interest in an electric generating plant an hour's bus ride from Twin Forks. The first bus to the plant passed through Twin Forks at five and Jerry assumed that Questor was on it, so he rose, showered and shaved, and finally left the motel room with the fishing tackle he was glad he had thought to bring along. Questor's note, stating that he had taken the bus to the generating plant, was tucked under the rental car's windshield wiper.

Jerry grinned, thinking of how hard-pressed the generator's crew would be answering Questor's technical questions. He shoved the note in his pocket and drove to Miyasaka's brother's home.

The man was patiently waiting outside at the front gate when Jerry arrived and quietly loaded his own tackle in the back seat. As Jerry drove off, Miyasaka asked, "Have you eaten breakfast, Mr. Robinson?"

"No. And it's Jerry, please."

"Only if you call me Sam," returned Miyasaka genially.

"Sam, then."

"Much better. There's a little diner up the road. It doesn't look like much, but the bread is homemade as well as the muffins, and I know you'll enjoy it."

Jerry's stomach was rumbling, so he agreed, and presently pulled into an unpainted, recon-verted farmhouse labeled "Marty's Diner." The dirt parking lot in front of the place was full, so Jerry drove around back and parked.

A half-hour and two muffins apiece later, Jerry and Miyasaka emerged from the diner and continued their journey, the former following the latter's precise directions to the quarry lake. As the car jounced from the lot, Jerry commented, "That was delicious. Much better than the breakfasts I get at work!"

"Where do you work, Jerry?" Miyasaka asked curiously.

Jerry smile sheepishly. "You've heard of Robinson Enterprises?"

"I have. Hasn't everyone?"

"I'm Robinson."

"I had no idea..."

"That's all right," and Jerry began to fabricate fiction in with the truth. "The company's in my name, but sometimes I think I'm just a glorified PR man. I get along well with people, whereas Questor, the brains of the outfit, doesn't. So I have the honor of the name--after all, a company president has to meet people."

"I see," Miyasaka said quietly, and Jerry wondered if he had believed him.

Now Jerry turned his attention to his driving. The road to the quarry was downhill, a wide but steep descent, so that he had to keep his foot on the brake. He pressed down more firmly as he rounded a particularly sharp curve--and the pedal suddenly sank to the floor.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, more vexed than panicked, steering hastily around the curve.

"What's wrong?" Miyasaka asked quickly.

"Lost the brakes," Jerry replied calmly, in control again. "Now you know why I hate renting cars. Hold on, I'm going to use the emergency brake."

Miyasaka clutched the seat as Jerry pressed down the smaller brake pedal. There was no response and Jerry's pulse began pounding in his ears. Before him the twisting road seemed to be charging him.

"This is ridiculous--it only happens on TV," he said loudly, foot floundering from one brake pedal to the other helplessly, while he turned the wheel from side to side to keep the careening car on the road. The road suddenly made a sharp left turn, and he twisted the steering wheel swiftly, but not enough. The car slid off the road, then plunged, bumping, bucking, whacking its white sides against boulders, down the slope, jolting to a stop only after crashing into a tree in the ravine below.

Jerry was momentarily stunned, then he glanced around himself in amazement. The car was battered beyond repair, and, although the steering wheel was jammed into his abdomen, he seemed to be unhurt except for minor cuts and bruises. Beside him, Miyasaka was calmly dabbing at a cut forehead.

Jerry let out an explosive breath. "Judas Priest!"

"Are you hurt?" Miyasaka asked.

"No," Jerry replied, trying the door. Badly smashed, it would not open. Just as well, he thought. The steering wheel has me trapped. Miyasaka's door was less damaged, but was blocked by an outcrop of granite boulders.

"I don't suppose this road is widely traveled," he asked hopefully.

"No," Miyasaka admitted. "But it's a beautiful day. Maybe someone will come for a walk."

"Maybe," Jerry agreed, but he didn't have that much faith.

If it were possible for him to be disgusted, Questor would have been returning on the next bus back to Twin Forks. He had spent three hours trying to find some technician to explain the plant's operating functions, only to discover that just a maintenance crew was on duty Sunday mornings.

He was wearing his usual business suit, but as he walked back to the motel, he noticed that even those people going to church were dressed more casually than he. It occurred to him that he might appear out of place, so upon his return to the motel room, he changed into denim trousers and a green pullover, and ineffectually tried to rumple his hair. His data banks informed him that he was now dressed more suitably, and he returned to the town center, planning his next question, so it would contain the correct colloquialisms.

"Excuse me," he said to the first man he met, hardware store owner Harry Gwillym, "While I was out taking a walk this morning, my com...my friend went fishing, but neglected to inform me of his location. Is there...a good place to fish in the vicinity?"

"The best place I know of is the quarry lake," returned Gwillym. "The Fish and Game Commission stocked it this spring. It's four miles down the road, or three if you walk in that direction. Would you like a ride?"

"No, thank you, I prefer to ambulate," Questor replied. "It will give me an opportunity to observe the zoological conditions of the forest. Thank you once more."

Gwillym stared after Questor as he walked off, then was interrupted by a teenage girl who jogged up to him and asked, "Harry, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Kate. What's the matter?"

"Harry, if you saw something suspicious-looking, would you tell Mr. Schutz even if you thought he might not believe you?"

"Depends on how suspicious."

"Well, I was riding to town this morning to get Daddy some more of that cough syrup for his cold--I guess it was around six--and Luke threw a shoe, so I walked him through the woods

so I wouldn't bruise his hoof. I stopped to rest him behind the diner and while I was there, a car drove in and two guys got out. The one guy--he was kind of dressed like a cowboy--had this toolbox and he got under this white car and fooled around for a couple of minutes. Then he and the other guy drove off."

Harry chuckled. "You're turning it all into a mystery novel, it sounds like to me. What if the car belonged to that man and he was just trying to fix it? He found out he couldn't and his friend took him to get a tow..."

"Harry!" Kate interrupted. "It wasn't his car. Just as I was leading Luke off, two men came out of the diner and got in that car and drove off. And I recognized one of them--it was Sue Lee Miyasaka's uncle!"

Questor was cutting across a clearing when his ultra-sensitive ears caught the sound of a dog barking. His sensors instantly identified it as the same collie that had saved Miyasaka's life the day before, also noting that the animal was heading in his direction. He quickened his walk.

The collie suddenly burst out of the underbrush, its barks dying at the sight of Questor. The andorid saw the dog's nose twitch and recognized its confusion at the strange scent. Before he could call, however, the collie began to bark again, tail wagging as it trotted up to him.

The dog's teeth closed on Questor's hand and tugged at it, then it let go, running off a few feet, halting, and turning to bark at Questor, whose head was cocked in the expression of curiosity that Jerry liked so well. When he did not respond, the dog repeated the procedure.

Now Questor understood. "You wish me to follow you?"

"Woof!" came the answering bark, as if saying, "Yes!"

"Proceed," Questor instructed.

The collie whined, confused for a moment, then seemed to translate the unfamiliar command and plunged back into the forest, leaving Questor to follow behind.

"Listen!" Jerry said suddenly.

Miyasaka did not answer, and Jerry looked over at him, only to discover that the man was unconscious. He touched Miyasaka's arm, and then his own, aching bruised chest.

The sound he had heard, a dog barking, was getting closer. He called, loudly, "Help!"

"Jerry?" was Questor's equally loud response.

Jerry nearly sobbed in relief. "Questor, help us!"

The excited collie came into view just then, followed by Questor who quickly assessed the situation. Setting his fingers in the crack between door and frame, he tugged.

Metal screeched protestingly as Questor easily yanked the door open, sending fresh air spilling over Jerry, who took a grateful breath. "Questor--thank god you came."

"It would be more appropriate to thank the dog," Questor replied, helping him out by casually thrusting aside the steering wheel.

Jerry managed a smile at the whining collie. "That's twice. That's one I owe you, boy."

"Woof," barked the dog.

"Are you badly injured?" Questor asked as he helped Jerry to a flat rock where he could sit.

"Just stiff and sore," Jerry answered, petting the dog, who was licking his face.

"And Mr. Miyasaka?"

"He said he was fine, but I'm afraid he might have a concussion."

Questor returned to the car to examine Miyasaka.

The collie barked then, jumping away from Jerry to run toward a boy sliding down the hillside almost on the seat of his jeans. The youngster hugged the enthusiastic dog, and Jerry chuckled to Questor, "Unless I miss my guess, that's Jody Carter."

The boy, about ten, with brown hair and bright blue eyes, ran up, staring amazedly at Questor. "How'd you do that, mister? I saw you from up there. You pulled that door off like it was nothing!"

Questor, who had discovered that Miyasaka was not badly hurt, looked helplessly at Jerry, whose fertile imagination was already working. "Well, uh, you see, Mr. Questor was an Olympic contender--weight-lifting, you see--but he was sick and didn't make the pre-trials."

"Oh," was the reluctant reply.

"You're Jody Carter, I'll bet."

"Sure--how'd you know?"

"Your dog. Sue Lee said he belonged to you."

"She," corrected Jody.

Jerry laughed. "And all weekend I've been calling her 'boy'. She's a wonderful dog, Jody. She's saved Mr. Miyasaka there twice this weekend."

Jody smiled and hugged her. "I know. She's always been like that, ever since I got her. She used to live on a ranch, but we kinda fell in love with each other and the owner let her come home with me."

The collie was watching Questor, and when he looked back at her, she lolled her tongue as if she were laughing at him. Questor cocked his head, perplexed.

Above, someone beeped a horn, and Jody jumped. "That's my dad. He can give you a ride back to town, and get Dr. Stephens for Mr. Miyasaka. Hey, do you know Deputy Sheriff Schutz is locking all over for your car?"

"Indeed?" Questor commented. "For what reason?"

"Katie--she's a friend of mine--she told him she saw two guys doing something to the engine with some tools this morning."

Jerry's eyes met Questor's. Both realized that with solid eyewitness evidence like that, Pulaski and Dale could now be arrested for attempted murder, and, with Scarpelli's testimony be headed for a substantial prison sentence. Their threat to Miyasaka's life would be gone.

The horn blared again, and Jody started up the slope. "I'll be back. Come on, Lassie!"

The collie bounded after him, but before she started to scramble up the hill, she turned to Jerry and Questor and lolled her tongue in another dog laugh.

"Lassie!" Jody called, and she clambered after him.

Jerry shook his head. "I think this has been too much for me."

"What makes you say that, my friend?" asked Questor.

"I don't know," returned Jerry, "But I could swear that collie just winked at me."

