

The Artists' Insurrection

by James Lynn Smith

“No, this can't be.” Thad sprang from his pillow, alarm on his face. Looking about, he realized the words were his. He crawled out of bed. “Lord...another nightmare.” Trembling, he looked at the clock. Time to get dressed and report to the security chief's office. Today was special; he would learn about his status in the State Security Branch. Although shaken by his dream, Thad went about his morning ritual, mumbling and reminding himself that invasion of governmental centers by remnants of twenty-first century nationals was still a threat. “Got to be on guard. No matter how my day starts.”

But thoughts recurred...In his dream he was ordered to execute people who had been friends. Captives were kneeling, hands tied, facing the opposite direction. He approached one from behind with an axe. After a stern command from his superior, he grimaced and hacked down. The man twisted around, axe imbedded in his skull, and fell over. Thad recoiled in horror. The fallen man was himself...

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Splashing water on his face, he shuddered and pulled himself back to present concerns. Since the global war of 2095, the only nation capable of sustaining its government was the United Republic of Transelamar. Although technically democratic, it was actually a weak liaison of strong state governments with voting powers. Individuals were subservient to dictatorial governorships.

Looking in the mirror, Thad facetiously mouthed propaganda. “Centralized state governments evolved from the need for stability and reconstruction after the

Great War.” He also knew they launched public control programs. “Frivolous endeavor,” such as art, was being outlawed.

As he looped his necktie about his collar, Thad reflected on a time ten years earlier when things had been different. He took an art history course taught by a short, stocky professor named Albert Hansen. Dr. Hansen became a good friend.

“Thad, you have genuine aptitude in art,” Hansen had said in his gravelly voice. “You could be a great professor. You’re thinking about it, I know. But the state government is pushing against employment in academic art. That includes painting, creative writing, music and drama. I’d like you to pursue an art career but can’t advise it now.

“And it’s even worse with the death of Norman Zeer, son of well-known artists. Years ago, Zeer entered art school but didn’t have the talent of his famous parents. Snubbed by some of the art faculty, he dropped out in a fit of anger. After his parents died, he started an activist movement against government art subsidies. His movement has grown but recently he mysteriously disappeared. People assume an ‘art buff’ murdered him.”

After this conversation, Thad’s girlfriend, Joyce, told him she saw government officials around the campus art museum. The next day it was stripped bare. “I’ll have to drop music too,” she said. “Because next they took all our music supplies.”

A very upset Professor Hanson applied for citizenship in another state, finding transfers recently outlawed and other states undergoing similar “purgings.” He organized an objection movement and then also disappeared. Rumor had him arrested, perhaps secretly executed.

Although disturbed, Thad heard those who explained the government knew what it was doing.

“Suppression’s temporary,” his friend Jon said. “After stability and

prosperity arrives, art will flourish again. You'll see.”

Thad reluctantly accepted this conjecture and enrolled as a cadet in the Government Security Academy. Security was a strong motivation since he came from a near-impooverished family. However, he could never forget the professor's remarks.

“Listen, son,” Hanson said. “Art is for the common person. Every embroidery, each song, even street lingo all has a touch of the artistic. When something fundamental to human nature is suppressed, it'll return in perverted form. Whatever the government wants to accomplish here will fail. Instead it will create a monster.”

Lately, Hansen's remarks had more significance. Thad had entered a profession dedicated to destroying what he wanted to pursue. Nightmares expressed his conflict. *God, how can I handle this?*

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At precisely 9:00 A.M. Thad walked into Chief Dronen's office and saluted smartly. “Cadet Rikkar reporting sir.”

“At ease Rikkar,” Dronen said. “I called you in about your candidacy for full instatement. Officers are not inducted as a group from the cadet graduate pool anymore. We're careful; select one-by-one. When we do select, it's on a contingency; you have to prove yourself. We've examined your progress to see if you have command potential.”

“I hope I've fulfilled your expectations, Sir.”

Dronen jerked his head emphatically, causing loose, reddish neck skin under his chin to flap. “I'm happy to say you *are* through with the rookie days. You're hereby confirmed as a fully instated second class security officer.” Dronen called two staff members in as witnesses.

When Dronen presented him with badge and confirmation papers, Thad did

not feel the long-expected exhilaration. He forced an appreciative smile. “Thank you sir, I’m happy for the opportunity to serve.”

“That’s good, my boy.” Dronen dismissed the two staff members. “A few minutes yet before the next rookie learns his fate. Sit down, get comfortable.” He smiled. “Only one of three in the academy is accepted here. Even the number accepted by the Academy is declining.”

Thad noticed that the door to an adjoining room was ajar. He could see something inside that astonished him. A large painting on the wall.

Dronen began shuffling papers on his desk, relating events from his days as a rookie. Glancing up, he saw Thad’s eyes quickly shifting toward the other room and back. He stopped talking abruptly.

Thad’s heart stopped. *Is this a test?*

“It’s all right, boy, I know you’re curious. Come on back. See what I’ve got back there.”

Thad followed the chief. On the wall was a one-by-two-meter painting. The semi-abstraction of a woman struggling to reach something was done in vibrant colors. Strong symbolism was apparent.

Dronen said, “I keep it here as reminder of the degeneracy inherent in artwork. I’ve seen the art crowd we have in confinement spend days on this kind of thing with makeshift markers. Frivolous emphasis on impractical ends is...” He sat in an armchair facing the painting. “An enormous waste of creative energy.” The chief’s eyes became glassy, and he was quiet.

Thad wondered if he were being ignored or simply forgotten.

Dronen became restless and fumbled in a cabinet drawer beside the chair, retrieving an unmarked bottle. He took a capsule out, opened it and sniffed the contents into his nostrils.

Thad looked away. *Medicine?* Then recognition. *A recreational drug.* Such a

product would be verboten to rank-and-file security. Yet a superior officer was openly taking it. *Is he slipping?*

Dronen glanced up, surprised. “Are you still—that’s all boy. You can go.”

When Thad reached the exit, he was called back. He felt he was going to be admonished to suppress what he had seen. But the chief stood shakily and went back to his desk. Picking up a piece of paper, he read it slowly. “There’s rumor of another insurrection attempt.” Regaining presence of mind, he looked at Thad. “We encounter about two of these each month. Art rebels see themselves as some kind of underground movement. Your first assignment is to organize a vigorous response. An intelligence officer will meet you with information on Hill Three, the one overlooking the capitol building. Be there at 10:30 sharp. Here’s your authority issue.” Dronen handed Thad a formal looking slip of paper with his signature.

“Yes sir.” Thad saluted and walked quickly from the office.

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On the way he paced quickly, but exertion did not keep him from wondering why an insurrection halt would be placed in his charge. Not only was he a newly appointed officer, but probably without sufficient authority to command such a thing. *The old man’s slipping. That drug must be doing something to him.*

Walking by the officers’ club he saw only the usual number of guards posted. With rumor of an insurrection, it should be teeming with activity. *Something’s not right.*

The club had become an exclusive headquarters building. Rookies and second class officers felt that decisions not made by the governor were actually made in back rooms of the officers’ club. While denouncing art influence, the governor strengthened security’s population control. The security force subsequently took much power from the bureaucracy in the capitol building. *Does*

the governor know of an insurrection? How much control does he actually have?

Thad mounted Hill Three a few minutes before his scheduled meeting and looked around. Things appeared normal, and he tried to analyze his situation based on information he had. But the nightmare he awoke from that morning intruded again, chilling his resolve. Thad mumbled under his breath. “Would artists be under suppression if they had not killed Zeer, making him a martyr?” That was the excuse government factions used for oppression. “And now rebels are brave enough to raid our base.” *I might have to kill people I admired.*

Looking over the hills around the capitol and down into the security base, Thad noticed sunlight reflecting from a line loosely dangling from a tower below. Soon he realized it was the severed power cable to the intercom transmitter connecting the capitol building to the security chief’s office and the officers’ club. *How can they coordinate new information? “What’s going on?”*

A startling cry from below made him freeze. With heart pounding he fell flat and crawled through the grass to the edge of a gully. Below, he saw a bloodied man lying motionless on the ground, his uniform that of the Intelligence Branch. *My contact? God, the raid has already started.* His face paled at the thought of court martial from allowing the resistance to converge on the capitol—if he lived. *How can so few security police be warned about this insurrection?* Then he realized most communications had been severed at an early stage, and he was sent out too late to collect and command a defense of rookies and lower class officers.

A loud explosion split the air. Thad saw a huge ball of fire roll into the sky over the horizon. *That’s bound to be the arsenal.* Several more explosions shattered the air and a volley of weapon shots unleashed mayhem. Non-uniformed figures sprang from hiding, converging on both the capitol building and the officers’ club below. Pulling his side weapon from its holster and crouching behind a rock, he searched the hill. Finally, he saw two of the insurrectionists in a

makeshift, rapid-fire automatic weapon nest. It was in clear view and he aimed his side weapon. He almost pulled the trigger, but then stopped, remembering his dream. Aiming again, perspiration trickled from his brow and his hand trembled as a risky resolve grew. *Loyalty to an oppressive government will not control me.* Thad relaxed his grip and tied a white scarf to the weapon barrel. Holding it high, he called out and waved furiously.

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Several hours later, the rebels ushered Thad with a large group of prisoners down the hill to the front of the officers' club. A small vehicle stopped, and a short, stocky man climbed out. He made his way to the front of the group and began directing nearby subordinates before Thad recognized him.

“Dr. Hansen,” he shouted. “Dr. Hansen.”

The old man squinted at Thad and slowly waddled over. He looked at Thad's face and then the uniform. “Thad Rikkar.” he said in his gruff voice. “I see you made some rank in security.”

“That's over. I surrendered voluntarily. Really didn't know what it was coming to when I enrolled in the Academy.”

“I know. Policies are not made at your level, son. But you *are* a member of the security police.”

“Doc,” another voice said. “I think I can vouch for this one. Even before he knew our attack would succeed, this fella turned himself in—from a pretty secure spot. He could have blasted us out of our weapon nest but didn't.”

Thad very much wanted Hansen to take him into the movement. Not a sure thing despite their past friendship. *I hope this man's remarks help.*

Dr. Hansen's face spread into a broad grin as he looked back at Thad. “Okay, son,” he said. “You're not the only one to switch sides, but at least get out of that damned jacket. I don't want to be looking at that security insignia all day.”

Thad disposed of the jacket and Hansen motioned to him. They walked into the officers' club, through the typically austere lobby, and into a large conference room with maps on the wall, rows of files, and electronic data banks. Adjoining rooms contained computer consoles and display screens.

“This is what you expected, right?” Hansen asked. “Well there is more. There is something here that I'm pretty sure not even the noble governor knows about. We found it just an hour ago.”

Hansen reached behind a data file and pushed a hidden switch. A panel in the wall slid back revealing a secret entrance. The two men walked through. After passing along a narrow corridor, they entered a large room. Under the watchful eyes of Hansen's guards, several superior security officers lay sprawled about on plush pillows and lavish couches. Many were gazing abjectly at Hansen's guards and the walls.

Thad started to ask if Hansen had drugged them, but when he noticed the décor, rich furniture, paintings on the wall, and art objects placed about the room, he remembered the chief's strange behavior and knew the answer. *An underground, art-drug cult right in the middle of the governmental security complex.*

“My God,” Thad said. “These people suppressed all forms of art as degenerate. And now—they *admire* it.”

“They *use* it, but in a perverse way,” Hansen said. “That's different from admiration. They gained power and control over the art world, then they bent it to fit their own purposes. All this remained hidden from the lower rank officers and the rest of the government. The governor *thinks* his security force is about *eliminating* art activity. These high officials have considerable freedom from questioning due to rank. And because they exist in an austere system that has taken beauty out of life, they gravitate to something different, something forbidden. Art

is forbidden, so it's lumped with other things forbidden—like drugs and who knows what else. Let's get out of here.”

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Thad and Dr. Hansen came across many sickening scenes before the day was over. A group of shabby quarters had been set aside for the imprisonment of a theatrical company which was forced to perform dramas written by the security police illustrating the “degenerate” nature of artists.

A haggard-looking actress explained. “The police forced us to depict scenes of sadism and sexual abuse written by them. High security officials attending enjoyed the perversion but shouted that we produced only trash. They pretended the scripts originated with our company. Since they were unable to accept art officially, they cursed what their natures yearned for and turned it into rubbish.”

Thad remembered that Hansen said years before that suppressing something fundamental to human nature would not work. It would only create a monster.

“It's ironic,” Hansen said. “The efficiency government power-mongers hoped to achieve by suppression was actually destroyed by it. It only created perversions and vulnerability to our counter-movement.”

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Late that afternoon, the captive Governor Mason was escorted about to see the sick, deformed hierarchy his government really was. Without aides to kowtow and filter unfavorable information, the authoritative father figure melted into an ashen-faced little man. An aide delivered a document to Hansen from the governor's files. Thad saw surprise on his face.

“Thad, do you know who Governor Mason really is?” He looked up shaking his head. “Norman Zeer.”

Thad looked at the document. “Is he the one that started the anti-art movement?”

Hanson grinned. “Yeah, the snubbed activist brat that grew up and was supposed to have been killed by some art gang. He must have planted the rumor himself, disappeared, changed his name, and forged a new personal history. Over the years he rose to political power as George Mason.”

“So the deceiver ended up being deceived.”

“Right, but it happened only after his doing a lot of damage. It’s outrageous what petty grudges can do in an unchecked system. Zeer should have punched someone in the snoot for their insults. Instead, he turned to the dark way, practiced deceit and amassed power.”

Thad looked at Hanson. “I agree, and it’s more than distressing. So what do we do now?”

“I think you know we have a hell of a lot of *work* to do. We sort out people who can put a state government back together. That selection process is going to start with *us*. Let’s go.” He sighed wearily, turned and walked off with a slight limp.

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Fifteen years later, Governor Thad Rikkar and his companions mounted the steps of the Albert Hansen Museum of Art. This was one benefit the governor was happy to attend. His speech would be short, but he would make it a proper tribute to his late friend and mentor. After he and his wife Joyce led the group into the interior, he stopped for a long time, gazing at a life sized oil portrait of Hansen.

“What are you seeing?” Joyce asked.

“More like listening. I thought I heard a gravelly voice admonishing me to encourage contributions to his foundation. And he says not to get too excited by this evening’s entertainment, especially the dancing girls. Because the lady on my arm is a work of art.”

She laughed. “Your mind is the work of art. You know all the right things to

say. I think maybe I'll stay around so I can be 'Mrs. Governor' in your next few terms."

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