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True Names
(1981)

In the once upon a time days of the First Age of Magic, the prudent sorcerer regarded his own true name as his most valued possession but also the greatest threat to his continued good health, for—the stories go—once an enemy, even a weak unskilled enemy, learned the sorcerer's true name, then routine and widely known spells could destroy or enslave even the most powerful. As times passed, and we graduated to the Age of Reason and thence to the first and second industrial revolutions, such notions were discredited. Now it seems that the Wheel has turned full circle (even if there never really was a First Age) and we are back to worrying about true names again:

The first hint Mr. Slippery had that his own True Name might be known—and, for that matter, known to the Great Enemy—came with the appearance of two black Lincolns humming up the long dirt driveway that stretched through the dripping pine forest down to Road 29. Roger Pollack was in his garden weeding, had been there nearly the whole morning, enjoying the barely perceptible drizzle and the overcast, and trying to find the initiative to go inside and do work that actually makes money. He looked up the moment the intruders turned, wheels squealing, into his driveway. Thirty seconds passed, and the cars came out of the third-generation forest to pull up beside and behind Pollack's Honda. Four heavy-set men and a hard-looking female piled out, started purposefully across his well-tended cabbage patch, crushing tender young plants with a disregard which told Roger that this was no social call.

Pollack looked wildly around, considered making a break for the woods, but the others had spread out and he was grabbed and frog-marched back to his house. (Fortunately the door had been left unlocked. Roger had the feeling that they might have knocked it down rather than ask him for the key.) He was shoved abruptly into a chair. Two of the heaviest and least collegiate-looking of his visitors stood on either side of him. Pollack's protests—now just being voiced—brought no response. The woman and an older man poked around among his sets. "Hey, I remember this, Al: It's the script for *1965*. See?" The woman spoke as she flipped through the holo-scenes that decorated the interior wall.

The older man nodded. "I told you. He's written more popular games than any three men and even more than some agencies. Roger Pollack is something of a genius."

They're novels, damn you, not games! Old irritation flashed unbidden into Roger's mind. Aloud: "Yeah, but most of my fans aren't as persistent as you all." "Most of your fans don't know that you are a criminal, Mr. Pollack."

"Criminal? I'm no criminal—but I do know my rights. You FBI types must identify yourselves, give me a phone call, and—"

The woman smiled for the first time. It was not a nice smile. She was about thirty-five, hatchet-faced, her hair drawn back in the single braid favored by military types. Even so it could have been a nicer smile. Pollack felt a chill start up his spine. "Perhaps that would be true, if we were the FBI or if you were not the scum you are. But this is a Welfare Department bust, Pollack, and you are suspected—putting it kindly—of interference with the instrumentalities of National and individual survival."

She sounded like something out of one of those asinine scripts he occasionally had to work on for government contracts. Only now there was nothing to laugh about, and the cold between his shoulder-blades spread. Outside the drizzle had become a misty rain sweeping across the

Northern California forests. Normally he found that rain a comfort, but now it just added to the gloom. Still, if there was any chance he could wriggle out of this, it would be worth the effort.

“Okay, so you have license to hassle innocents, but sooner or later you’re going to discover that I am innocent and then you’ll find out what hostile media coverage can really be like.” *And thank God I backed up my files last night. With luck, all they’ll find is some out-of-date stock-market schemes.*

“You’re no innocent, Pollack. An *honest* citizen is content with an ordinary data set like yours there.” She pointed across the living room at the forty-by- fifty-centimeter data set. It was the great-grandchild of the old CRTs. With color and twenty-line-per- millimeter resolution, it was the standard of government offices and the more conservative industries. There was a visible layer of dust on Pollack’s model. The femcop moved quickly across the living room and poked into the drawers under the picture window. Her maroon business suit revealed a thin and angular figure. “An honest citizen would settle for a standard processor and a few thousand megabytes of fast storage.” With some superior intuition she pulled open the center drawer—right under the marijuana plants to reveal at least five hundred cubic centimeters of optical memory, neatly racked and threaded through to the next drawer which held correspondingly powerful CPUs. Even so, it was nothing compared to the gear he had buried under the house.

She drifted out into the kitchen and was back in a moment. The house was a typical airdropped bungalow, small and easy to search. Pollack had spent most of his money on the land and his ... hobbies. “And finally,” she said, a note of triumph in her voice, “an *honest* citizen does not need one of these!” She had finally spotted the Other World gate. She waved the electrodes in Pollack’s face.

“Look, in spite of what you may want, all this is still legal. In fact, that gadget is scarcely more powerful than an ordinary games interface.” That should be a good explanation, considering that he was a novelist.

The older man spoke almost apologetically, “I’m afraid Virginia has a tendency to play cat and mouse, Mr. Pollack. You see, we know that in the Other World you are Mr. Slippery.” “Oh.” There was a long silence. Even “Virginia” kept her mouth shut. This had been, of course, Roger Pollack’s great fear. They had discovered Mr. Slippery’s True Name and it was Roger Andrew Pollack TIN/SSAN 0959-34-2861, and no amount of evasion, tricky programming, or robot sources could ever again protect him from them.