



CORPORATE HEAD

Franque placed Dushawn's head in the shopping cart's baby seat and leaned it back against the handle. The chop had left a lot of neck and the head stood kind of high. Its half-closed eyes seemed to peer out past the front of the cart. The dreadlocks were mussed so Franque ran his fingers through them. The hair used to rest on Dushawn's shoulders but now it was splayed out on the seat.

The Target crew stood about ten feet away, ringed around their cart. It was red with a white company logo on the side. Two judges were finishing up with their count at the cart. They were down to the last head. It was an important one because the score was tied. Franque's Walmart team had been given credit for fourteen heads, but Target would get fifteen if the last one was allowed. Really it was just the top half of a head. The guillotine's blade had caught it across the bridge of the nose. The judges said they weren't sure if there was enough for the facial recognition system to make an I.D. They used the system on every head to help keep ringers from being sneaked into the baskets—heads of the recently deceased taken from funeral homes, morgues and so on. If they were listed as already dead the judges would know. One of them snapped a picture of the half-head and said it would take a couple of minutes to get the results.

The leader of the Target team, Javier, looked over at Franque and scowled. Franque smiled in return and thought back to earlier in the day, when he got the call to action. It was a warm summer afternoon and he and a dozen other members of his family were sitting on his grandmother's front porch

after dinner. The sun was sinking, the mood was mellow, and then his phone vibrated in his pocket. All of the young people checked their devices. His screen showed the word “congregation” and an address. He and his cousins went hustling off after hugs and kisses.

That night’s congregation was in the commercial district, and everybody knew what that meant. A horde of people showed up pushing shopping carts. There were chromed carts and carts of every color plastic. With so many rolling around it was easy for the headhunters to blend in.

Franque wasn’t sure how the headhunting game came into being. Some thought it was Marxist social engineering, and some thought it was just a form of competition dreamed up by bored billionaires. Whatever the case the truth was hidden on the dark web. The group in charge operated from behind a wall of encryption that Franque hadn’t been able to penetrate. Twice he tried to trace the communiqués he received advising him on how to set up and train his team, but both attempts ended with disconnects. So he reined in his curiosity and just did as directed.

Dushawn did too. His head was leaning sideways, so Franque righted it and secured it by tying a couple of dreads to the cart’s handle. As he worked he thought how he would miss Dushawn. The boy should never have entered the competition. He was too laid back, had been ever since they met in the first grade twenty years before. He was weak and there was no room for weakness in the world today. Even the tards knew that.

Franque looked over at the Goodwill cart. It was made of the same dark blue plastic that Walmart used. The carts were identical except for the logos on their sides.

The leader of the Goodwill team was a Down’s dude named Larry. When he saw Franque looking

at him he grinned and gave a thumbs-up. The other members of the team stood poking at the cart's contents. One of them was still wearing his facemask. The team was made up of your typical Goodwill types, group homers who sorted bric-a-brac at the thrift shops. They were sorting through heads now, mostly. One held up a foot with a huarache on it. Franque had seen the guy lose the foot. The Goodwill boys made a decent pin, but then they got confused and flipped the man the wrong way round when Larry rolled up with the cart. He tripped the guillotine's spring before he realized he had an ankle instead of a neck under the blade. The team tried to fix the mistake by turning the man around for a second cut, but by then his adrenaline had kicked in. He knew he was fighting for his life and made such a fuss that he turned the cart over. The tards ran off chasing spilled heads, and the forgotten victim hopped away on one huarache.

Franque chuckled at the memory and then checked his phone for news reports on the congregation. The networks weren't reporting anything yet, but several videos had been uploaded to personal accounts. He selected one and tapped Play.

The video showed the crowd about a half hour before, already gathered in the commercial district. Black people were at the front to give an appearance of social justice, and non-blacks were behind them. Everybody was waiting, just passing time until they could roll their carts forward.

Franque skipped ahead to where the Antifa provocateur threw the first Molotov cocktail. A parked car bloomed into light and then the bricks started hitting the storefront windows. The mass of shopping carts surged toward the stores.

Franque and Dushawn had both put their teams to work at that point. They were at the rear of the crowd, carts waiting side by side in the shad-

ows. The crash of glass was the signal to mount their little guillotines on the fronts of the carts. Franque's team set theirs up in just seventeen seconds. Franque tested the trigger rope with a quick chop, and then he was following his boys into the crowd.

He looked forward to seeing the official videos later. Both teams were assigned a videographer, to keep a record for review by the judges if needed. The videos would never be uploaded, unless it was to the dark web, but the contest rules said that the teams would be allowed to review them to analyze performance.

Franque was impressed by his pin team. He'd picked well. Teams consisted of five men — one for each arm and leg, plus a cart driver. Franque's leg men were short, wide bodybuilders. They had practiced sneaking up on their targets from behind, then dropping at the same time and settling like concrete around the feet. Once the legs were immobilized the two arm men would move in. They were bodybuilders too but taller, and they'd each grab an arm and lean the target back slightly, to keep him off balance. Franque would run the cart up from behind, the leg men would lift, and the body would be held horizontal while Franque pushed forward. As soon as the head passed between the guillotine's uprights he would trigger the blade. Spurting blood could be a problem, so he wore a long rubber apron. The rest of the team never got bloody because the moment the head fell they dropped the body and set off for their next target.

Outliers at the back of the crowd were the easiest to pick off, and most of the outliers were white boys. Franque told his team to focus on them. He had nothing against whites, it was just that a lot of them weren't very aware of their surroundings. They tended to think of riots and looting as shows for their amusement, and they

stood with their phones held high shooting video. The first four heads that went into the Walmart basket were white.

Then Franque saw the Target team try to pin a guy who turned out to be a kickboxer. He put up a good fight while Dushawn held back looking pissed. Franque directed his guys to move on Dushawn. They pinned him, and Franque rolled up and took head number five.

They were doing number six when Franque looked back and saw Dushawn's people standing around their cart yelling at one another. Javier yelled the loudest and took over as driver. The reduced team of three pin men moved off into the crowd searching for the next target.

A little later the videographers told the teams to stop their chopping. Six minutes and 6.6 seconds was what had been allotted, enough time to allow for a good contest but not so long that the police could figure out what was going on. So the videographers called time and then accompanied the teams to the warehouse. They continued to record video from behind, to make sure nobody took an unauthorized head along the way.

Franque had felt some admiration for the Target team as the count of their heads progressed. He didn't think they'd be able to regroup after they lost Dushawn, but Javier did a surprisingly good job. He got things back on track by directing his guys to go after women. They were smaller and easier to handle. Some of them had brought men along as bodyguards, but that wasn't a problem. The men were tofu eaters better suited to guard against offensive gender labeling than offensive linemen. A couple of their heads ended up in the basket. You could tell which heads were pairs because of matching tats and nose rings.

Results from the facial recognition scan on the half-head came in, and it was allowed. Target got

fifteen, Walmart fourteen. The Target team broke into cheers. Javier stuck his tongue out at Franque and went into a dance that involved some vigorous pelvic pumping.

“Point of order!” Franque shouted.

Javier stopped in mid pump and the warehouse quieted down. Both judges looked at Franque. The videographers focused their cameras on him. One of the judges asked what he meant by point of order.

“Well,” Franque said, “now that the first round of counting is finished, I want to present our second basket of heads.”

He pointed to the Goodwill cart that nobody else seemed to have noticed until then. The tards standing around it fidgeted self-consciously when attention turned to them. Franque walked to the cart and peeled the Goodwill sticker off the side. A Walmart logo was underneath.

“Larry here is the team leader,” Franque told the judges, then to Larry he said, “Take your cart to those two men so they can count.” Larry smiled and started toward the judges. One of the cart’s front wheels made a loud floppy sound in the silent warehouse.

Franque smiled at Javier, who stood bulging his veins. They got bigger, and bigger, and then he popped.

“No way! He can’t do that!”

Larry reached the judges and one of them shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said to Franque. “This is unprecedented.”

Franque shrugged. “Can’t be helped. This is the maiden run for this contest, so how can there be any precedents? But I’ve studied the rules. There’s nothing in them about having only one cart.”

The judges conferred, then fingered their hand-held devices, apparently going through the contest rules. Franque looked at Javier. He seemed ready to

pop again, but before he could one of the judges said, "We can't find a rule regarding the number of carts, but there's one about the markings on them. It says the competitors' carts must be clearly identified with company logos."

"We're in compliance," Franque said. "The cart you're standing at is marked with the Walmart logo. It's true that it was covered up temporarily by a Goodwill sticker, but the Walmart logo is there."

The judge said, "But to our knowledge Goodwill did not give permission to use their logo, therefore we find that . . ."

"Hold on," Franque interrupted. He looked at Larry. "Did you give permission?"

Larry was picking his nose. He unplugged and said, "Did I, uh . . . huh?"

"Did you say it was okay for me to put that sticker on your cart?"

Larry balked. He looked as if he thought Franque was trying to trick him. Franque persisted.

"You said I could put the sticker on your cart when I showed you and your friends how to set up the chopper. I bought y'all sodas, remember? The orange sodas?"

"Oh, yeah," Larry smiled. "The sodas was goood."

"And you told me I could put my sticker on your cart, right?"

"Right."

Franque spread his arms to the judges. "There you go, your honors. An agreement between Walmart and Goodwill. Everything's copacetic."

"But . . ." One of the judges leaned over the cart. "This is a mess. There's a hand in here, and a foot, and a . . ." He took a pen from his shirt pocket and used it to poke at something. "Is that what I think it is?"

The other judge looked. "Could be, but I think it's a finger."

“As long as there are two heads,” Franque said, “the Walmart team wins.”

The judges conferred, then one of them called the videographers over to record the official ruling. “Due to the vague and incomplete nature of the rules, we find that the Walmart team has a valid point. And since there are four, maybe five heads in their second cart . . .”

“You didn’t scan them!” Javier shouted. “And there’s no video of them!”

“True,” the judge said, “but we have no doubt that Walmart’s lawyers would claim those rules are also open to interpretation. File an appeal if you want, but for now we find that since there are more than enough heads in Walmart’s second cart to put them in the lead, they win.”

Franque’s team broke out with shouts and high fives. The Target team sulked. But Javier, as leader of the runners-up, got a few seconds with a videographer to make a wrap-up statement. He bitched about the loss and said the rules needed to be fixed.

Each member of the winning team also got some time with the videographers. The pin men gave the usual sports bromides about team effort, a hundred and ten percent and so on, then Franque took his turn. He faced a camera and said, “Corporate cooperation is the key to the future. The temporary alliance between Walmart and Goodwill achieved a notable victory tonight, but such cooperation does not need to end here. I have a Bachelor’s Degree in marketing and am working on my Master’s in Woke Profiteering. I look forward to hearing from the corporate participants in tonight’s contest. Together I think we can achieve great things.”

He held his smile until the videographer said they were clear. The man was about to walk away but Franque stopped him and said he kept his blurb

short so it could be included in the highlights reel. To show he was serious he slipped the videographer a hundred-dollar bill.

The man pocketed the money but said, "I don't know. You just went out live, so you got your exposure, but the highlights reel?"

Franque gave him another hundred.

"And the editor."

Franque handed over another hundred and said, "That's it, man. I'm dry."

The videographer told Franque his speech would be in the reel.

A line had formed in front of the judges, who were doing the payouts. Team members were to receive five hundred dollars apiece, and each of the winners an additional two. Franque knew he would only net four hundred after the business with the videographer, but he didn't mind. His eye was on a greater reward. The game they'd initiated tonight would no doubt catch on, and he could be running it before long. From there he'd go on to . . . no telling what.

There was a disturbance in the pay line. Larry from Goodwill was demanding more money. Franque heard one of the judges say, "But sir, we don't pay extra for fingers. Or whatever that is."