

# Blue Ice

BRIAN DICE





*What would it be like in San Francisco the days after a magnitude ten earthquake? How would our social relationships change if we could inhabit online personas indefinitely? How would a piano virtuoso adapt when called upon to serve his country on the field of battle? The stories of Blue Ice take the reader to both recognizable places in the world and new locales of the mind to explore the triumphs and heartbreaks of humanity.*

## **Blue Ice**

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## The Smokescrippter

About a week ago, a grinder showed up at my shop just as I was about to close for the day. It was carrying a standard issue Type 3 Personal Conveyance in one hand and a scroll in the other. Placing both of them on my counter at the same time, it pointed to the scroll.

I broke the seal and read the missive. "I'm sorry," I said. "But I can't help you." I shook my head and pointed at the paper. "This request is impossible."

The grinder reached into its tunic and pulled out a purse heavy with coin and dropped it on the counter. It grinned wide and pointed emphatically at the scroll in my hand.

I picked up the purse and loosened the strings. It was filled with all gold coins. Enough to pay the shop rent for three seasons. I shook my head again, frustrated at being distracted by the money. "What you're asking me to do is, in the first place, impossible. And even if it was possible, it is highly illegal. You must know this."

The grinder continued to grin eerily at me as I spoke. When I finished my explanation, it jumped into the air and turned circles while howling ululations of irritation. "Look, I don't want any trouble –" Before I could finish, the beast jumped onto the counter, grabbed my quill from its inkstand and shoved it to my chest. It then picked the scroll up and slapped it in front of me. I understood that I was to write the reason for my non-compliance. And so I scribed:

*To whom it may concern,*

*I appreciate the very generous offer that you have communicated through your servant. However, as you are no doubt aware, the work that you have requested of me is both impossible to perform on a Type 3 P.C. and is also highly illegal. I therefore respectfully decline your request*

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*and return to you via your servant this reply on your original scroll, as well as your conveyance and your purse of money.*

*Very truly yours,*

*Gembil*

I re-rolled the scroll, affixed fresh wax and my seal, and handed it back to the grinder. Without delay and another sound the beast grabbed the purse, conveyance, and scroll, and flew out of the shop.

All Type 3 P.C.'s come standard with a smokescript attachment that is basically worthless. You can get three, maximum four, characters out of it – and even then they have to be scripted so small that they are almost unviewable from the ground at heights greater than two hundred feet. Most people figured this out quickly and so never used it. For a while there were a bunch of kids that started using it for sky graffiti instead, but that was quickly outlawed. So now it is only the big dirigibles and falconers that do any of the smokescripting.

And everyone knows that nine seasons ago it became illegal to smokescript anything longer than ten characters at one time. Before the law the sky had become a mess. Adverts and slogans plastered the sky all day long, causing merchantseers, soldiers, and farmers to waste hours a day reading the heavens from horizon to horizon. The laws went even further: not only were 'scripts limited to ten characters, you also had to get clearance from the kingdom on both the message and the timing. The bureaucracy itself to smokescript all but killed the means of communication. So now when someone wants to go through all of the trouble to smokescript, pretty much all heads tilt towards the sky.

So whoever it was that wanted to enlist my services to outfit their Type 3 P.C. with the ability to smokescript twenty characters at one time knew both the near impossibility and total illegality of the request. Even if it were possible to do, I

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would be the first shop the millitenz would visit. I am the best smokescripeter on the YBR – everyone knows this.

Two days later at the end of the business day I turned the Closed sign to the road and worked at the counter to complete the day's accounts. My back was to the door when I heard the entry bell jingle. Apparently I had forgotten to lock the door when I changed the sign. Irritated, I barked without turning around: "We're closed for the day. Be open tomorrow at sun-up. Come back then please." I waited for the second bell to ring letting me know the customer had departed. After another moment without hearing the jingle, I turned around.

A figure in a rich black velvet robe stood at my counter. Its face was hidden by a deep cowl. I was unnerved. "I'm sorry. I am closed for the day," I said uneasily. "Please come back tomorrow morning and I'll help you with whatever you need."

The figure stood silent for another moment and then said, "You recently rejected a very profitable business opportunity." The voice was deep, graveled and clearly an attempt at disguise.

I replied, "Ah. I assume you are referring to the P.C. smokescript modification request?"

The person nodded once.

"Then you received my reply, I assume. Was there anything unclear in my response?" I said

"Your response was perfectly clear. But I am here to request your aid in person and to improve my offer."

Before I could once again deny the request, a black glove emerged from beneath the robe and placed a wooden box onto the counter.

I opened the box. Inside was an intricately designed P.C. attachment. "May I remove it from the box?" I asked.

"Please do."

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I took out the metalwork. The size of my open hand, the cylindrical object was extremely lightweight and of a design I've never seen. "What is this?" I asked.

"Fire," the figure answered. "Effective up to twelve feet. And attachable to any P.C. Types 1 through Type 5."

"Where is the fuel source?"

The figure shook its head back and forth and replied, "It needs none."

I put the object back into the wooden box and closed it. "This is worthless to me. I have no majik skills and can do nothing with this." I pushed the box towards the figure.

The glove reappeared from the robe and pushed it back towards me. "No majik. This is realTec."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "Then who owns the rights?"

The gloved finger tapped gently on the box. "This is the prototype. There is only one other in existence." From the robes came the Type 3 P.C. that must have come into my shop the other day. "Outfit my ride like I ask, smokescripiter, and the prototype is yours."

I laughed and said, "What kind of joke is this? There's no such thing as a self-immolating realTec fire device."

Before I finished my sentence, the gloved hand reached out and grabbed the sheaf of account papers I had been working on. In one motion the papers were thrown into the air and the P.C. was raised as a weapon. A burst of fire erupted from the end. Charred remnants of the pages fluttered to the floor.

I moved back from the counter. "Who are you?" I asked

The figure leaned against the counter. Two gloved hands slowly moved back the cowl until it revealed a face. "You know who I am," she said in an undisguised voice. The words were a statement, not a question.



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I nodded my head. "Good," she said. "Then let us talk seriously about what is needed."

I was truly afraid and had a hard time concentrating. "Your ride," I said. "Even if it was legal, I can't do twenty letters. It is an impossibility."

"Before today you thought that a self-immolating realTec attachment without fuel was an impossibility, yes?" she asked. I shrugged in assent. "Then stop thinking in the same ways you work now. You are the Smokescripiter." She said it like an honorific title. "The air of civil war is upon the land. You must know this. The number of people that would want a personal weapon attachment to their P.C. will be innumerable. And you will be the only one with the realTec rights to deliver this."

I put my hand on the wooden box that contained the prototype. "You realize that this will probably be the last thing that I do as a professional. The kingdom will know that only one person would be capable of making these smokescript adjustments. After this, I'm out of business. And even if the realTec works, it could be many seasons before I realize any return."

She reached again to her robes and pulled out two black leather purses. "This should be more than enough to compensate you for your loss. In addition, of course, to the return you are sure to realize on the realTec fire device."

I pulled the strings on both bags. All gold. "I'll need some time," I said. "I need to do some research."

"Two days," was her reply. "If you can't realize a solution in that time, it is worthless to me. If you can deliver me what I require, I will give you full schematics to recreate the fire attachment."

"I will attempt to construct the attachment per your request. Come back in two days." She left one of the purses as a down payment, her conveyance, and left.

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I closed shop for the next two days and retired to my personal work shed at home. For forty-eight hours I worked with few breaks and almost no sleep. At the end of the prescribed time, I met my client back at the shop.

"I pushed the envelope on all known kingdom science," I said. "I actually created two new algorithms in propulsion dynamics that may be realTec advances. But, at the end of the day, the most you will get out of what I've done is fifteen characters. Maybe sixteen, if you are lucky."

My client took the P.C. and hefted it to test its weight. "It is heavy," she said.

"Yes," I replied. "A necessity based upon the amount of smoke required for you to do your scripting."

She thought for a few moments and then said, "I believe I can change the script I want to create to sixteen letters. You believe that your adjustments will be sufficient?"

I shrugged and said, "I don't know, and don't want to know, your smokescript plans. If you can figure out how to shorthand or small script a letter, all the better. But fifteen characters are all I can really guarantee."

She nodded and then said, "It will have to be enough." She handed over a sheaf of papers to me, the wooden box and the other purse of gold. "I trust you, Smokescripiter. I believe that you've done the changes I require. If I've been cheated, you know that will find you."

I smiled weakly and nodded. "I've done as you've requested. Fifteen characters. I wish you the best of luck."

She pulled the cowl over her head and without further comment left my shop.

A day later, there was a commotion on YBR. "Not another blasted parade," I thought. The congestion from kingdom sanctioned parades caused all of the shops in our neighborhood to suffer. None of the revelers purchased

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items, and the traffic kept us from getting any real customers.

I quickly realized that the people on the Road were standing still, and all of them were looking skyward, pointing and shielding their eyes from the sun. I walked out of the shop to look at what they were viewing.

Five hundred feet above the City in a crystal blue sky was a lone rider smokescripting on a P.C.. After the fourth letter, the crowd began to guffaw, point and comment loudly – everyone being aware that a P.C. couldn't write more than three characters. I realized immediately that my client was the 'scripter – the more letters that poured out of her ride, the higher the excitement of the people on the street. It quickly became clear that the characters were complete words, not the shorthand that the citizens were accustomed to reading. The rider was an expert smokescripiter. I counted the letters as they appeared and was equally impressed and astounded that two entire words were completed. A total of sixteen letters. But the message was completely incomprehensible to me.

I was standing next to a girl in a blue and white-checked dress holding a small dog. In a strange accent I had never heard, she read the smokescripting out loud. "Surrender, Dorothy," she said, as the sky grew dark with hundreds of grinders converging onto the Yellow Brick Road.



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