

The Liberation Paradox

by

Sarah McKee

darklandschronicles.com

© 2019 Sarah McKee

The author has created this work for the purpose of sharing and generating exposure for her body of work. You **MAY AND ARE ENCOURAGED** to share and reproduce this work in its entirety provided that it retain all attribution and copyright notices. However, the author reserves all other rights, including but not limited to commercial and ownership rights. You **MAY NOT** sell, modify, claim as your own, or in any way financially benefit from this work without prior written permission from the author.

Contact: sarah@darklandschronicles.com

This is a work of fiction. The characters and events in this work are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events is entirely coincidental. Sorry, but to the best of my knowledge the Darklands galaxy doesn't actually exist.

Cover Image by

[Angela Yuriko Smith](#) from [Pixabay](#)

For Collin McKee
The best brother a girl could hope for
and the best man I know.

Lyssa is lucky to have a brother like Marcio.
I'm even luckier to have a brother like Collin.

A Name and a Pot to Piss in

Dawn

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: Cable's End

Planet: Distortion

City: Harvest Junction (flotilla city)

The man woke up face-down on the cold, hard concrete of a trash-strewn alleyway behind some greasy spoon diner. It took him a few seconds to realize that he was completely naked. He was alive, and that was something, but he was also butt-naked in an alleyway.

Slowly, he raised himself to a sitting position, bare ass on the dirty concrete, and met the murky light of dawn under the planet's red giant sun. Although he was grateful just to be alive, the man couldn't escape the fact that last night had been a disaster. But the man was not one to dwell on the past. No sense dwelling on yesterday when today had its own challenges for him. Today, he had no money and no one he could implore for assistance. He had not even a shirt on his back nor a pot to piss in. He didn't even have a name, really.

Well, he had names. He had lots of names, actually. Unfortunately, he didn't have any documents for any of those aliases. He couldn't use "Sid Stone" again after last night's fiasco. He'd used that name since he'd first arrived on this planet, but he might end up dead if he tried to use it again. So whom should he be? He thought through the multitude of aliases he had at his disposal and finally came upon one that suited his mood that morning.

Danny Jake.

The old name came to him in a flash of inspiration. It suited his mood that morning perfectly. Danny Jake was an optimist and the man felt very optimistic about today. When you wake up butt naked in a dirty alley without even a name nor a pot to piss in, there's really nowhere to go but up. The man would almost certainly end his day better off than he was beginning it, so he would be Danny Jake. Danny Jake was an optimist.

He hadn't used the name Danny Jake for several years, not since he'd left the planet Promisedland. There had been a girl on Promisedland, a girl he'd genuinely cared about, but that was years ago now. Idly he wondered if she still missed him. He wondered if she was still mad at

him. She probably didn't, and she probably was. Never mind all that now. The man was not one to dwell on the past.

So he would be Danny Jake again today. And why not? He didn't have any paperwork to suggest his name might be anything else.

As for not having a pot to piss in, Danny presently noticed an old biocurd tub on the ground next to the diner's dumpster. *That'll do*, he thought. And so he stood himself up and padded over to the biocurd tub. It had several cigarette butts in it. He guessed that the diner's staff or someone had been using it for an ashtray. Danny just shrugged and had his morning piss. And isn't that first morning piss really the best piss of the day?

So now Danny had a name and a pot to piss in. The day was looking up already. Danny Jake was an optimist. Of course, as any optimist knows, the moment you start to feel good, a hater is bound to come along and try scratch your groove.

Right on cue, a hater came along to do just that. "What the hell are ya supposed to be, some kind o' nancy, fuckin' nudist or something?" The stranger's words came from above Danny's head. From the raspy sound of the man's voice, Danny guessed about three packs a day.

Danny looked up and saw a late-middle-aged man in a stained, white t-shirt leaning out of a second story window. He had a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Danny made no effort to hide his nakedness as he answered the man, "Fuck, no. I ain't no kinda nudist or nothin'. Just some poor bastard what had a bad night last night."

Danny was perfectly capable of speaking as eloquently or ineloquently as any situation demanded. This situation demanded the latter. In his experience, most people trusted him more if he spoke like they themselves did. Danny wasn't worthy of anyone's trust, but he knew how to get it and he knew how to profit from it.

The older man flicked his cigarette ashes out the open window. The ashes fell down close to where Danny was standing. "Okay, so how'd ya end up stark-ass naked behind my diner?"

"Had me a run-in with the owner of the Paradox Hotel. Some asshole na —"

"Whoa! Nope, never mind. Whatever kinda fucked-up trouble ya got into with Eddie The Mushroom, I don't even want to know about it."

Danny hadn't gotten the gangster's first name. His goons had only referred to him as Mr. Daniau. "What do they call him 'Eddie The Mushroom' for?" Danny couldn't help asking.

"Ya don't wanna know. Looks like ya still got all ya parts, at least."

Danny remembered what Eddie "The Mushroom" Daniau had threatened to cut off of him last night. The man had been serious about it, of that Danny had no doubts. He wondered if this was why they called him "Eddie The Mushroom." Danny shuddered and decided he probably didn't want to know.

"Assholes done took my clothes and all my scratch, though," Danny said to the man in the window. "Any chance you might be able to help out a poor bastard what ain't got no clothes?"

"Any chance a poor bastard would be willin' to wash dishes for an old set of clothes?" the man countered. "My regular guy ain't showed up past couple days."

"I wouldn't have it no other way." No way was Danny going to have it that way. Only suckers work to get what they want. "Any chance o' maybe gettin' breakfast as well?"

The older man harrumphed. "Dry toast and coffee. No cream. Shit's too expensive right now with the dairy strike on."

"Fair enough," Danny lied. It wasn't fair, but he knew the secret to making any game fair: cheat. "Name's Danny."

"A'ight, Danny. Be right down." The man didn't offer his own name in return. He just took one last drag on his cigarette and flicked the butt out into the alleyway before disappearing from the window.

A couple minutes later, Danny heard a series of bolts being thrown from the other side of the diner's back door. When the door opened, the Man With No Name appeared holding some clothes, not folded but rumbled up in a ball. They turned out to be some old, gray sweatpants and a yellow t-shirt with the word "Rotors" across the chest in navy blue lettering. Danny wasn't from this planet, but he guessed the Rotors were some local sports team. There were no shoes, but Danny hadn't expected the Man With No Name to provide shoes. Both the sweatpants and the t-shirt were stained. The t-shirt had what looked like food stains down the front, and the sweatpants looked like they had urine stains in the crotch.

Beggars can't be choosers, so Danny put the clothes on, glad just to have something to wear. Danny was considerably broader in the shoulders than ol' Nameless Magoo here, and at least six inches taller. The clothes were cartoonishly ill-fitting. It was a long way from the designer suits he'd been wearing until last night, but it was a start. "Thank you," Danny said.

"Ya can thank me by getting a start on them fuckin' pots. Like I said, regular guy went all fuck-off past couple days and now shit's pilin' up." Nameless Magoo, still standing in the doorway, indicated a dish washing sink. Danny could see from where he was standing out in the alleyway that it was a mess. A huge pile of pots, pans, plates, cups, and utensils stood piled in and around the sink. Some were piled on the floor next to the sink, while others were partially submerged in a basin of turbid water. All were crusted with yesterday's – or *whatever* day's – food.

"Yeah, I guess I better get started cleaning that shit up," Danny said, glad he wasn't going to have to clean that shit up.

Nameless Magoo hadn't said anything about Danny getting the promised breakfast first and Danny didn't care enough to ask about it. He would get his breakfast on his own terms. As

Nameless Magoo turned his back to lead Danny into the back of the diner, Danny's practiced fingers picked the man's pocket. In one deft move, Danny liberated the man's wallet and slid it into the pocket of his own "new" sweatpants. Child's play for a pro like Danny.

Out in the front of the diner, Danny could hear and see lots of activity. A couple of cooks were busy at their grills and a waitress was running back and forth delivering orders to the cooks and food to the customers. Farther out in the dining area, customers were talking amongst themselves. The whole scene was a chaotic din of conversation, sizzling food, and clattering dishes.

The smell of the food made Danny hungry, but he knew he had to wait a few minutes to make his move. So he made a big show of stuffing his chest-length hair into a hairnet, donning an apron (still no shoes), and acting like he actually intended to work. He scrubbed intently for a couple of minutes at the first pot he grabbed while Nameless Magoo stood watching over him. It wasn't long before a dish clattered to the floor in the front of the diner and Nameless went to investigate and castigate.

Danny could hear Nameless's voice yelling at the other workers. Now that he wasn't being watched, Danny saw no reason to actually scrub the pots which were his job to scrub. He knew Nameless would still be listening to ensure his newest kitchen slave was working. If the sounds of washing stopped, he would be back here, breathing down Danny's neck. So Danny banged and clanged for several more minutes until he felt the time was right. He peeked around the corner, and the coast appeared to be clear. Discarding his apron and hair net, he walked past the busy cooks who were sweating at their grills like good wage slaves. Danny walked right out into the dining area, where he still saw no sign of Nameless Magoo. Sensing the moment was right, he continued right past the waitress who was distracted taking an order from a customer. He walked right up to the window behind the counter where several plates of food were drying out under a heat lamp as they waited to be delivered to customers. He selected one that had sausage, eggs, and toast on it. It would be too risky to stop to pour himself a cup of coffee but he did grab a fork.

Then, plate in hand, he walked right out the front door.

The planet of Distortion's massive red sun shown in the east, taking up a quarter of the sky. The huge, red star's light gave everything a distorted, reddish hue and thereby gave the planet its name. The street in front of the diner was busy with morning traffic. The city of Harvest Junction forbade personal motorized transport for all but those wealthy enough to be considered important. Nevertheless, the streets bustled with the occasional service vehicle, a multitude of pedestrians, and a fair number of commuters on bicycles. Everybody was on their way to somewhere.

Everybody except Danny.

He was on his way *from* somewhere. He was on his way from here. He had to make some distance between himself and the diner before he was missed. Danny had no particular destination in mind, but as he momentarily surveyed the street in front of the diner, he noticed Nameless Magoo.

Luckily, the diner owner stood with his back to Danny, apparently having an argument with the owner of the adjacent business. Nameless Magoo was to Danny's left, so Danny decided it would be prudent that he go right.

Danny turned right and continued along the street in his "new" clothes, his feet bare, and a plate of liberated breakfast in his left hand. In his right hand he held a liberated sausage, impaled on the liberated fork. He ate as he walked down the street with the flow of traffic. He ignored the strange looks others shot him. When he had traveled a few blocks and the food was gone, he casually tossed the fork and the empty plate down an alleyway as he passed. The plate shattered as it hit the ground, just another broken thing abandoned in the city.

The King of Paradoxes

Eddie Daniau

23:45

(last night)

Eddie Daniau, owner of the Paradox Hotel and leader of the Paradox "organization," had been enjoying a nightcap in his 17th floor penthouse and anticipating going to bed when his phone rang. It was Oswin Miles, his chief lieutenant. Eddie sighed. Miles wouldn't be disturbing him at this late hour unless it was something important.

And likely something bad.

Eddie set his drink down and answered the phone on the second ring. "What's going on, Miles?"

"Sorry to call you so late, Mr. Daniau, but you're probably going to want to see this. Couple of the boys caught some small-time conman running a hustle in the hotel. Selling counterfeit mining bonds for cash under the table."

Eddie felt that there was more to the story than just that. Miles likely wouldn't have called him at this hour over a simple conman running a hustle in the hotel. Likely, Miles would have just had his enforcers clean the guy out, beat him up, and throw him out on the street. Normally, Miles would have told Eddie about it in the morning. There was more to the story. Eddie sighed, "What else?"

"Reason the boys noticed him, he was meeting with Kenneth Harmon."

That got Eddie's attention. Ken Harmon was the leader of the Distortion Planetary Congress's conservative caucus. He was the hypocrite son of a bitch who led the congress in the daily prayer circle. Ken Harmon was one of the principal supporters of a new racketeering and anti-corruption bill that was designed to make life harder on "honest businessmen" like Eddie. And here he was, Mr. High-And-Mighty himself, caught in a dirty deal in a hotel room. "And? Tell me no one was stupid enough to hurt Congressman Harmon?"

"No, sir. The congressman is okay. Scared half out of his mind that we might... um, *hurt* him, but otherwise unharmed. We've got him and his bodyguard here in your office."

"That's good. What about the conman?"

"He's unharmed, too. We got him in room eight." Room eight, or more accurately room 1608, was a secure room on the 16th floor. It was where the enemies of Eddie's "organization" were brought to be "questioned." "There's something else, though, Mr. Daniau."

Eddie sensed some hesitation from his lieutenant. "Yes?"

"Well, um, we think he's been running this scam of his for some time right here in your hotel. We caught him with a large sum of cash in his possession and he's been checked in for over three weeks."

Eddie was silent for a long moment. It looked very bad indeed that some small-time hustler had managed to operate right under their noses for so long. Who does a thing like that? Either some rube from off world who doesn't know whose hotel he was operating in or some dangerous operator who knew exactly whose hotel this was. Eddie would definitely have to have a chat with that man. "Very well. I'm coming to my office. First thing we need to deal with is Congressman Harmon. Offer the congressman a drink and tell him I'll be with him shortly."

"Yes, sir."

Eddie hung up the phone without saying goodbye. His mind was already calculating how to turn this potentially hazardous situation to his advantage. Eddie Daniau had risen from a street level nobody to become the leader of the Paradox Syndicate by always being able to leverage unfortunate situations to his advantage. And by always being more ruthless than the next guy.

00:02

(last night)

(okay, technically this morning)

(don't be so nitpicky)

Eddie had taken his time as he'd allowed Congressman Harmon to worry over his potential fate. Eddie had considered getting dressed to meet Harmon, but he decided to wear just the pajamas he had already been wearing before the call. Let the congressman see how he was inconveniencing him. Eddie gave himself a look in the mirror and made sure his salt-and-pepper graying hair was neatly combed and that his glasses were clean and on straight.

His office was on the same floor as his penthouse apartment so the walk was short, just to the other side of the building. Eddie entered his office and saw Congressman Harmon sitting in one of the two leather chairs in front of Eddie's big desk. Another man, whom Eddie presumed to be Harmon's bodyguard, was sitting in the other chair. Miles and two more of Eddie's enforcers stood in a loose circle around Harmon and the bodyguard. The congressman and his bodyguard began to rise as Eddie entered the room, but a warning glance from Miles brought them back down to their seats. Eddie pretended not to notice.

"Congressman Harmon, good evening. What a pleasure it is to meet you." Eddie extended the congressman a slight, courteous bow before walking over to his miniature bar. "Would you or your associate care for a drink?"

"Uh, no thank you, um...Mr., uh..."

"Daniau. Eddie Daniau." Eddie fixed himself a drink, a tonic and lime. He wanted to appear as though he was drinking, but he also wanted to maintain a clear head. "But you can call me Mr. Daniau. Most people do."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Daniel. I just want to say — "

"Daniau, not Daniel. *Dan-Yo*. My ancestors were French on old Earth."

"Mr. Daniau. Sorry, um..." Congressman Harmon must have finally realized that he sounded like a fool and everyone was staring at him. He shut up. The man who talked so tough on the exnet news feeds was just a coward when it came right down to it. The politician apparently had never heard of Eddie Daniau before. At least he was smart enough to perceive what a dangerous situation he was in. Good.

Eddie sipped his drink, pretending to savor the alcohol that wasn't in it. This teetotaler, bible thumper politician wouldn't know the difference. Eddie sat down in the big, leather office chair behind the desk. He examined the things Miles and his enforcers had set out atop the desk. There was a surprisingly large pile of cash and an equally large pile of bond certificates from some Andromedan mining company Eddie had never heard of. Though Eddie knew the certificates were almost certainly fake, he couldn't see how. They appeared genuine, right down to Andromeda United Mining Consortium's holostamp. But he doubted if the certificates would stand up to any scrutiny from the mining company whose name was printed on them. If the company itself was even real.

"So let me guess, congressman. You came here to buy these certificates with this money?"

"Uh, no, n-not all of it." Harmon glanced nervously up at Miles, who, by his mere presence, was daring the congressman to lie to his boss. "I was buying a hundred at five hundred dollars each."

Eddie quickly did the calculation in his head. "That's fifty thousand dollars, congressman. What is a respectable leader of the congressional prayer committee doing buying bearer bond certificates with cash in a hotel room in the middle of the night?"

"Uh, I..." Harmon had no good answer.

Eddie picked up one of the rubber banded stacks of cash and fanned through it with his thumb. He set that stack back on the pile and then did the same with another stack. "This is all Gonaways currency, congressman. Isn't it a little unpatriotic to be buying stuff off the black market with foreign currency? Distortion dollars not good enough for you?"

"Mr. Stone demanded payment in Gonaways dollars, Mr. Daniau. Sir."

Eddie assumed that this "Mr. Stone" to whom Harmon was referring must be the conman currently being held down in room 8. "You seem to have gotten very lucky, congressman. These bond certificates are almost certainly fake." Eddie turned to Miles. "You put the congressman's fifty thousand dollars in here amongst the rest of the cash?"

"Yes, Sir. The bundles are ten thousand each. Over three hundred thousand total."

Eddie considered the pile of cash before him. Miles had referred to the conman as "small time," but this didn't look very *small time* to him. He counted out five of the \$10,000 bundles from the large stack. He didn't bother to count the money in each individual bundle, just grabbed five bundles and handed them across the desk towards the congressman. Harmon seemed surprised. Only a minute ago, he was undoubtedly wondering if he was going to leave this hotel alive. Now, he was being given his money back. Harmon hesitated, confused.

"It's your money, congressman. Please take it with an apology from those of us on the Paradox Hotel management team."

Tentatively, Harmon took his money back.

Eddie smiled and leaned back in his chair. He sipped on his drink for a moment and stared at Harmon. Harmon still looked uneasy. On the desk was Eddie's secure data terminal. Its display was facing him, but not visible from the opposite side of the desk where Congressman Harmon and his bodyguard sat. Through the terminal, Eddie had access to live feeds of his secret camera network all over the hotel's secure zone, the hotel's four uppermost floors from which he ran his empire. With his network of secret, hidden cameras, he could see into private rooms, hallways, bathrooms, elevators, almost every inch of the secure zone. On his display, however, the only feed he had up was the one for this particular room. He didn't want Miles or his men to see more than just this office. Most of the enforcers in Eddie's organization knew that Eddie's office was wired with hidden cameras, but they wouldn't like it if they were to find out that they had no privacy, that their every move was watched and recorded.

Eddie pressed a few buttons on the data terminal to play back what the camera had witnessed just a minute before. He turned the display around so that Harmon could see the recording of himself accepting a large sum of money from someone behind a desk whose face never quite came into the frame. There was no sound on the video, but it looked very much like the leader of the conservative, crime-and-punishment caucus of the Distortion Congress accepting a bribe from a shady off-camera crime boss. In foreign currency, no less.

The blood drained from Harmon's face as the realization of what had just happened dawned on him. He stared at Eddie, wide-eyed. There were worse things Eddie could do to this man than kill him. He could ruin him. Or he could *own* him.

"Let's talk about your racketeering and anti-corruption bill, congressman. It sure would be a shame if that bill were to die in committee and never even make it to the floor for a vote, wouldn't it?"

The politician swallowed hard, considered his options for a moment, realized he was trapped, and finally answered, "I...understand." He now served at the pleasure of the Paradox Syndicate.

One Con Too Many

Sid Stone

00:29

(last night)

Sid Stone was not having a very good night. Tonight's con was supposed to be his last score before he got off the planet with enough money to live comfortably for a while. With tonight's scam, he would have had just over \$300,000 in quality Gonaways scratch. He was going to leave Distortion and this entire area of space on tomorrow's starhopper. But as it turned out, he had apparently overstayed his welcome here on Distortion by one con too many.

Just as he was about to seal the deal for his last \$50,000 three big gorillas in lower-end designer suits had come flooding into his hotel room with their guns drawn. They hadn't even needed to kick the door in or anything. Claiming to be "hotel security," they'd had a key card. Sid was no fool. He had just surrendered, knowing he would likely be able to either talk or bribe his way out of the situation. The guy he'd been selling his counterfeit bonds to, some local politician, had been taken elsewhere and all of Sid's money had been seized. So much for bribing his way out of the situation. Now, he would just have to rely on his natural charm.

It had been over an hour since he'd been locked into this room on the 16th floor. Though the room had once been a normal hotel room, it had been converted to something much more nefarious. The walls and floor were tile and a heavy duty drain had been installed in the floor. In the middle of the room, a steel table was bolted to the floor. It had an eye bolt sticking up from its center. Sid had been in enough police interrogation rooms to be familiar with this kind of table design. The eye bolt was for securing a prisoner's handcuffs to the tabletop. Sid wasn't restrained in any way, but the room was windowless, and he doubted if he'd be able to open the door. Just for good measure, he walked over and gingerly tried the knob on the heavy, steel door. As expected, the knob didn't budge.

He sat down on one of the small room's two uncomfortable chairs. They were made of some kind of polymeric metal which seemed always to be cold and uncomfortable. But they were probably easy to clean blood off of. Sid had no doubt about what usually went on in this room. He was going to have to incorporate all of his skills to talk his way out of this mess.

Before long, he heard the electronic door lock activate. Sid affected a casual and confident air as the same three goons who had earlier broken into his room now entered. "Hey, guys. How's it going?"

The three goons didn't answer him. The head goon, the one the others had called Mr. Miles earlier, just watched as the other two grabbed Sid by an arm each and led him out of the room. Sid offered no resistance and allowed himself to be led, albeit somewhat forcefully, down the hall and to the elevator. As he went, Sid made a mental map of as much of the building as he could. He doubted if it would help him, but one never knew.

Still holding his arms in their trap-like mitts, the two ogres followed Mr. Miles's lead onto the elevator. Sid watched out of the corner of his eye as Mr. Miles swiped an access card and pressed a button that was labeled PH.

"Access granted!" a chipper, pseudo-female computer voice sang out from a hidden speaker. They went up one floor. The two ogres followed Miles as they drag-led Sid out of the elevator and down a short corridor. Out of habit, Sid put his photographic memory to work. He mapped the penthouse floor in his mind just as he'd done with the floor below, counting his steps. He made note of doors, a stairwell, and just gathered as much information about his surroundings as he could. He might need it if he had to make a down-and-dirty running escape.

The goons led him into a plush office with leather chairs, a minibar, an unlit fireplace, and probably the most beautiful desk Sid had ever seen. The desk was made of a salmon-pink wood with natural swirl patterns in it. Burl wood. Red gum, he guessed. The desk must have cost a fortune. Atop the desk was an all-too-familiar pile of money, *his* money, and a stack of equally familiar counterfeit bond certificates. And behind that imposing desk sat a middle-aged man with neatly combed, evenly graying hair, and round-rimmed spectacles. He was dressed informally in pajamas and a silk robe. Even still, the man emanated power from his bearing, his appraising eyes, and the obvious deference the other, much larger men in the room showed to him. Sid could tell right away that this was no man to be trifled with.

The two goons forced Sid to sit down in one of the two empty, leather chairs in front of the desk. Sid realized he was sitting almost exactly over the spot where he'd just been sitting in the murder room downstairs.

"Did our other guests get away without being seen?" the man behind the desk asked his henchmen.

"Yes sir, Mr. Daniau," the one called Miles answered. "There was no problem. We used your private exit. No one saw."

"Good."

The man called Mr. Daniau sipped his drink and set it down on the beautiful wood desktop without the inconvenience of a coaster. He then picked up the stack of Sid's counterfeit bonds. The beautiful, expensive, and difficult to fake holostamp of the Andromeda United Mining Consortium

seemed to hover about two centimeters above the top bond of the stack. "I don't think I need to even ask you if these are actually worth anything, do I?" Daniau asked Sid.

Sid gave kind of an embarrassed shrug. "The holostamp was pretty expensive to fake, but other than that, no. They're completely useless." When you're caught, you're caught.

Daniau nodded and pressed a couple buttons on his data terminal. Within a few seconds, the fireplace was alight. He handed the stack of bogus bonds to Mr. Miles and turned his attention to the giant pile of cash as Miles began feeding the bonds into the flames. "What about all of this? Any of it fake?" He indicated the cash.

"Not so far as I know. It all came from people buying bonds, but as best as I can tell, it's all legit."

"It wouldn't help your cause to lie to me, you know."

"I believe it's all legal tender, Mr. Daniau." Sid had to resist the very human urge to just beg Daniau to keep it in exchange for his life. Sid knew that Daniau would certainly keep the money anyway. He needed to find a reason to convince this man to let him live."

"Good. You see, you present a dilemma for me, Mr. Stone. Normally I would just exterminate any vermin I found in my hotel, but you've unwittingly done me a great service tonight. I find myself oddly compelled to let you live."

That was easy. Sid smelled a "but" coming.

"But I need to know everything about your operation." Daniau looked to his goons on either side of Sid. "Strip him."

Miles and the two big men began roughly tearing Sid's \$4,000 designer suit off of him. The chair he'd just been sitting in toppled to the floor. Sid himself was thrown down and held pinned by one goon while the other two tore and cut his clothes. Though his every instinct was telling him to panic and fight back, Sid knew that violence would not help him in this situation. The goons didn't stop at the suit. They ripped Sid's underclothes off of him as well, leaving him completely naked. He began to be genuinely afraid of what they might do to him. He pushed his panic down deep inside himself. He maintained as much calm as he could while his nakedness was forcibly exposed. His clothes were reduced to a scattering of rags all over the plush carpet. The goons lifted him to a kneeling position and held him there, once again facing their boss across the desk.

The most frightening thing was Daniau himself. He just sat in his chair behind the desk with a satisfied smirk on his face. *This man is insane*, Sid thought to himself, *completely, psychotically, and sadistically insane.* Sid had been in scarier situations, but not by much.

Daniau swiveled around in his chair and began doing something Sid couldn't see on the other side of the desk. He heard the familiar, faint sound of a safe's mechanical dial being turned. Even now, Sid's mind continued to habitually take in every detail. He listened as the gangster entered a five-number combination into the safe. There was a beep and then a short delay before a sultry,

seductive female voice came from the safe's computer. "Access granted. Welcome, Mr. Daniau." Sid, a moderately decent safe cracker himself, recognized that beep. It was a QSP scanner. A QuantumScale Processor scanner meant that Daniau had a computer smaller than an atom hidden somewhere in his body which communicated directly with the safe. That safe would only open for him. That was a very expensive safe and almost impossible to crack. *Maybe* a really good hacker could open it, but that safe was well beyond Sid's capabilities.

With the safe now open, Daniau began feeding Sid's money into it. The crime boss had to swivel his chair back and forth between the open safe and the desktop to gather handful after handful of cash. As he did, there were a couple of brief moments during which Daniau's turned back failed to entirely hide the safe from Sid's sharp, quick eyes and photographic memory. There was already a lot of money in the safe even before Daniau began adding Sid's cash to the horde. Sid also noticed a stack of holostamped documents, an old cigar box, and an item that looked sort of like a fat, silver-and-gold ink pen. Sid recognized this item right away as the trademark control wand of a *Fulmine*, the ultimate in flashy status symbols. Daniau had to struggle to fit all the cash into the small safe. The mobster left three of the \$10,000 stacks sitting atop the desk and closed the safe.

"This is for you and your men, Miles," Daniau indicated the three stacks remaining on his desk. "You've done good work tonight."

"Thank you, Mr. Daniau," Miles said and then the other two goons repeated the sentiment.

Sid didn't really care about the money at this point; he just wanted to get out of this situation alive. He swore to himself that if he somehow managed to get out of this, he would leave Distortion and nothing could ever, *ever*, get him to come back to this place. The prospects looked pretty dim, however, as Daniau retrieved a knife from his desk drawer. The narrow, katana-esque blade was only about fifteen or so centimeters long, but it looked sinful sharp and ended in a precise point. Sid recognized it as a chef's boning knife. This psycho wanted him afraid and even if he'd wanted to hide his fear, Sid doubted if he could. Sid was no coward, but something about this crazy psycho made him literally shake with fear.

Daniau got up from his desk and walked around to crouch right in front of where his goons held Sid down on his knees and naked. The sharp edge of the knife glinted in the light from the still-burning fireplace. "So tell me, Mr. Stone, are you working alone? Lie to me, and I'll know. Lie to me, and I'll cut something off of you." The psychopath gently touched the blade's tip to Sid's exposed penis. Sid recoiled as much as the goons' restraining hands would allow. Even Daniau's goons were looking away, their faces screwed up in pained wincing. They didn't seem surprised, though; they'd obviously witnessed scenes like this one before. The blade was so sharp that Sid barely even felt it break the skin. A small trickle of blood ran down a part of his body that no man *ever* wanted to see bleeding. It was just a small nick, but even that was too much.

"Y-Yes," Sid answered Daniau's question. "I usually w-work alone. Accomplices can c-complicate things." It was the truth. Sid just hoped that Daniau would believe it.

Daniau just stared at him for a long moment, looking directly into his eyes. "Good. I think you're telling me the truth. You get to keep your parts."

Daniau raised the knife up and examined the small drop of blood running down its blade. He continued: "Now, you're going to give me a list of everyone you sold your bogus bonds to while you were here in my hotel. You're going to give me a complete list and not hold anything back. And then, if I think you're telling me the truth, I'm inclined to let you go. You're going to leave this planet and never return. I'm going to let all those honest citizens of Distortion know that they were swindled by you and I can't guarantee they'll all be as forgiving as I am."

Sid knew that it was probably a ruse. He knew that this guy would probably still kill him. He knew that Daniau likely wanted the names so that he could blackmail or otherwise exploit those people. Still, knowing all of that, Sid gave up everything he knew. As he saw it, Sid owed the people he'd scammed nothing. If there was any chance whatsoever that he could get out of this alive and in one piece, he was going to take that chance. Sid answered all of Daniau's questions and he answered them honestly. Miles wrote down everything he said while the other two goons held him there kneeling before their master.

When Daniau was satisfied he'd gotten all there was to get out of Sid, he said: "Thank you, Mr. Stone, or whatever your name really is. You've been most helpful to me tonight." Then, the gangster did the scariest thing yet. Never breaking eye contact with Sid, he licked the thin trickle of Sid's blood off of the knife's blade.

This man was insane.

Sid thought he might pass out or cry or do something else decidedly unmanly. Daniau was watching Sid's reaction with a vaguely interested expression on his face, like a scientist observing a specimen. Sid gasped for air, desperately trying not to faint. Even the two goons restraining him winced.

Daniau looked up at his chief goon, Miles. Miles was studiously trying not to see what had just happened. "Mr. Miles, can you think of anything to add?" Daniau asked.

"Um, yeah, um..." Miles was struggling to maintain his composure. "Just, um, that I think we should consider doing a full security audit of the building. Um, make sure nobody else is doing anything they shouldn't in your hotel. Maybe have the nerds in the server room run background checks on all the guests."

"That's a good idea," Daniau said. Then, he looked pensive for a moment, "Oh, and while we're at it, might as well have them check the servers as well."

Sid didn't even know which goon knocked him out after that. He just heard the faint hum of a stun stick coming to life. The next thing he knew, he was waking up face-down on the cold, hard concrete of a trash-strewn alleyway behind some greasy-spoon diner. It took him a few seconds to realize that he was completely naked. But he was alive, and that was something.

Biting the Hand

Marcio Ruiz

23:45

(last night)

Datasphere: Darklands

Exchange: Distortion exchange

Domain: Marcio Ruiz's private domain

Marcio Ruiz wasn't most people.

Most people who log in to the datasphere do so to let their baser instincts off their leashes. Most people entered the virtual world of the datasphere in order to fight virtual wars with one another, to have anonymous or deviant sex with one another, or to buy and sell illegal software. The really freaky stuff usually happened inside private domains, which could (in theory) only be entered by the owners or those whom the owner invites.

But Marcio wasn't most people. Marcio's private domain was like almost no other. His domain had no sex dungeon, no illegal software to buy, and no battle arena. Above all else, Marcio's private domain had no guests. He came here to be away from people, not to interact with them. What Marcio's domain did have was a meadow, a woodland, and a cheerfully burbling stream. And it had Marcio's best friend, Clovis.

Marcio had found Clovis about ten years ago. Back then, when Marcio had been in his late teens, he'd been hacking into almost anything he could get into. One day, he'd found an exploit which allowed him access to someone's private domain. Within that private domain, Marcio had found himself in an expansive, virtual warehouse full of various types of AIs. Whomever owned this domain was an AI merchant and the warehouse had everything from sexbots to vanity pets.

All of the AIs were in their offline, resting states. Except one. Somehow, a single AI had been left online: a striped, ginger cat with a collar which read "Clovis." Marcio had been marveling at bears and tigers standing there offline and unmoving, as though they'd been stuffed. He likely would have never given a small, virtual cat a second glance if Clovis hadn't been online. The moment the cat had seen the teenage Marcio, it had trotted right over to him and began making affectionate figure-8's around his legs. Marcio had grown up on Ciudad Estrella, a space station where owning animals was something only the wealthy could afford. He'd never held a cat in reality before. When he'd first

picked up the virtual Clovis, Marcio had felt the animal's soft fur, his lithe body, and he'd heard the softest, most satisfying sound coming from deep within Clovis's chest.

He'd taken Clovis with him. He'd stolen the valuable AI and now, all these years later, he still had his furry, orange friend. Marcio had never felt comfortable with people, but he liked animals. He like Clovis most of all.

Tonight, like most nights, Marcio unwinded after his workday by sitting cross-legged in the middle of his private, virtual meadow. He breathed virtual fresh air that smelled of flowers into his virtual lungs. He reclined against a fallen log as a yellow sun shone overhead, warming his dark curls and the orange fur of the virtual cat in his lap. Clovis purred as Marcio petted him. All around them virtual bees buzzed between flowers.

"Three more months, Clovis," Marcio said to the cat. "Three more months and we can go back home. Well, not *home* home, but to Gonaways, at least."

They could never go home to Ciudad Estrella, the station world where Marcio had grown up. A problem with Estrella's secondary reactor a few years ago had caused it to fold spacetime in on itself and implode into a pseudo-singularity. Ciudad Estrella, the oldest station world in the Darklands, was now deserted and slowly being consumed by its own imploded reactor. Since the disaster, Marcio and his sister, Lyssa had joined millions of Estrellans as they'd sought refuge anywhere that would have them. While most Estrellan refugees struggled to find even the most menial work where they settled, Marcio and Lyssa had made out pretty well. Both had found skilled work on Gonaways station.

Because Marcio had made a deal with the devil.

"That's why we're here, Clovis. Paying our dues."

The AI feline responded by rolling over and presenting his chest to the man. Marcio obeyed by scratching the cat's chest.

"After this job, we'll only owe one more favor. Then, as soon as we pay that one off, we'll be square with the Boaters and free citizens of Gonaways. I figure that by this time next year, this will all be behind us."

Officially, Marcio worked for Refuge Exnet Security Systems. Unofficially, he worked for the Boaters. Part mobsters, part political party, part street gang, the Boaters ran the criminal underworld on Gonaways station where Marcio lived. Need drugs? Need someone killed? Need to fix an election? Almost anything you want to happen on Gonaways station, the Boaters can make it happen.

If you're willing to pay their price.

Are you and your sister refugees from one of the worst station reactor disasters in Darklands history? Need expedited citizenship and work permits for yourself and your sister? Sure, the Boaters

can take care of that for you. *If you're willing to owe two favors, one for yourself, and one for your sister. If you have a valuable skillset, like hacking. If you're willing to spend six months inside the fortress of a psychotic gangster, stealing said gangster's accounting data. Are you willing to do all that or are you willing to watch your sister starve in the refugee camp?*

Marcio scratched behind Clovis's ears. The cat massaged his forepaws into Marcio's leg and purred. "Three more months, Clovis. Then one more job after this and we'll be free. Lyssa need never know what we've done for her."

Clovis was a good confidant. He didn't judge, he could keep a secret, and he was always happy to see Marcio. And Marcio needed a confidant he could trust with his secrets. He knew all about secrets and how dangerous they could be.

Marcio was a spy. He stole secret data *from* dangerous men who would kill him if they caught him, and he was stealing that data *for* equally dangerous men who would kill him if he didn't. Marcio needed this peaceful meadow and his ginger friend. He needed this virtual place where he could be himself.

Even though it was midafternoon in his private domain, an owl hooted from deep within the nearby woods. Marcio sighed dejectedly. The owl was his alarm program, letting him know it was midnight in the real world, time to disconnect and go to bed. He was always loath to leave, but his real-world body needed sleep. He would have another busy, stressful day tomorrow of spying right under the noses of large men with big guns and small minds.

"It's bedtime, buddy," he said to Clovis. "I gotta log out." He gently lifted Clovis from his lap. The cat registered his dissatisfaction with a plaintive groan and a minor nip at Marcio's hand. Sometimes Clovis did that. Clovis never bit hard. Occasionally, for whatever reason, the cat just felt the need to bite the man. Marcio was pretty sure that was just some glitch in Clovis's program. Surely no real cat would bite a hand that had just been stroking him. It just wasn't logical.

Marcio stood, stretched his virtual body, and took in the bucolic meadow one last time. He executed the commands to disconnect from the datasphere. Within a few seconds, he found himself once again in his own physical body in his small hotel room on the 14th floor of the Paradox Hotel. The little room had been his home for the past few months and likely would be until his contract was up in another few months. The boring, windowless room was a drab contrast to his beloved meadow. He sighed dejectedly, got himself ready for bed, and made sure his alarm was set for 07:00 the next morning.

He slipped under the covers and within minutes was sound asleep. He was completely unaware that his whole, tenuous world was about to come undone.

Lock Down

Sky Meussen

00:45

(last night)

Sky had just finished his shift in the Paradox Hotel's server room at midnight. He'd gone back to his room on at the other end of the fourteenth floor from the server room. He was tired. He'd just managed to get out of his work clothes and was browsing the headlines on the *Gonaways Guardian* on his data pad when his phone rang. He was surprised. It was Mr. Miles, Mr. Daniau's right hand man, himself.

"Hello? Mr. Miles?" Sky had answered the phone nervously.

"Sky Meussen? You're the nerd on call tonight, right?"

"Yes, Sir." Sky answered. He didn't get offended at being called "nerd." Mr. Daniau's men used the term so often that it was practically an official job title at this point. Within the organization's culture, "nerd" was simply shorthand to described what Sky and his fellow contractors from Refuge Exnet Security Systems did at the Paradox Hotel

"Good. We've had a security breach in the hotel and Mr. Daniau wants all departments to do a complete security audit starting immediately."

Great. Sky wasn't stupid enough to ask if immediately really meant *immediately*. Of course it did. So much for sleep. Sky would likely be up the rest of the night running security scans on every one of the googols of files on the servers. "Yes, sir. Let Mr. Daniau know I'll get started on it right away."

"Good." And with that, Mr. Miles hung up without even saying goodbye.

Sky sighed, locked his data pad, changed back into his work clothes, and gathered up his briefcase. While that idiot Marcio slept, Sky would have to pull a thankless all-nighter.

04:05

It was now a little over three hours now since Sky had started what he had expected to be a pointless and thankless audit of the servers' security. And about one hour since all hell had broken loose with his security scanning protocols. His pointless and thankless task had, in fact, found a security breach. A big one.

Someone had been using a skimmer program to copy Mr. Daniau's accounting records. What's more, whomever had hacked the servers appeared to be an extremely skilled hacker. They had set

up a chain of an unknown number of proxies to bounce the data all over the hotel's private network. Each of those proxies was protected by some pretty severe encryption. As far as Sky could tell, the stolen data had bounced off of perhaps dozens of employee cell phones, access terminals, and company data pads. It was going to take forever to break all of that encryption and to track exactly where the data had ultimately ended up.

Sky had run a check of the firewall's log files to see if the data had passed out of the hotel through the firewall. He could find no record of the data having left the hotel and the log files appeared to have been unaltered. Sky felt pretty sure that the stolen accounting data was still somewhere on the hotel's private network, though the thief had done a good job of hiding it. What's more, he felt that if he could find the data, he would find the thief. He suspected that Mr. Daniau would care as much about catching the thief as retrieving the data.

Sky had a vague, unprovable feeling that he already had a primary suspect. As far as he knew, no one in Mr. Daniau's organization had any great deal of skill with computers. That was exactly why he and the rest of the team from Refuge Exnet Security, outside contractors, were here to upgrade their servers for them. But this encryption Sky was looking at was pretty advanced. No one in Mr. Daniau's organization that Sky knew would be able to write encryption like this. Sky doubted if even he himself could do it and his coding skills were far superior to anyone else on the R.E.S. team. Unless someone on his team was playing dumber than they actually were... Isn't that exactly the kind of thing a spy would do?

As soon as Sky had found the breach, he had called Mr. Miles and reported what he'd found. Miles was smarter than the average goon who worked for Mr. Daniau, but not by much. Sky had only needed to explain the situation twice before Mr. Miles indicated that he more-or-less understood and hung up. At first, Sky had wondered if Miles had indeed taken the threat seriously, but about five minutes later, Mr. Daniau himself came into the server room with Mr. Miles close in tow. Sky explained the situation again, this time directly to Mr. Daniau, who understood what he was saying right away.

"Lock down the upper floors," Mr. Daniau said to Miles. "Nobody gets in or out without my say so."

"Yes, sir. Any chance this could be related to the other thing?" Mr. Miles asked his boss.

Mr. Daniau considered that for a moment and then said, "I doubt it, but have the boys bring Stone back in for further questioning, just in case." Sky had no idea what they were talking about, but he was smart enough not to ask.

"Yes, sir," Mr. Miles said and then left to carry out his boss's orders.

Next, Mr. Daniau turned to Sky. "You do the same thing with our private network. Lock it down. Shut down all outside access. The exchange uplink, outside calls, even internal communications.

Only keep alive my personal phone and any connections you need to find the stolen data and the son of a bitch who stole it. Above all else, I want the person who stole from me, understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Daniau," Sky responded as he swiveled in his chair to face his data terminal. He got to work carrying out the mobster's orders, shutting down virtually all of the organization's internal network.

There was a moment of tension in the air as Sky worked and the dangerous crime lord watched over his shoulder. Sky *felt* the question coming before Mr. Daniau even asked it.

"Who do you think might have done this? You must have your suspicions."

Sky stopped and turned back in his chair to address Mr. Daniau directly. "I...I have some ideas, but no solid proof yet. I'm afraid to name any names without proof of wrongdoing, sir."

Mr. Daniau's voice took on an air of authority: "Tell me what you know." This wasn't a suggestion.

What I do know is that if your, um, *organization* had anyone capable of this level of hacking, I doubt that you would have hired us to upgrade your servers for you."

"Hmm... So you think it may be someone on your own team, then?"

"Possibly..." Sky considered it for a moment. "Probably."

"So that narrows it down to four – no, *three* people. I doubt you'd have brought this to my attention if you were the spy."

Sky could think of a few reasons why a spy might want to bring attention to his own theft. Primarily if he needed to create a distraction. But he wasn't going to suggest any of that to Mr. Daniau. "Of course not, Mr. Daniau."

Mr. Daniau stared at him intently. The older man held heavy, direct, frighteningly intimate eye contact. Sky felt that the gangster was reading his very soul. This man was no dummy. He knew that Sky's own reporting of the hack didn't fully absolve him of the crime.

At last, Mr. Daniau must have decided that he really was innocent. He placed his hand on Sky's shoulder. "Good job finding this, Sky. Now find me that fucking thief."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Daniau." Sky turned back in his chair and got back to work shutting down the network.

Some Kind of Computer Breach

Marcio

04:08

Marcio was truly and properly screwed.

The whole mess started just after 04:00. Marcio had been asleep in his room on the fourteenth floor of the Paradox Hotel when he was awakened by one of Mr. Daniau's goons. The enforcer had used his security key card, entered Marcio's room, and woken him up from a dead sleep. The goon had scared Marcio half to death. He demanded that Marcio get his clothes on and come to the server room immediately.

Marcio needed coffee.

"What's going on?" he asked the goon. *Vice*, Marcio thought, remembering this particular ogre's name.

"Dunno," Vice answered him, "Boss hisself is in there. Says one of the other nerds found some big security breach."

Marcio's blood stopped cold and he thought for a moment that his bowels might actually let go. He knew all about the security breach, of course, because he was the one who'd perpetrated it. A million questions raced through his mind in quick succession. How did they discover the breach? Did they know it was him? Did they know what was taken? Did they know why? Did they know who he was really working for? What could he do? Could he just slip past Vice somehow and get out of the building and off the planet?

"We're in lock down," Vice continued, unwittingly answering Marcio's last couple of unspoken questions. "Nobody gets in or out of the secure zone without Mr. Daniau's say so."

The Paradox Hotel was actually a fortress, disguised as a hotel, from which Eddie Daniau ran his illicit empire. The first thirteen floors of the seventeen-story building operated like a normal hotel, but that was just a front. The building's real business was carried out on the four upper floors. Floors fourteen through seventeen made up the "secure zone" and were off limits to the hotel's guests. The secure zone housed Mr. Daniau's penthouse and offices, the crime syndicate's computer servers, apartments for Daniau's lieutenants, safe houses, and an armory stocked for war. Marcio had even found and hacked into Daniau's secret hidden camera network. People who make their living through graft and intimidation seldom think the skinny nerd in the computer room can pose any great threat to them.

Marcio threw on some clothes and followed Vice out of the room. "What kind of breach was it?" He was fishing for information. He needed to know how much they already knew. He needed coffee.

The dumb oaf just shrugged. "Some kind of computer breach."

Idiot. I'm an information security contractor and we're going to the server room. Of course it's a computer breach. Why else would they be calling for me? "What kind of computer breach, I mean?"

"I dunno. Somethin' with files and stuff."

Oh yeah. Vice is a live one, all right. Easy enough to see why he hurts people for a living. Marcio's momentary sense of smug superiority was immediately cut short, however. It occurred to him that by the time this day was out, Vice might be directed to hurt him. They might kill him. And it wouldn't be quick.

It was an open secret why Mr. Daniau was called "Eddie The Mushroom." Supposedly he had a collection of crudely amputated penises, taken from people who'd wronged him over the years. Supposedly he had them dried out and he kept them as macabre souvenirs, sometimes killing their former owners and sometimes allowing them to live out their days sitting to pee.

Marcio knew he'd been as careful as he could be. He'd even hidden the data he'd collected in a place that was pure genius. But even with all the precautions, he knew eventually someone would figure out it was he who'd stolen the information. Any belief that he could go undiscovered indefinitely would be the height of hubris. He had to figure out a way out of this hotel and off this planet before they could unravel his crime. He had to do it soon and he had to make sure he got the data out with him. Without that data, the Boaters would kill him.

04:15

When Vice escorted Marcio into the server room, Mr. Daniau was indeed already in there, just as Vice had said. They were definitely taking the situation seriously if the boss himself was overseeing the investigation at a quarter past four in the morning. Marcio pretended to be completely oblivious to the situation. "What's going on, Mr. Daniau?" he asked the mobster.

Though Eddie "The Mushroom" Daniau was wearing some very expensive looking silk pajamas, the older man's red-rimmed eyes betrayed his lack of sleep. Nevertheless, he managed not to look disheveled in the least. As usual, the erudite Mr. Daniau looked more like an Andromedan robber baron or a duke from one of the old Milky Way kingdoms than a Darklands mob boss who was reputed to own an extremely grotesque "mushroom" collection. The glare from the server terminal reflected in the boss's glasses lenses as Mr. Daniau stood looking over the shoulder of Sky Meussen, a junior tech on Marcio's team.

Mr. Daniau didn't look up or answer Marcio's question right away and Marcio knew better than to annoy the man by repeating his query. Finally, after a moment, Mr. Daniau answered Marcio's question, still not looking up at him: "What's going on, Mr. Ruiz, is that we've got a rat in our larder. Someone has hidden a program on our server which has been monitoring and copying my company's accounting data." Mr. Daniau looked up at Marcio and fixed him in his deathly gaze as he continued, "Isn't that just the type of thing you're here to prevent?"

Actually, that's just the type of thing Marcio was here to perpetrate.

Marcio knew he was expected to be intimidated by the older man's stare, and he was. He felt like a still-wriggling mouse being swallowed alive by a snake. "Y-Yes sir, well I'm sure we can fix whatever the problem is and secure the data."

"That's all well and good, Mr. Ruiz, but above all else, I expect you to catch the son of a bitch who's spying on me. I'm going to pull his spine out through his asshole."

From behind him, near the door, Marcio heard Vice chuckle approvingly.

"Yes, sir," Marcio said. "I'll get to work on it immediately."

"Good."

"What do we know so far about the breach?"

"The whole mess started just before midnight when hotel security caught some con artist running a scam out of his hotel room. Apparently this idiot didn't know — well, he didn't know not to run a hustle in my hotel. We dealt with him and I ordered a full security sweep, just as a precaution. That's when young Sky here —" Daniau placed a hand heavily on Sky's shoulder, " — found a nasty little program running on the server, collecting data and sending it out to who-knows-where." Marcio could tell that Sky was eating up his little victory. He stared at Marcio smugly. Did Sky suspect him? Likely he did. Marcio would have to be very careful around his junior tech.

"You're sure it wasn't that con artist you caught?" Marcio had a moment of hope in which he thought that maybe he'd be able to just blame everything on some stupid con artist who was probably dead already.

"Sky says no." Daniau said.

Marcio looked at Sky and now it was Sky's turn to speak. Although Marcio was himself only twenty eight, he often thought of Sky Meussen, only two years his junior, as a much younger than he actually was. There was just something vaguely juvenile and emotionally immature about him. While Marcio could be lazy with personal grooming and socially awkward, Sky took it to a different level. Dressing himself from his own laundry basket, Sky tended to wear the same badly-wrinkled clothes day after day, not even attempting the illusion of cleanliness. He often wore a patchy "laziness beard" and seemed to never brush his teeth. He possessed an angsty sullenness that most

people grew out of in their teen years. Nevertheless, Sky was possibly a genius with computers and a real threat to Marcio.

"Nuh-uh," Sky answered Marcio's question. "It wasn't the conman. That dumbass wasn't even smart enough to encrypt his phone. Didn't even have an unlock code or biometrics on it. We've been all through his messages. Nothing was secured. Fuckin' noob. I checked for hidden files or programs on the phone, and nothing.

"On the other hand, the spy program we found in the server seems like it was put there by somebody that knew what he was doing. This fuckin' thing was hid real good and its AI was smart enough to try to evade our sweeps. I almost missed it, but luckily I'm better than the dickhead that wrote it." Sky grinned, proud of his achievement, naively believing that outsmarting the AI was the same as outsmarting the man who had written it. "The shit stain that put it in there really wanted to cover his tracks." Sky gave Marcio a brief overview of the hacker's secure proxy network, unaware that he was describing it to the very hacker who'd built it. "Looks like the jerk couldn't figure out how to get that much data out past the security screens so it just kept bouncing around here on our network. We just need to find out where it is and who has it."

Sky was actually close to being right. The data was still here in the building, not because Marcio couldn't figure out how to get it out, but only because he wasn't done collecting it yet. He'd planned to get someone else to unwittingly take it all out for him when he was done.

"Good work, Sky," Marcio said. It was good work. Too bad Marcio needed him to do bad work.

"One more thing, Mr. Ruiz," Daniau said, "we're going to need to see your phone too."

"Yes sir, Mr. Daniau." Marcio was suddenly very glad he'd been smart enough not to keep anything incriminating on his own phone. He took his phone out of his pocket, and as he was handing it over to Daniau, he noticed there was no signal. That made sense. The only cell phones allowed into the secure zone of the hotel were those which were on the Paradox's private service. Now that the secure zone was in lock down, that private service was shut down as well. Having a private network allowed Daniau to have anyone in his organization monitored, and it also prevented anyone from using a cell phone to spy on them.

In theory, at least. Remember, every system has cracks in it.

Daniau passed Marcio's phone over to Sky and the junior tech performed a scan of all the data in it. The only thing the scan turned up was some rather disturbing and illegal pornographic videos. At their discovery, Daniau and Sky looked judgmentally at Marcio. He was embarrassed and he let them see his embarrassment. In truth, however, Marcio had no interest in porn. He'd just put those videos on there as a red herring, just in case anyone ever decided to check his phone. It would look more suspicious if he was too clean, if he had nothing to hide, than if he had something to be embarrassed about.

Marcio noticed another phone, partially dismantled and connected with physical wires to one of the other server access terminals. This phone was a really expensive model, top of the line, not like the cheap ones Daniau issued to rank-and-file members of his organization. It seemed to have been pushed aside, forgotten. *Is that the con artist's phone?* Marcio wondered. If so, it wouldn't be a part of Daniau's private network and would likely still have signal.

Once the scan of Marcio's phone was complete, Mr. Daniau slipped it into his own pocket. "I'll be holding on to this for the time being," Mr. Daniau explained. "Until the spy is caught, I'm keeping everybody's phones. When you catch the spy, come see me to get your phone back." Daniau then paused a moment before adding, "When you catch the spy, I expect a very convincing explanation as to how he managed to steal data from the server you're in charge of protecting."

"Yes, Mr. Daniau," Marcio said contritely.

"You really don't want me thinking you might be involved, Mr. Ruiz."

"Of course not, sir."

And with that, Daniau stepped past Marcio towards the door. Marcio saw him stop and whisper something to Vice. Vice glanced at Marcio and Sky with a predatory smirk on his face. "Okay, boss," Vice responded to whatever Daniau had said. And with that, Daniau left the room, closing the door behind himself. The mobster didn't take the con artist's phone with him. Vice remained, standing at the door, watching the two techs.

Once Mr. Daniau left, Marcio was able to speak more frankly with Sky and gather more information. Sky had been able to figure out that the conman's name, "Sid Stone," was just an alias, though he'd not been able to learn the man's real name. Also, Sky revealed that the con artist had still been alive, though unconscious, when Daniau's goons had taken him out of the hotel. Unfortunately, Sky hadn't discovered the data theft until a couple hours after they had gotten rid of the con artist. As a precaution, just in case this "Sid Stone" was somehow connected with the server breach after all, Daniau had sent some goons back out to retrieve the man and bring him back for "questioning," but the goons weren't back yet. *Poor bastard*, Marcio thought. *He was lucky to get out alive once, but now Daniau will probably kill him anyways.*

As for the breach itself, tracking the stolen data was proving time consuming. Marcio had built his network of encrypted proxies specifically to make it hard to track the data. Marcio did the calculation in his head of how many proxies he had and how long it was taking to decrypt each one. He figured he had about a day and a half before the data was found. Marcio knew that if he wasn't caught by some other means in the interim, that data would have his digital fingerprints all over it. And he couldn't simply access it and delete it; if he did, the people he'd been collecting it for would kill him. At best, he had a day or so to live. By tomorrow afternoon, Eddie The Mushroom will have added another "mushroom" to his collection.

Marcio made coffee in the small coffee maker he kept at his desk and asked Sky if he wanted a cup. As he expected, Sky refused. Sipping his first cup of hot, black coffee, Marcio sat beside Sky and watched the decryption script slowly work on one of his proxies for an hour or so. During that time, two more people were escorted into the server room by Daniau's goons. In addition to himself and Sky, junior techs Ivan and Camilla made up the rest of Marcio's team from R.E.S. Marcio, as the team lead, briefly explained the situation to Ivan and Camilla, and gave them busy work running background checks on all of the hotel's guests. No way was he going to put any more resources into finding the spy.

There was a brief moment of excitement as Sky's decryptor finally broke into one of Marcio's proxies. Everyone gathered around Sky's terminal as the progress bar went slowly from 99% to 100%. It seemed to stall at 100% for a long moment before finally indicating that the proxy had been unlocked. Sky had been momentarily hopeful and Marcio had feigned hope, but this proxy, implanted on one of the housekeeping mobile terminals, turned out to only bounce to yet another encrypted proxy.

Sky was enraged. "Ah, fuck this asshole!" Sky exclaimed, slapping the terminal monitor in frustration. "Another encrypted proxy. How many proxies did this knob gobbler use?"

A lot, but not enough. Marcio thought to himself. Marcio thought Sky looked tired. The younger tech's eyes were red. He'd been watching these scripts slowly chip away at the proxies' encryption all night. Aloud, he answered, "Look, Sky, there's no telling how long this could take. Why don't you go get some rest."

"Oh, fuck that!" Sky was indignant. "No, seriously. I wanna be here when we catch this asshole. I wanna see the look on his face when we nail him. This guy's done pissed on my territory and I want to be in the room when Mr. Daniau rips him apart."

Marcio raised his eyebrows and glared at his subordinate over the tops of his glasses for a moment. The junior tech knew he'd overstepped his bounds with his supervisor. "Look," Marcio said, "this could take days. In fact, I'd wager it *will* take days. This scumbag seems smart enough to use multiple encrypted proxies, so it's likely he used a lot of them. I've been sleeping all night while you worked on this. Now you need to get some rest. Come back and relieve me this afternoon."

Besides, I've already got Ivan and Camilla distracted running checks on the guests, Marcio thought. If I can get rid of you, I can slow down the decryptors and buy some more time while I steal the con artist's phone, contact my real boss, and ask for help.

Sky glanced protectively at the screen where his decryptor's apparently unmoving progress bar was chewing at the new proxy. It was still showing 0% and he knew it would likely take an hour or two to break into this one.

"I promise you I'll come get you as soon as we have something," Marcio reassured the junior tech." He could see Sky's resolve wavering as he likely thought about his bed. Marcio continued, "Don't worry; you'll be in the room when we confront the fucker. You've earned that, Mr. Meussen."

No one ever called Sky "Mr. Meussen." He was always just "Sky." Marcio knew this small sign of respect would win Sky over to his point of view.

Sky sighed. "Okay. You better let me know as soon as you know something."

"I promise. The only person that'll know before you will be Mr. Daniau himself."

That seemed to appease Sky, so he finally got up from the terminal and walked towards the door. As he stepped out into the hallway, Sky glanced longingly back at the terminal once and then was gone. Marcio was relieved. Now he only had to palm the con artist's phone, get away from Vice, hope the phone still had signal, and make a call to his handler on Gonaways station. Then, he had to hope like hell there was something his handler, a man on a different world days away, could do to help.

Easy.

Paranoia

Marcio

05:27

The thing about working for a psychotic gangster is that he's unfailingly paranoid. Mr. Daniau had every inch of the Paradox Hotel's top four floors under constant video surveillance. He had a secret network of hidden cameras everywhere, even in bathrooms and the private apartments of his own lieutenants. Everywhere, as far as Marcio could tell, except the penthouse apartment of Mr. Daniau himself, the apartment of his kept girlfriend, and the area behind his own office desk. Mr. Daniau would have his privacy, even if no one else would.

All of this surveillance could have been a hazard for Marcio, but Marcio had turned it to his advantage on day one. Before he'd even begun harvesting the gangster's private accounting data, Marcio had thoroughly familiarized himself with as much of the organization's security protocols as he could. The expansive hidden camera network was secured so that only Mr. Daniau himself had access or even seemed to know it existed. For Marcio, it had been child's play to find it and hack into Mr. Daniau's creeper cam network. Ever since he'd first arrived on Distortion three months ago, Marcio had had all the surveillance access that Mr. Daniau himself had.

After Sky had left the server room to get some sleep, Marcio spent some time watching the decryptors. Oddly, they seemed to run even more slowly since Sky left, almost as if something Marcio did was slowing them down. He wished he could stop them altogether. Marcio and the other two techs worked quietly under Vice's disinterested gaze. Marcio's terminal displays were turned strategically so that no one could see them, particularly Vice, and most particularly the camera Marcio knew to be hidden in the corner. Nevertheless, Marcio couldn't help but be a little nervous accessing Mr. Daniau's secret camera network with the big enforcer in the room. If Marcio were caught accessing a creeper cam network that shouldn't even exist, it would be over for him. The risk couldn't be helped, however. He needed to know what his enemies were up to.

He hadn't expected to find Daniau very easily, as the boss usually lurked in those private areas of his not covered by the camera network's watchful gaze. Marcio expected that Daniau would likely be going to bed, having been up all night, but he was surprised to find Daniau almost immediately. Since he had left the server room, the boss had gotten dressed in a smart suit and was now walking across the rooftop landing platform where his plane was parked. Marcio didn't know anything about planes, but he could plainly tell that this one was a small, expensive, sporty, model. His sister, Lyssa,

would know everything about the plane at a glance. She worked as an aviation mechanic and she would probably extol the virtues of the plane's engines or lambaste how hard it was to access the electrical system for even routine maintenance. Marcio watched as on his display the mobster climbed into the sleek plane's cockpit. He started the engines, lifted off vertically from the hotel's small landing platform, and then disappeared from the camera's view, off to points unknown to Marcio.

Marcio had expected Sky to be easier to track, but was disappointed. He accessed the cameras in Sky's hotel room, expecting to find his junior tech asleep. He saw nothing, neither in the bedroom nor in the bathroom. The bed in Sky's room looked undisturbed and his briefcase wasn't there. Next, Marcio checked the cameras in the small canteen up on the fifteenth floor. With the secure zone on lock down, there would be no access to the restaurants on the lower floors nor any room service delivery. The canteen was now the only place to find food in the secure zone. It stood to reason that Sky might have gone there for something to eat, but the camera network showed only a couple of Daniau's goons having their morning coffee and the woman behind the counter. Strange. Where could Sky have gone?

Then, a sinking feeling in his innards, Marcio had an idea he knew where to find Sky. He switched to a view of the hallway outside of his own room and saw nothing out of place. Next, he checked inside his own room and there he found Sky. Sky had hacked the lock to Marcio's room and was now digging through the files on his private data terminal. Though Marcio wasn't stupid enough to keep anything incriminating on his personal terminal, it still made his blood run cold to see Sky looking through it. There could be no doubt about it: Sky suspected him.

Marcio glanced nervously at Vice, but found the big oaf absorbed in a dirty paperback called *Hot Studs of Prison Base 12*. Marcio had to admit he was surprised; he'd never suspected that Vice could read. While the ogre was distracted by his book and the other two techs were distracted by their work, Marcio slowly slipped his hand up to the counter where the conman's phone still lay. Its cover had been removed, exposing its circuitry. Furtively, Marcio disconnected the phone's circuit board from the wires linking it to the data terminal where Sky had scanned it earlier. He slipped all the phone's pieces into his pocket. Hopefully, with a little reassembly, it would come back to life.

He closed down the camera feeds on his server terminal and made sure that several innocent, but highly technical-looking windows were left up on the display. "I need to go to the bathroom," Marcio announced.

Vice just nodded in response without ever looking up from his book.

Once in the bathroom down the hall from the server room, Marcio checked both stalls to make sure that he was alone. He locked the door. He knew where the camera in this room was hidden, so he climbed up and disabled it. Daniau was likely still flying his plane, so probably no one would be

watching right at this moment. He made a mental note to go into the server and delete the final few minutes of the camera's life which would show him climbing up to destroy it. Next, he reassembled the conman's phone and powered it on.

He was grateful to the pit of his soul when he saw that the phone still had signal. He called the local exchange operator and asked for a quantum-entangled connection to the Gonaways station exchange. He had never before appreciated how wonderful it was to be able to communicate in real time with somebody light-years away in a different part of the galaxy.

Perhaps half a minute passed as Marcio listened to some hold music that he actually found soothing for his tattered nerves. Then, the hold music ended abruptly. A familiar series of clicks signified that his connection to Gonaways was being made. A perky computer voice came on and said "*Welcome to the Gonaways exchange, gateway to the Darklands! What number, please?*"

Marcio recited the number of his handler, Beauregard Tyson, from memory. He had no idea if "Beau Tie" would be able to help him, but if anyone could, it would be Beau.

"*Please wait while I connect your call! And thank you for using the Gonaways exchange!*" the computerized operator said.

There was a click and then Beauregard "Beau Tie" Tyson's phone began to ring.

The Tenebricite Shadow

Danny

08:48

Danny Jake had two options: he could either leave the planet or he could catch a steamer to Distortion's mainland. Remaining in the city of Harvest Junction where several wealthy and powerful people would soon figure out the mining bonds they'd bought from him were worthless wasn't an option. If he remained in Harvest Junction, he would surely end up dead or in jail. For a man like Danny, who so relished his freedom, it was debatable whether death or jail would be worse.

Leaving the planet would be ideal, but interstellar travel could be prohibitively expensive. Danny found himself a little short of cash at the moment. Travel to the mainland via steamer, on the other hand, was comparatively cheap and therefore a much more feasible option.

But Danny *really* didn't want to go to the mainland.

Understanding why Danny didn't want to go to the mainland would require understanding why most major planetside cities in the Darklands (such as Harvest Junction) were built on flotillas in the middles of oceans. Darklanders have always built their planetside cities on offshore platforms connected together to form sprawling, deep-water flotillas so they can live outside of the "tenebricite shadow."

If you've ever been to the Darklands, you may have noticed that the night side of almost any terraformed planet was *completely* dark. Travel to any other galaxy and you'll see the night sides of the settled planets alight with vast cities twinkling gayly beneath you as you orbit. But not so in the Darklands. The small, remote dwarf galaxy at the tail end of human settlement had been named the "Darklands" by its first settlers because nights on Darklands planets were *very* dark. This was due to a phenomenon unique to the Darklands called the "tenebricite shadow."

Some say that at the formation of the universe, whatever gods oversaw its creation decided to set one remote dwarf galaxy aside as their garbage dump. There, those anonymous gods threw all of the universe's most useless mineral, tenebricite, where it wouldn't interfere with the advancement of civilization. They were confident that no species would ever be stupid enough to settle there. Those gods underestimated the power of human stupidity.

Tenebricite is a mineral found only in the Darklands. The cursed mineral emits a weak electromagnetic field. This EM field interrupts all but the simplest electronic devices. Hold a chunk of pure tenebricite up to your data terminal sometime and watch the terminal go dark. On

Distortion, like most Darklands planets, tenebricite permeates the soil and the seafloor, preventing most advanced technology within about a kilometer of the surface. This area where tenebricite's EM field inhibits technology is known in the Darklands as the "tenebricite shadow." Light bulbs will work within the tenebricite shadow, but generators or batteries to power them won't. Magnetos and spark plugs will work, but carbon-emitting engines are banned on most terraformed worlds, except in very special circumstances.

About a thousand meters above the land or above the sea floor, the effects of the tenebricite shadow wear off and advanced electronics work just as well as they do in space or in other galaxies. Computers can function. Spaceplanes can land and take off as long as their runways are built on flotillas anchored in deep water. People can have electric light and live in the comfort of climate-controlled housing.

Within the tenebricite shadow, however, life is very different and much more primitive. Though the tenebricite shadow is death to technology, it harms neither human nor plant nor animal. Within the tenebricite shadow, those comparatively few people who eke out their primitive livings do so by the sweat of their brows, the power of beasts, and the heat of flame.

Within the tenebricite shadow, the living is hard. The people are poor and so are the prospects for a swindler like Danny Jake. Danny really didn't want to go to the mainland.

After finishing the breakfast he'd liberated from Nameless Magoo's disgusting diner, Danny had stopped at one of the crossover bridges which connected the platforms of the Harvest Junction flotilla to one another. Though the morning sun was now fully up, it felt like dusk in the reddish light of the ancient and slowly dying star. A few million years from now, that star would go out entirely and Distortion would become a dead, frozen ice ball. Twenty or so meters below where Danny stood on the crossover bridge, the churning ocean waves appeared purplish in the strange light as they gnashed at the city's platforms.

Danny cleaned out the wallet he'd liberated from ol' Nameless Magoo. He discovered that Nameless Magoo's real name was Norbert Marshall, which probably went a long way to explaining why the man hadn't given his name. Danny found almost \$200 in Distortion currency, which he estimated would equate to about \$120 on Gonaways station. He was pretty sure you couldn't spend Distortion dollars beyond Distortion itself or maybe a few of the nearby systems. He also found a very expired condom in the wallet. *Guess it's been a while for old Norbert*, Danny thought. He let the wallet itself and most of its contents fall to the ocean waves below, keeping only the cash and the condom. He almost dropped the condom as well, but he decided to hold on to it, just in case. Expired protection was better than none at all, and Danny was an optimist.

With cash now in hand, he next found a coffee shop where he bought a cup of coffee, courtesy of Norbert Marshall. On his way out of the coffee shop, Danny liberated a cell phone from a woman

who wasn't attending to her valuables. Down an alley a couple of blocks from the coffee shop Danny angled the liberated phone in the red light of the giant sun. He wouldn't be able to unlock the phone with biometrics, of course, but when he woke the screen up, he could see the thumbprint smudges only corresponded to two numbers: 1 and 7. Danny assumed that the woman's four-digit unlock code for her phone only involved those two digits. It only took Danny three tries to guess her unlock code of 1771. If people weren't so predictable, Danny would be out of a job.

Now, with access to the exnet, Danny could see about his options for getting off Distortion. Getting off planet meant catching a ride on a starhopper. Catching a ride on a starhopper meant coming up with the \$3,000-\$4,000 it would take to pay for third-class passage. This situation was complicated by the fact that today was Monday. Even by Darklands standards, Distortion was a backwater through which starhoppers only passed once a week, every Monday. Not only did Danny have to come up with a lot of money, but he had to do it today before the starhopper slipped into transtachyonic flight and was gone.

Starhoppers are truly massive ships, the size of smaller asteroids. They can only be constructed in space and are too massive to ever land on any planet. The only way to get aboard starhopper as it lumbers through the solar system is to catch a ride on a shuttle plane which can intercept and land on the starhopper itself. Danny looked up at the sky as if he were expecting to see the massive ship he knew should be up there somewhere, but even a ship that large was minuscule in the vastness of space. Perhaps if the sun weren't out and he had a really good telescope...

Danny used his liberated cell phone's exnet access to check the schedules and ticket prices to get off planet. Shuttle planes were departing more or less every hour until the last one was scheduled to take off from Harvest Junction International Spaceport at 21:08 local time. The massive starhopper, *Twilight Elegance*, would then begin its acceleration to transtachyonic flight just before 23:00 and would likely break into transtach about thirty to forty-five minutes later. Danny looked at ticket prices for both the *Twilight Elegance* and the shuttles to get to her. The cheapest prices he could find for both the tickets he needed would total just over \$4400. Danny knew he'd never be able to get that kind of scratch and make it to the spaceport before 21:00.

Dejectedly, he began looking into tickets aboard steamships headed for the mainland. Those would set him back just over a few hundred dollars. He knew he could hustle that kind of money and be out of the city by evening. He sighed as he went ahead and reserved a ticket for himself aboard some shitty tub called the *Harvest Gold* under his current name. All he needed to do was get together a couple hundred more dollars by 18:00 and present it to the ticket office down at the steamer docks. He would get out of the city this evening and be on the mainland in two days.

On the mainland, he could set himself up as a traveling judge. He would spend a few weeks going from one small town to the next performing marriages, administering justice, and taking bribes

for that "justice." Eventually, he would have the funds to finally escape this cursed planet. Hopefully his fortunes would be better wherever he found himself next.

He knew he'd have to dispose of the recently liberated cell phone soon. It would be reported stolen and it was too easy to track. The phone would lead the police right to him. Danny was allergic to police. He started to make his way to the next crossover bridge where he could drop the incriminating phone to the ocean below. He kept mostly to side streets and alleyways to avoid any police.

As he walked, he started to read the news, but he found it to be too much of a downer. Instead, he decided to log in to his message account and check to see if he had any messages. That's when everything changed.

Mrs. Kundertson, I Presume?

Danny

08:53

Danny walked along deserted side streets in the strange, reddish light of the Distortion morning. He was looking for a crossover bridge where he might dispose of the liberated cell phone. As he walked, he started to read the exnet news feeds, but it was mostly depressing stuff. The day's biggest headline read:

WAR ESCALATES!

– Olost Defense Ministry Hit by Missile Strike –

It was the first time that either the Kell or the Olost home worlds had been hit directly, and it signified a significant escalation in the war between the two major powers. Some Brigadier General named Siskin Lia and sixteen others of lesser ranks had been killed in the attack. The news article showed a picture of what was left of the Olost Defense Ministry. Even though the building still mostly stood, it was severely damaged. The upper third of the tall building had been reduced to charred, twisted I-beams and crumbling rubble. According to the article, the attack was believed to be the work of Kell saboteurs in retaliation for the recent hijacking of one of their military transport planes. The article went on to say that the hijacking had been carried out by some notorious terrorist (and suspected Olost operative) named Sallie Starlinger.

Danny decided he didn't want to read the news after all. It was all terrorists and hijackings and death and destruction. Instead, he decided to see if he had any messages. He logged into the account of Mrs. Ethel Kundertson. Mrs. Kundertson had been dead for a couple years now, but Danny had her password, so he used her message account and identity for his own purposes.

I know what you're thinking.

No, he didn't kill her.

Actually, he'd married her.

Long story.

Danny logged in to Mrs. Kundertson's account and was greeted, as always, by the old woman's heavy-set, jowly face set in her permanent frown. He looked at the inbox and that's when everything started to change.

Some joker identifying himself by the name "Fetch DeCodeExecute" had left almost twenty messages over the past three hours. Danny recognized the caller's pseudonym as being some computer reference, but he didn't get the reference. Fetch DeCodeExecute had left text messages, voice messages, and video messages. Danny suspected it was likely a scammer trying to rip off old Mrs. Kundertson.

Amateurs, he thought with disgust. He considered just deleting all the messages. Ultimately, he decided to open the most recent message, just in case it was something interesting. This one was a video message. Fetch DeCodeExecute was using some kind of filtering software to disguise his face and voice. It looked like he'd filmed the message in a bathroom. Fetch was speaking into the camera in hushed tones made more difficult to understand by the voice filter.

"Listen here, you son of a bitch," the mysterious caller had said to the camera just fifteen minutes earlier, "you can't ignore me forever. It's your fault all this is happening. They're gonna find me and they're gonna kill me. If I don't complete my mission, the Boaters'll hold you accountable. Do you know what they'll do to you? It's worse than death, motherfucker!" At that Fetch DeCodeExecute had ended the message.

That was...interesting, Danny thought. The mysterious caller's mention of the Boaters got Danny's attention. Danny knew very well who the Boaters were; he'd had dealings with them before. While Eddie Daniau was a hoity-toity, keep-your-dick-in-a-jar kind of psychopath gangster, the Boaters were just good old-fashioned, blue collar, break-your-kneecaps kinds of gangsters. At least ostensibly. Danny was pretty sure there was more to the Boaters than was commonly known. They were too well-funded and too organized for there not to be. Whatever this was all about, if the Boaters were involved, Danny would do well to at least return Fetch DeCodeExecute's calls.

He started to go back through the previous messages Fetch had been leaving for him all morning, since before he'd even woken up, when suddenly his inbox pinged. Fetch was leaving him a message right now. Danny tapped on the message and answered the call.

"—not screwing arou—" Fetch DeCodeExecute, in the process of leaving another angry message, was surprised at Danny suddenly picking up his call. Fetch's surprise was obvious, even through the face filter.

"What's this all about?" Danny asked. "I just now checked my messages. Who are you?"

"You're Sid Stone? You're the idiot con artist that started all this crap?" In addition to his face, Fetch's voice was also distorted. He sounded like he was talking through a metal tube full of cotton.

"First of all, I'm not using the name Sid Stone anymore. Name's gone unlucky. Furthermore, I don't know that I like your tone, friend. I'm about to end this call." No way was Danny going to end this call. His every hustler's instinct told him there was an opportunity here.

"No! No, don't do that! I'm sorry!"

"Explain to me why I shouldn't just hang up."

"Well, you kinda owe me, to start with."

"Don't know how you figure that. Besides, I'm not really one for paying debts. Do better."

"I'm working for the Boaters. They can pay."

"That's better. Define 'pay'."

"Twenty-five thousand. But you have to get me off the planet on today's starhopper."

Danny did the calculation. By the time he bought third class tickets for himself and this idiot, he'd barely clear fifteen thousand dollars. Normally he'd consider that chump change. Might be worth it, though, if it gets him out of spending the next few weeks on the mainland scamming farmers and shopkeepers. Depends on what other strings are attached to this job. Danny could smell the bull crap coming from this guy's distorted image and voice. There were strings attached.

"What else?" Danny asked.

"I'm trapped in a building and you have to get me out with — and this is important — *with* the data I was sent here to collect. Otherwise, the Boaters'll kill us both."

"Well, you drive a hard bargain," Danny said sarcastically. On the surface, the job sounded crappy. "I wasn't even aware The Boaters had any presence on Distortion."

"They don't. I'm from Gonaways station."

That was interesting. Danny knew the scumbag that ran the Boaters out of Gonaways. Lowlife named Beau Tie.

"What building are you trapped in?" Danny was pretty sure he already knew.

"The Paradox Hotel."

Danny didn't even feign surprise, just glared at the distorted face on the screen in front of him.

The idiot on the phone began to babble through his distorted voice filter. "I'm on the fourteenth floor, and I'm a computer security expert, and I've got a huge trove of data on the Paradox organization's accounting practices. I've been here for about three months, but now I can't get out because we're on lock down because of you — well, because of me — but they would've never found my skimmer program on the server if they hadn't done a security sweep, and that was all because of you. You see, after they caught you they did this security sweep — "

"Oh, shut up," Danny said. It was hard not to laugh at this idiot. "I was lucky to get away from that place in one piece last night. Do you know why they call your boss 'Eddie the Mushroom?' He almost plucked my mushroom last night, but he let me go. I'm free and clear, here. Why would I come *back* in there and risk my big, beautiful plonker for a miserable fifteen thousand dollars or so profit?"

But Danny was seeing an opportunity here. If he could get into the Paradox's secure zone, there might be a chance he could get into Daniau's safe where he could make some real money. He'd

already decided he would need a highly skilled hacker to hack the QSP scanner on Daniau's office safe and now just such a hacker had just fallen right into his lap. It was meant to be. While Danny knew there was a chance this could all be a setup, he felt like this was just the universe sending him a wave to ride. This was an opportunity. Anyway, he knew how to verify this guy's story. He could just call the leader of the Boaters on Gonaways station. Danny still remembered Beau Tie's private number from he last time they'd done business together.

"I got news for you, pal," the fool calling himself Fetch DeCodeExecute said. "You're not so 'free and clear' as you seem to think you are. Mr. Daniau seems to think you might be involved in my little data theft. His goons are out looking for you at this very moment. And you can bet they'll be camping the spaceport and probably even the steamer terminal. It's only a matter of time before they catch you. Like it or not, your sad, little plonker is already at risk. And if I'm caught and you don't help me, I'll tell Mr. Daniau –

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Danny interrupted him. "I'm gonna stop you right there, kid. It sounded like you were thinking about threatening me for a second there." A tense, silent moment passed between them before Danny continued, "First of all, if you're asking me to come back into the belly of the beast to save you, then I need to know who you are. Drop the stupid voice and face filters."

The guy on the other end hesitated for a long moment, unsure if he could trust Danny, and then tapped his screen a few times. Suddenly Danny could see Fetch's true face. He was a skinny guy, late twenties, with glasses. He had dark skin with dark, curly hair and deep, brown eyes. Though his narrow shoulders and curls gave him a somewhat effeminate appearance, he could be handsome if he'd just work out. Danny could tell from the pleading expression in the man's face that he was telling the truth. This guy was genuinely scared.

Of course, Danny would still have to check out the kid's story with Beau Tie.

"What's your name?" Danny asked the frightened-looking hacker.

"Marcio Ruiz," came the reply so quickly that Danny knew it couldn't be a lie. Good, now they were getting somewhere.

"Danny Jake...well, for today, at least."

"Wish I could say it was a pleasure to meet you, but..." Marcio Ruiz trailed off. "So can you help me or not?"

"Maybe. What else do I need to know? Anybody on to you that you know of?"

Marcio hesitated. That was as good as a "yes."

Danny sighed. "Who?"

Marcio pinched the bridge of his nose. "One of my junior techs, real cretin named Sky. He hated me even before I was chosen as team lead over him. He doesn't really like Estrellans, you know the type. He even reads the *Gonaways Guardian*. Do you know what the *Gonaways Guardian* is?"

"I'm familiar with it." Danny made no effort to hide his disgust at the mention of the *Gonaways Guardian*. The nationalist, anti-immigrant exnet "news" service was notorious for disseminating racist propaganda disguised as news. Since the reactor had gone critical on Ciudad Estrella a few years ago, most of the worlds where Estrellans have taken refuge have seen sharp rises in ethnic nationalist movements. Marcio must be a refugee from the Estrellan crisis. "What else can you tell me about this guy, 'Sky?' What's his last name? How much does he know?"

Marcio filled Danny in. He told him about Sky Meussen being the one to actually find the data breach. He told Danny about Daniau's secret camera network. He told Danny about having watched Sky on that secret camera network as Sky had searched through his hotel room and personal data terminal.

"Hmm," Danny said. His mind was already looking for ways to turn Sky's suspicions and bigotry to his advantage. Bigots are some of the most insecure and therefore easily controlled people. "Doesn't sound like he knows anything, but he'll definitely be watching you very closely. Be careful around that guy. He's the biggest threat to you. Come to think of it, how are you able to get away so frequently to leave so many messages in my inbox? You do realize that's probably drawing suspicion, don't you?"

"I've been telling everybody I'm having stomach trouble today."

"That's a pretty weak excuse, kid." Even though this man looked older than himself, Danny couldn't help thinking of him as a "kid."

"Yeah, I know, but what other choice did I have? I needed to get hold of you."

"Well, after this conversation, your tummy problem should get better, understand? Don't use that excuse again. You'll end up drawing attention to yourself."

"Yeah, I get it."

"What about this data situation? Tell me about the data we need to retrieve before we can escape."

Never ask a nerd to explain data. Danny instantly regretted the question as Marcio started babbling again, telling him everything about the data except what he really needed to know: "...the thing about the converted eighty-four-R-G reformatted, interpolation-compressed data —"

"Shut up. I just need to know where the data is, how to access it, and how much of it there is."

"Oh, sorry," Marcio said. He then told Danny where he'd hidden the data and how much of it there was. He explained why he'd hidden it there and detailed how he'd originally planned to get it out of the Paradox Hotel.

"That's...kinda brilliant, actually," Danny was genuinely impressed with the kid's original plan to smuggle the data out past Daniau's security firewall. Too bad it wouldn't work now. "I'm going to

need to be able to access the data to verify it's there. How do I access it? Is there a password or something?

Marcio hesitated again. Danny gave him a moment. He sensed that Marcio would tell him, but he didn't want to seem overeager. Finally Marcio explained how to access the data and he gave Danny the password.

The password was terrible. Danny couldn't believe it, even though he could see that Marcio was telling the truth.

"*That's* your password? That's a pathetic password. A smart computer guy like you picks a stupid password like that? Are you serious?" At least Danny would have no trouble remembering it.

Marcio seemed embarrassed. He should be. "It's a word that means a lot to me. And yes, I know that that makes it even easier to guess. But if everything had gone according to my plan, the data theft would never have even been found."

This guy was sentimental. That probably made him a good person, but it also made him very predictable and very controllable.

Danny considered the entirety of the situation for a moment. As an accomplice, this Marcio character was a pretty weak one, but he had potential. Danny knew it would be wise to just leave Marcio to his fate. But Marcio was the accomplice the universe had provided him. The whole job was stupid. It was suicide. It was an opportunity. It could be fun, or it could cost him his manhood. It was a chance to screw over Eddie The Mushroom. It could make him rich, or it get him killed. It *could* work.

"I'll tell you what, kid, I think I can help you out if you can answer me one question: Is it possible to bypass a quantumscale processor scanner on a safe?"

"What? I mean, kinda. You can't really bypass a QSP scanner, but you can fake them out. You'd need a second QSP to mirror the signal from the original QSP. And you'd need the original QSP close by, like in the next room. The range is really short."

Danny looked at the face of the skinny hacker on his stolen phone screen. He could read this kid pretty clearly. He knew the answer to his next question before he even asked it. "You like the datasphere, Marcio?"

Marcio's eyes narrowed. He clearly understood exactly where Danny was going with that question. Few people had quantumscale processors in their bodies. Those who did were mostly either people who needed them for advanced security protocols (like The Mushroom) or nerds who spend their free time in the datasphere. QSPs were necessary equipment to interface with the virtual world of the datasphere. "What if I do," was Marcio's guarded answer. "What's that got to do with getting me and the data out of the Paradox?"

Danny grinned mischievously. "Everything."

Marcio and Danny spent the next ten minutes coming up with the rudiments of a plan. They needed to get Danny into the secure zone and then they needed to retrieve the stolen data and clean out Daniau's safe. They needed to do it all in time to escape and make the last flight off planet. It wouldn't be easy, but Danny was feeling lucky today. They could pull this off.

Danny Jake was an optimist.

Fulcrum

Danny

09:05

The conversation with Marcio Ruiz had put the day into a new perspective. A day which had started out completely devoid of any prospect was shaping up to be far more interesting, profitable, and potentially deadly than Danny had ever dared hope. And it was still only midmorning. He'd gotten a good read off Marcio. The kid was just a scared nerd who had apparently gotten himself mixed up in something he couldn't handle.

But Marcio had potential. Danny had a unique talent was for seeing what people really were and what they were capable of becoming, even if they themselves didn't see it. Marcio had potential. If Danny could harness that potential, Marcio could prove useful to him.

Danny also had another unique talent for bending people to his will. Human beings might seem like sluggish, immovable objects, but like any inert object, people are easy enough to move if one knows exactly where to apply leverage. The critical point of any lever is its fulcrum, the point upon which the lever pivots. The fulcrum point for all people was always their need. Danny knew that if he could figure out what a person's greatest need was, he could bend that person to his will every time.

Danny had the rough outline of a plan in mind. The timing would have to be perfect. The levers would all need to be pulled in just the right way and at just the right times. He needed to get the Boaters their data, raid The Mushroom's safe, and escape the Paradox Hotel. He needed to lever The Mushroom, Marcio, and this Sky Meussen person into their proper places at just the proper times. As Danny saw it, there were a total of four of "levers" which needed to be pulled to produce the desired outcome for this situation.

The fourth lever was Beauregard "Beau Tie" Tyson. Marcio hadn't mentioned Beau Tie by name, but Danny knew there was only one person to whom Marcio could be reporting if he was an off-station spy for the Gonaways Boaters. Danny had done business in the past with the Gonaways Boaters. Beau Tie already knew some of Danny's tricks. Danny knew he wouldn't be able to hoodwink Beau Tie, at least not very easily. But he could negotiate with him. Beau Tie *needed* his spy and the stolen data extracted from the Paradox Hotel. Fulcrum. Likely, Beau Tie was already awaiting Danny's call and the dickering over his fee that call would bring.

Danny pressed the button to call the Distortion exchange operator and waited as the phone rang twice before a bored-sounding woman came on the line. "Operator Eighteen. What exchange, please?"

"Gonaways. Collect, please." Danny knew it was rude to call light years across the galaxy collect, but he wanted to put Beau Tie on his back foot prior to starting the negotiation. He wanted to none-too-subtly emphasize that he was doing the Boaters a favor. Of course, Beau Tie didn't know about Danny's ulterior motive, the \$300,000 or so in The Mushroom's safe and Danny didn't see any reason to tell him.

"Did you say, 'collect'?" the operator clarified his request. Clearly she didn't get such requests very often.

"Yes, ma'am, collect."

"Number, please?"

Danny recited from memory the only number he knew for Beau Tie, hoping it was still a good number.

"Thank you, sir. I'm gonna have to ask you to hold the line for a minute while I connect you." She put him on hold before he could even answer her.

The Distortion exchange was a small space station somewhere in the sky above, probably in orbit around Distortion itself or one of its three moons. To make a call to anywhere on Distortion or to one of the outlying systems, one only needed to dial the number. But calling somebody in a distant system, required a direct, quantum-entangled connection between the Distortion exchange and the distant world's exchange. Danny listened to terrible, tinny hold music as he waited for Operator 18 to make that connection between her own exchange and the Gonaways station exchange. It took a little longer than usual, presumably because she had to get approval for a collect call.

Phones had been around since that murky, prehistory epoch before humans had even left old Earth. Since the cell phone had originally been invented by some long-forgotten inventor, thousands of years had passed, the light barrier had been broken, and human kind had settled innumerable worlds across hundreds of galaxies and dwarf galaxies. Yet no human had ever figured out a way to make hold music bearable. Some problems defy scientific innovation.

He heard a few clicks on the line as Operator 18 connected him. She herself never came back on the line, but Danny suddenly heard an overly chipper, female computer voice say "*Welcome to the Gonaways exchange, gateway to the Darklands! Please stand by while I connect your call!*"

Another click and then the line began to ring. It rang three times. Danny knew that Beau Tie likely just didn't want to seem overly eager to answer him. It rang a fourth time. Then a fifth.

"Hello?" Danny recognized the voice on the other end as that of Beau Tie, himself. The man was pretending to be perplexed as to who might be calling him, but Danny knew better. He could detect the subtle undertone of anticipation in the man's voice. Two swindlers were about to make a deal.

"Beau! It's —" Danny had to think of what alias Beau Tie would know him by. " — um, Kash Carter. How're you?"

"Hey, Kash. I hear you been working with Sid out Distortion way these days." Beau Tie was being careful in case someone might be listening in on their conversation. Somebody likely was, considering how much underworld power Beau Tie wielded. What he was really saying was: *I know you've been running some scam under the name "Sid Stone" out on Distortion. I've been talking to my man Marcio, because how else would I know all this? You can assume Marcio's made me aware of his situation.*

Danny followed Beau's lead. "I was, but Sid has left the business. Left his phone in his hotel, though." *I'm not using that name anymore. It's my phone Marcio called you from.*

"Yeah, I heard about that. Any chance you could pick up Sid's phone and get it back to him? He's got a lot of important data on that phone. He's really only worried about the data, but if you can get his phone back to him too, that'd be a bonus." Now "Sid's phone" was a symbol for Marcio. What Beau was really saying was, *Want to make some money by getting that data Marcio stole to me? I'm really only worried about the data, but I'll pay a bonus if you can rescue Marcio as well.*

"I suppose I could swing by and pick it up for him. There's a starhopper in system right now. If I hurry, I could ship the phone and its data out on that starhopper before it transtachs outta the system this evening. Guess I better do it soon, though. If I don't retrieve the phone today, hotel staff are likely to keep it, and we'll never see it again." *I can rescue your guy and your data. I'll have to get us out on the starhopper today, though. Otherwise, we're dead, and no one will ever see us again.*

"Good. Sid will appreciate it." *Good. The Boaters will appreciate that.*

"Of course, I'd need Sid to reimburse me for going so far out of my way and for the shipping expenses." *I expect to get paid well for risking my life.*

"What does it cost to ship a phone off of Distortion these days? Twenty-five dollars or so?" *We'll pay you \$25,000 for the job.*

"Well, ya gotta figure for inflation. Shipping industry is cut throat. They'll want at least fifty dollars, all up front, especially because we'll have to pay for priority shipping to get it on tonight's starhopper." *It's going to cost you \$50,000, all up front. I could get my throat cut doing this job. And since I know time is of the essence, you should pay me what I'm asking.*

"That sounds about right. I'll have Sid wire you the funds for the shipping." *Agreed. I'll wire you the \$50,000.*

That surprised Danny. He was expecting to have to haggle a little more and settle for around \$40,000. The Boaters really wanted this data. He should have asked for more money. "Um, okay.

Thanks, Beau," Danny said. "Make sure to let Sid know he owes me a big favor, okay?" *I'll do the job, but the Boaters are going to owe me a big favor.*

There was a moment of heavy silence on the line. The Boaters trade in favors and they take them deadly seriously. Deadly. What Danny was asking for was no small thing. Beau Tie finally answered, "Will do. Hey, I have to go now. Safe travels, Kash." *We'll owe you a favor, then, but don't ask for anything else. Try not to die.* The phone beeped at him thrice, indicating that the call had been terminated from the other end.

Less than a minute later, the phone chimed with a notification that 50,000 Gonaways dollars had just been transferred into the account of Mrs. Ethel Kundertson from some shell company cheesily named "Gonaways Executive Data Systems Associates." The note on the wire transfer simply read *"Favor owed. Use it wisely."* Danny had gotten everything he'd asked for. Still, he couldn't help but feel he'd just been swindled in some way.

He couldn't help but feel that there was something more to this story than he was aware. What was this data the Boaters wanted so badly?

Danny would find out.

The Power of the Mind

Marcio

10:15

(10hrs, 53min until the last shuttle off of Distortion)

Marcio was not entirely happy with this plan. Though he was happy to have help, he didn't fully trust this guy, Sid Stone or Danny Jake or whatever his real name was. Still, Beau Tie had assured him that this con artist could be trusted. "Trustworthy con artist" seemed to be a contradiction in terms to Marcio. Beau Tie had worked with this guy in the past and insisted this Danny Jake could definitely get the job done. But how good could he really be? This whole mess only got started because Mr. Daniau caught this fool just last night. Come to think of it, Marcio wasn't even sure he trusted Beau Tie.

But what choice did he have? He was stuck and the clock was ticking away the minutes before he would be eventually and inevitably be found out. And now there was an even tighter timeline ticking away. They had to do everything that needed to be done *and* make it to the spaceport in time to catch the last shuttle off planet if they wanted make it aboard the starhopper. 21:08. That was the scheduled departure time of the last shuttle. In order to make it to the spaceport in time, they had to be out of the Paradox Hotel *with* the data no later than 19:00.

This Danny Jake idiot was the only lifeline Marcio had left. So, he followed Danny's instructions. What other choice did he have? He put Sid's – Danny's – phone on silent mode and paired it with his own QSP. The subatomic computer, made up of a network of quantumscale switches, was integrated with Marcio's central nervous system. The QSP only had very basic functionality, but it would allow Marcio to interface with the phone in a way which was somewhere between cybernetic and telepathic. It would allow Marcio to covertly send and receive text messages with Danny without arousing suspicion.

Next, with the silenced phone in his pocket, Marcio had returned to the server room. Ivan and Camilla were still working on the background checks for the hotel's guests. Their babysitter, Vice, had been replaced by another goon. This one, Marcio knew as Awl. He wasn't sure where these big, stupid men got their names, but he was pretty sure it wasn't from their mothers.

At his desk, Marcio pretended to work at the decryptor. What he was really working at was hacking into the hotel's power grid. He quickly cobbled together a simple program that would allow him to cut and restore power to the server room at will. The program, which he hid in the hotel

maintenance control system, could be controlled from Sid Stone's cell phone, which Marcio could in turn control via his QSP. With a mere thought, Marcio could cut or restore power to the server room.

As they'd planned how to get Danny Jake into the secure zone, Danny had been dubious about Marcio's claim that he could control the power to the servers with his mind. But like most people, the dumb conman clearly didn't understand how good Marcio really was at what he did.

Setting up the ability to control the servers' power supply with his mind was the first step to getting Danny into the secure zone. The second step made Marcio sick to even think about it. He had to speed up Sky's decryptors. He knew a few tricks to speed up the decrypting programs, but doing so would use a tremendous amount of the server array's resources. The servers would have to draw much more power. The building's power supply could handle it, but Marcio's pseudo-telepathic control over the power supply would allow him to engineer some convenient brownouts.

With the decryptors now running at nearly twice the speed that even Sky himself had managed to get out of them, Marcio watched the server processor load spike. He could hear the slight increase in the fan speeds of the processor array near to his desk.

"My terminal's getting laggy," Camilla complained from the other side of the room.

"Mine too," Ivan affirmed.

"It's okay," Marcio assured them as he heard the processor array's fans speed up again. "Mr. Daniau has made catching the spy our highest priority. I've just sped up the decryptors that Sky wrote last night and diverted as many of the servers' resources as possible to running them."

"You want us to help with breaking into the proxies instead of these background checks?" Ivan asked.

"Nah, keep doing what you're doing as best as you can. We can only work on one proxy at a time." Marcio had designed the proxy network specifically to work that way.

As the two junior techs went back to their duties, Marcio accessed Daniau's secret camera network. He wanted to check on his enemies before he started engineering brownouts. He found Sky. The junior tech had apparently gotten tired of digging through Marcio's personal things and returned to his own room. Sky looked to be tossing and turning in his bed, unable to get to sleep. Good. Marcio would need Sky soon and he'd much rather have him unrested and off his game.

Next, Marcio looked for Daniau, but as expected, wasn't able to find him. The landing platform on the roof was still empty, so Marcio just assumed that the gangster hadn't returned from whatever nefarious errands upon which he had left.

He checked on Mr. Miles. With Daniau out of the building, Miles would be in charge. He found Miles, who had also pulled an all-nighter, asleep on his office couch. Unlike Sky, however, Miles seemed to be sleeping soundly.

Everything seemed to be in order as Marcio disconnected from Daniau's secret creeper cam system. The fans on the processor array were now getting quite loud. The processor load was at the maximum and the chips were getting hot. The electrical supply for the server room was designed to handle the load, but Marcio would just keep that little secret to himself. It was time to test out his pseudo-telepathic control of the power supply.

Marcio never took his eyes off the terminal display in front of him. To anybody watching, he would look like he was busy working. With a simple thought, Marcio accessed his QSP and connected it to Sid Stone's cell phone. Through the phone, he sent the command to his program hidden in the hotel's power grid control terminal.

Nothing happened for a second.

Marcio worried that he had failed. What if Danny was right and such a thing really wasn't possible? What if Marcio wasn't really as good as he thought he was?

Then the lights went out.

The access terminals went dark.

The servers continued to run, supported by their battery backups. The hundreds of blinking status lights from the server towers collectively provided only dim illumination in the otherwise dark room. The server fans now seemed even louder in the darkness. The battery backups began to beep loudly and insistently. They would run the servers for a few hours before even they would give out and the servers would go entirely dark. Marcio was tempted to let that happen. No servers meant no decryptors.

"Crap!" Camilla said in the gloom.

"What's going on?" Awl demanded. "You broke it, nerd."

Marcio assumed that last was directed at him, though Awl had no idea how true his words actually were. Marcio sent the restart command to his program on the power grid control terminal, and within a few seconds, the lights came back on. The beeping alert from the battery array subsided and the user terminals came back to life.

"Okay," Marcio said to his junior techs, "everybody get back to work."

He waited a few minutes before engineering another brownout just like the first one. It was somewhat intoxicating having the ability to control the power supply with his mind. It felt like magic. Not the goofy, fake "magic" that the so-called "witches" sold to crooked-toothed yokels on the Gonaways promenades. This was the magic of science and technology.

After the third brownout, Marcio "grudgingly" acknowledged that he was going to have to slow down the decryptors and run the servers at lower power. The power grid just couldn't handle the load.

The fourth brownout happened with the decryptors running slowly and only minimal load on the server room's power supply. He was "forced" to slow the decryptors down to a crawl. At this new, glacial rate, Marcio estimated that it would take about three days to chew through all his encrypted proxies. He checked back in on his enemies and saw that Mr. Daniau's plane was still gone and that Sky still tossed and turned in his bed. It was time to text Danny and let him know that everything was set on his end.

Still controlling the phone with his mind (via his QSP), Marcio texted:

Everything in place here. The power is mine to control. Never underestimate the power of the mind.

Marcio was proud of the play on words. He wondered if Danny would be smart enough to get it. A couple of minutes later came the terse response from Mrs. Ethel Kundertson, another of Danny/Sid/whomever's aliases:

Okay. Standby.

Great, Marcio thought, Yeah, I'll just wait here until it's convenient for you. No rush. Take your time.

The Belly of the Beast

Danny

11:56

(9hrs, 12min to catch the last shuttle)

Shortly after getting off the phone with Beau Tie, Danny had let the stolen cell phone fall from a crossover bridge into the ocean below. It seemed a waste, but that thing would shortly lead the police to him, and Danny was allergic to pork. Besides, now he had \$50,000 in his – or rather, Mrs. Kundertson's – account.

Danny's next stop had been at a shop where he bought a cheap cell phone with some of that money. It wasn't a very nice model, but at least it was legal and wouldn't draw the law down on him. Next, Danny bought himself a set of clothes, a costume really, of an electrician. He brushed his long hair, tied it back into a ponytail, and tossed the clothes he'd gotten that morning from Norbert Marshall into the trash can at the store. It really felt good to have shoes again.

It was about this time that Danny heard from Marcio again:

Everything in place here. The power is mine to control. Never underestimate the power of the mind.

I'll bet he thinks that play on words makes him witty, Danny thought. Danny wasn't ready yet, so he'd just responded:

Okay. Standby.

It took some doing, but Danny managed to steal a tool belt from the back of an electrician's service van. He could have just bought a tool belt, but it would look suspicious if he showed up with a new belt full of new tools. He needed a worn belt with well-loved tools. Besides, he wasn't an electrician. He had no idea what tools he would need to buy. Easier just to steal a set from a legitimate electrician. How do you find an electrician's service van? You call one to a random business for emergency service. Then, you wait across the street. While the electrician is distracted arguing with the business owner about the expense of the emergency call and to whom they can bill it, you sneak into the back of the service van and grab whatever you need.

Now, with a belt full of tools and a blue collared work shirt with his current name on its lapel, Danny looked for all the world like a broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, working man.

Danny hated work. He'd never worked a day in his life if he could help it. Working was not his style. Danny would work harder at getting out of work than he would have to work at any job. He had a strong work ethic; he considered himself strongly and ethically opposed to work.

Once he was in position just down the street from the Paradox Hotel, he texted Marcio back:

Ready now.

Okay.

You're certain that the goons that caught me last night are out in the city looking for me? It would end our plans real quick if I stepped off that elevator and got recognized.

Yeah. Apparently they don't know exactly where they left you. Miles is pissed at them.

Ha-ha! Morons. Do like I said and I think this Sky can be manipulated into calling for an electrician. Text me as soon as he calls for the electrician.

I don't see why it's so important that Sky call you in. Why not me?

I don't want to risk drawing any more attention to you. Sky needs to feel superior to you and that is what we are going to use to get him to help us. Besides, I need to talk to Sky. I need to get a read on him.

No way is Sky helping us. I'm telling you.

Not willingly. But let me worry about all that. You hack the computers and I'll hack the people.

Are you going to screw me over?

No.

That's what somebody who's about screw me over would say.

If you don't have the stones to do this, I need to know now.

Danny had gotten a good read off of Marcio. He knew Marcio had it in him to do what needed to be done. The kid had more guts than even he himself realized. The lever just needed a little pulling.

*Because its not too late for me
to get on the starhopper and
forget I ever heard about you.
Go back to your room and enjoy
your last day in this life.*

**NO! DON'T DO THAT! I GOT
THIS!**

*Then do what I told you to do
and let me know AS SOON as
Sky calls the electrician.*

Okay.

About twenty minutes later, Danny was still in the same spot a couple blocks from the Paradox Hotel eating a fake, factory-made apple. He stood in the shadows of a tree where he could see the Paradox down the street. Even now, with the red giant sun almost directly overhead, the daylight had a reddish, dusky feel to it. The dying sun loomed ominously and overlarge directly above. Danny had hated this planet since he'd first arrived here. The light of the doomed star was depressing.

His cheap phone chimed at him again. It was Marcio:

*You were right. He just called
for the electrician. Light-o-Day
Electrical Services.*

*Good job. Now just act stupid
and let me take it from here.
They'll take my phone away
when I come off of elevator.
Remember: when I say "that'll
do 'er" is your signal to go to
lunch.*

Okay.

Danny could practically feel the apprehension in that last "Okay." from Marcio. The kid was worried that Danny was going to screw him over. Truth be told, it wasn't an unappealing prospect. He could sell Marcio out to Daniau, maybe negotiate some kind of finders fee, and keep the money he already had from the Boaters. He figured he could probably clear \$70,000. Not a bad way to end a day which he'd begun naked and broke in an alleyway just thankful to still have his life and his pecker.

That plan was a lot less risk, but it was also far less reward. Not only would he be forfeiting the \$300,000 or so in Daniau's safe, but he'd also never be able to go anywhere near Gonaways station again because the Boaters would be after him. If the Darklands were a wheel, Gonaways would be its the figurative hub. If you're locked out of Gonaways, you are essentially locked out of most of the galaxy. He'd probably have to leave the Darklands altogether. Even more significantly, he'd be forfeiting the chance to stick it to Daniau.

And okay, yeah, it would be a jerk move to leave that fool Marcio twisting in the wind like that.

Danny wanted to recruit Marcio to his cause, the cause of making Danny Jake rich. There was something about Marcio, something hard to describe, but Danny could see it there. Marcio had more guts than anybody could guess. Well, anybody but Danny, at least.

Danny's line of work required he have a few hackers he could call on whenever he needed security systems disabled, evidence destroyed, or when he needed some bogus mining bonds with legit-looking holostamps made. Hackers were good to have around. Something about this one struck Danny as having greater than average potential. Marcio was already working as a spy for some gangsters who basically owned him. So he didn't have any annoying hangups about legality or ethics. Marcio might not realize it, but this whole job was basically an interview.

Danny deleted any record of the text conversation he'd just had with Marcio from his phone in anticipation that Daniau's goons would take it away. He finished his fake apple and threw the fake core on the ground. Next, he found the number for Light-o-Day Electrical Services and dialed it.

A woman answered the phone with a stupid, scripted greeting. "Light-o-Day Electrical Services, this is Margie. How may I light up your day today?" Yet another reason why Danny refused to work a regular job.

"Yes, ma'am, this is Eddie Miles down at the Paradox Hotel," Danny said. "One of the technicians in our computer room just called you guys and asked for an emergency service."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Miles. We've already dispatched a service team and they'll be there shortly."

A team? These guys must be owned by Daniau or his organization. "Well, that's why I was calling you actually. We're gonna need to go ahead and cancel that call. We figured out the problem."

"Well, you're sure you don't want us to just send a team out anyway and make sure?"

Danny faked a sheepish affectation. "Well, actually, it turns out the nerd that called you guys didn't have the computer plugged in. It's working fine now."

"Well okay, if you're sure, Mr. Miles..."

"Yeah, I'm sure. Sorry for the inconvenience."

"That's okay, sir. We're always happy to help out our friends at the Paradox." Daniau definitely had sway with this company. Likely, some kind of union influence.

"We appreciate it. You have a good day now."

"You too, Mr. Miles. Buh-bye now."

"Bye." Danny hung up the phone and began walking down the street towards the Paradox, back into the belly of the beast.

Sky

12:38

I should be in charge of this team, Sky thought as he waited behind the security checkpoint on the fourteenth floor for the electrician to arrive. That fucking Estrellan is either incompetent or complicit. Either way, I should be running this team.

Sky had left the server room that morning only reluctantly, knowing that he was likely leaving the server in the hands of the spy himself. From the server room, Sky had gone to directly to the Estrellan's private room and looked through the moron's personal terminal and data pad for any evidence of espionage. He'd had a brief moment of hope when he'd found Marcio's exnet history history, but quickly discovered that Marcio spent most of his free time interacting with some kind of advanced AI named "Clovis."

Marcio kept the Clovis AI on his private domain where Sky couldn't examine it directly. With the secure zone in lock down, Sky didn't have any access to the exchange network. All he could see were the local access logs on Marcio's personal data terminal. Sky was pretty sure he knew exactly what this Clovis AI was all about, though. Virtual sex bot. Of course, Marcio would be one of *those* losers.

Ultimately, his search of Marcio's room had turned up nothing useful so Sky had gotten something to eat at the small canteen up on the 15th floor and gone to his own room to try and get some sleep. The attempt at sleep had proven fruitless, however, and he'd ultimately returned to the server room about an hour ago. He had arrived to find that the fool Marcio had hobbled his beautiful decryptors, making some lame excuse about "brownouts." Sky would have denounced him as the spy right then and there had it not been for Ivan, Camilla, and the big dummy watching over them all confirming Marcio's story that he had indeed tried to run the decryptors faster.

"Why didn't you call maintenance and have them boost the power supply to the servers?" he'd asked the room full of morons at large. Camilla had just shrugged like the stupid cow she was and Ivan had had the nerve to tell him to "chill out." None of these dipshits realized the seriousness of the situation.

"The hotel doesn't keep an electrician on staff," Marcio had stupidly explained. "Besides, we're on lock down. We couldn't get an electrician into the secure zone right now if we wanted to."

So it had all fallen upon Sky to go upstairs and find Mr. Miles to get permission to call in an electrician. Mr. Miles's only two stipulations were that he use a specific union electrician service affiliated with Mr. Daniau's organization and that he not let the electrician leave the secure zone once he was in. That was all fine with Sky. Want to guess upon whom it fell to temporarily reconnect a single external phone line and call the electrician service? If you assumed that only Sky himself was willing to do it, you'd be right.

So now here was Sky, the only competent person in a server room full of morons, waiting for some slack-jawed trade school underachiever to come up the elevator and boost the power supply to the servers. On the other side of the security checkpoint, the elevator *dinged* as the doors slid open. A tall man in jeans, work boots, and a blue collar, button-up shirt stepped off the elevator. He had a tool belt full of electrician's tools around his waist. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows and his name was stitched into a patch on his lapel.

His name, according to the patch, was *Danny*.

"That'll do 'er."

Danny

12:39

(8hrs, 29min left)

Danny was a little nervous as he stepped off of the elevator onto the 14th floor of the Paradox Hotel. If he were recognized, he would be a dead man, but he was relieved that none of the goons standing guard looked familiar to him nor did they seem to recognize him. They patted him down, used a hand-held body scanner on him to ensure that he had no hidden tech nor implanted devices. They checked his entire tool belt and every tool in it to make sure that they were all just tools.

They never found the blank data chip disguised as a button on his shirt.

When they got to the stethoscope, one of the ogres looked at Danny with a quizzical look on his face. The big man was close to having an intelligent thought, but Danny squelched that thought before the other man's slow mind could fully form it. "It helps me listen for the buzzing of current. Good for finding cables behind walls."

The goon just shrugged and said, "I never heard o' that." But he didn't question it any further and just went on inspecting the rest of Danny's tools.

They also inspected the device he had brought with him. It was some kind of heavy, clunky electrical device with a few wires coming out of one end.

"What's this?" another of the three goons at the checkpoint asked him.

"That there's a top-of-the-line, XT-4 kilowatt booster." Danny had no idea what the device was, but "*XT-4 kilowatt booster*" sounded good. He'd found it in the same electrician's service van from which he'd stolen the tool belt. "That baby's gonna boost your draw rate and drop your resistance ratio down to practically nothin' so your fancy computers can draw as much power as you need 'em to. Just gonna haveta be careful you don't overheat your circuit boards."

"You just fix the power and let me worry about the processor temps." This came from a skinny, nerdy-looking guy standing just beyond the goons' checkpoint. He looked to be about Danny's own age. He had short-cropped, blond hair, a patchy neckbeard, rumpled clothes, and bad teeth. *Sky Meussen*, Danny presumed. Danny noted that Sky had said "let *me* worry about the processor temps," not "let *us* worry." Interesting.

"You the guy?" Danny asked Sky.

"Yeah, apparently I am. It never even occurred to anyone else to call for an electrician. Their brilliant solution was just to let the servers run slower."

That smug sense of superiority, Danny thought. He's hiding a serious inferiority complex. It must really gall him that Marcio outranks him.

"Well, I'll get ya' taken care of real good, sir. Super said this was a priority job for the union. Also said I'd have to stay the rest of the day for security reasons."

"Yeah, the area is in lock down. Nobody leaves. We had to get special permission just to allow you in."

"That's okay. I get paid by the hour."

"How nice for you," Sky remarked condescendingly. He clearly had no respect for Danny's blue collar.

Good. He looks down on working class people. He sees me as an idiot and therefore not a threat.

As expected, the goons took his new, cheap cell phone away. "You get this back when you leave. We tell you when you can leave, got it?"

Danny knew he'd never see that phone again.

"Sure thing, dude. Now if you guys'll show me where them fancy computers are, I can get ya all the power you'll ever need."

One of the goons gave Danny his ill-gotten tool belt back and failed to notice as Danny picked his pocket. No one noticed because Danny was smooth as cream.

"Follow me," Sky commanded Danny and then started walking down one of the two long hallways.

"Keep an eye on this guy," one of the goons said to Sky. "You're responsible for him."

"I know," Sky said irritably without looking back.

He thinks himself superior to Daniau's goons as well. Intellectually speaking, he is. Heck, most draft animals probably are. But this guy gets something from it.

"So you guys got some kind of security problem going on here, huh?"

"We're dealing with the security problem. You just deal with the electrical problem."

"Yes, sir. You're the boss." Danny could *feel* Sky just itching to say more. He wanted to be respected. He *needed* others to look up to him.

They walked several steps in heavy silence before Sky's pace slowed almost imperceptibly. Danny could feel Sky was about to speak even before he said, "Look, I'm not gonna bog you down with technical details, but we need the servers running as fast as we can get them. That means they need to draw more power, and I'm the only one who thought to call for you. The other people on my team never even thought to call. They just don't *think*. Idiots. Especially that entitled Estrellan, Marcio."

Sky had called them *his* team. Danny knew that it was actually *Marcio's* team.

Danny rolled his eyes. "Estrellans. I feel ya on that, man."

"Oh, this one's especially useless. I hired in with Refuge, which is the company we work for, a month before Marcio, but he still gets promoted over me."

"I hate that special treatment crap," Dany said, encouraging Sky to keep talking.

Sky obliged. "What's more, he's one of those pervert losers that spends all their free time in the datasphere. I got to see the datasphere access logs on his personal terminal today, and this guy spends hours every with an AI program called 'Clovis,' which is almost certainly a virtual sexbot. Figures he'd be into dudes. Loser can't even get a real man, so instead he's in the datasphere during most of his free time, getting pounded by some AI."

Interesting, Danny thought. Aloud he said, "Wow, that's sad."

"Pathetic," Sky agreed.

"We got us a couple of Estrellans on my crew. They ain't even Distortioneer citizens, but government says we gotta hire 'em anyways."

"That's so unfair. They can't do for themselves so we have to take care of them. They screwed up their own world, so we have to take them in."

"Especially since there's good Distortioneer union electricians that can't find jobs." Danny feigned racist disgust. If Sky looked closely enough at Danny's features, it should be obvious that he wasn't really a Distortioneer. *Never underestimate the power of prejudice to blind people to reality.* "Sorry, but it just irritates me."

"Nah, that's okay. I agree with you. We have the same problem on my world."

"Where's that?"

"Gonaways. Don't worry, I'm not taking any Distortioneer's job here. I'm a contractor with a highly specialized skill set. Nobody on Distortion was available to do the job. I'm going home in a few months." A brief silence and then Sky continued: "Anyways, do you realize that on Gonaways we now have Estrellan physicists working on our reactor array? Yeah, the same morons that imploded their own reactor into something called a 'pseudo-singularity' are now monkeying around with ours. Pisses me off to no extent."

"Wow, that's... I hope none of those guys try screwing with any of our reactors here on Distortion."

"I got news for ya, dude, they probably are."

"That's scary. Hope not." *Okay, so Sky's a racist. That stands to reason; lots of people with inferiority complexes are.* "So what's this specialized skill set? What kinda work you do on the computers?"

"It's kinda technical. Do you know much about computers, private servers, exnet protocols?"

"Not much. I never had much use for schoolin'." *How's that for appealing to Sky's sense of superiority?*

"Let's just say...You know whose servers these are? Eddie Daniau's, that's who. Ever heard of him?"

"Yeah, most people in this end of town know who Mr. Daniau is. Especially us in the union, ya know?"

"Well, I'm kinda his go-to guy for his server security." Sky leaned in and confided to Danny in a hushed tone. He clearly knew he shouldn't be telling this "electrician" all this, but he couldn't help himself. "We've had somebody infiltrate our servers. I'm the one that found it and I'm the one that'll catch the guy."

By now, Danny had a pretty good read on Sky. Sky wasn't Daniau's "go-to guy," but he plainly wanted to be. Sky would do whatever it took to be the big hero in the boss's eyes. That could make him dangerous. Sky was a threat, but one which Danny knew he and Marcio could manage if they were careful.

"Do you know who did it?" Danny asked.

Sky seemed to realize that he shouldn't be discussing this with an outsider he'd just met. He'd already said too much. Danny could sense Sky's defenses going back up. Nevertheless, Sky couldn't resist one last comment, "I have an idea, but I can't prove anything yet."

"Well, hang in there, buddy. You'll get the jerk."

Marcio

13:08

(8hrs until last shuttle)

Marcio had watched on Mr. Daniau's creeper cams as Danny Jake, disguised as an electrician, had stepped off of the elevator. He had watched as Danny went through the wall of no-necks that protected the secure zone. It was amazing watching the conman work. Marcio hadn't been able to hear any of what was said over the creeper cams, but Danny had carried himself like the blue-collar electrician he was pretending to be.

No way is Sky going to want to talk to an electrician, Marcio had thought. Sky thinks he's too good to talk to someone who works with his hands for a living.

But Marcio had been surprised as he had watched the two men walk down the hallway towards the server room. They had talked the whole way down the hallway. Sky seemed to be engaged in the conversation, even appearing to lean in and whisper in confidence. Maybe this Danny Jake really was good at what he did. Maybe there was reason to hope.

When Sky and Danny entered the server room, Marcio just pretended to be busy at his terminal. He logged out of the boss's secret camera network and asked Sky an obvious question. "This the electrician?"

Sky exchanged a significant look with Danny before answering Marcio's question. "No, he's housekeeping. He's here to change the sheets."

Marcio looked back at his display. "Thank you, Sky. Please show him where the power feed comes in for the servers."

Danny barely looked in his direction as Sky led him back behind the server stacks.

About twenty minutes later, Danny emerged from behind the server stacks and announced that something called a "kilowatt booster" had been installed and they should have all the power they needed. Marcio wondered if a "kilowatt booster" was a real thing or if Danny had just made it up. Something told him probably the latter.

"Sky, if you would do the honors?" Marcio said to his junior tech.

"About time." Sky mumbled as he got to work speeding up his decryptors and allocating most of the servers' computing power to running the complex code breaking programs.

Marcio watched over Sky's shoulder as the decryptor sped up. It was really sinking its teeth into the current proxy's encryption now. It would break into this proxy within the hour. Marcio did the calculation and guessed that at this new, faster rate, Sky's decryptor programs would find the stolen accounting data where it was hidden by midnight tonight. The clock was really ticking now, ticking away the remaining minutes of Marcio's life. Marcio glanced at Danny, but Danny made no acknowledgment of Marcio's apprehension. From within the server stacks, Marcio could hear the processor fans speed up. And then, they sped up again. And once again until they were significantly louder than they had been all day.

"There," Sky said. "Now we're cooking. We'll catch the bastard soon enough, now."

"Reckon that'll do 'er?" Danny asked. He was addressing Sky, but Marcio knew it was for his benefit. That was Danny's signal for Marcio to go to lunch.

"Yeah, thanks for setting that up for us, Danny. Just invoice the Paradox Hotel."

"No, sir. Super told me to let you guys know there ain't gonna be no charge. We're always happy to help out our friends at the Paradox."

"That's nice of you," Marcio said. "Let your boss know how much we appreciate it."

"Any time," Danny said to Marcio, without making eye contact. Marcio couldn't help but note the dismissiveness in his tone. To Sky, Danny asked, "You guys got a cafeteria or something around here? I'm starving."

"Yeah, up on fifteen," Sky said, distracted by his efforts to tweak his decryptor.

"I'm hungry too," Marcio said. "I can show you."

"All right," Danny said. "If you need anything else, Mr. Meussen, just let me know."
Sky didn't look up from his terminal as he said "Thanks again, Derrick."

Something Gleeful and Predatory

Marcio

13:31

(7hrs, 37min remaining)

As the door to the server room clicked shut behind them, Danny held his finger over his lips for Marcio to be quiet. Marcio nodded his understanding and began leading the way down the hall in the direction of the front stairwell and the elevators.

Once they were some distance from the closed server room door, Marcio stopped and checked that they were alone in the hallway. He whispered to Danny, "Okay, so what's your great plan? 'Cause we just sped up the servers. Sky and his decryptors are going to find that data by midnight tonight."

"Sky and the Decryptors," Danny mused, "sounds like some bad cover band."

"Could you please take this seriously?"

Danny cocked his eyebrow at Marcio. "I am taking this seriously. And speaking of Sky, you need to take that one seriously. He's a real threat to you. He's out to get you, and he'll go straight up to The Mushroom's office the moment he thinks he's got you."

"I know that," Marcio said, annoyed. Of course he knew that. Marcio continued, "Back to the business at hand, it's gonna be tough enough just getting that data. And then, after we do that, we need to figure out how we're going to get past those goons guarding the elevators. Do you even *have* a plan for all that? Or are you just making this all up as you go?"

Danny hooked his thumbs in the belt full of tools which he obviously had no idea how to actually use. "Easy, kid. Remember, my butt's on the line, same as yours." Danny paused for a moment, presumably to let the tension die down. It didn't work; Marcio felt as tense as an airlock door. Danny continued, "I'm assuming they've got the stairwells secured as well?"

Just as Marcio had suspected, Danny was making it all up as he went. This situation sucked. "Yeah, of course the stairwells are secured. We can go up and down the stairs within the secure zone, but there's a security door that prevents us from going below the 14th floor."

"Just a security door? No goons?"

"Nuh-uh. Supposed to be goons there, but they're a little understaffed. I think Mr. Miles sent half of the goons out into the city to look for you."

Danny grinned. "Well, that should be easy, then. Security doors won't slow us down." There was something gleeful and predatory behind Danny's grin as he said that. Marcio wasn't quite sure he liked it. "What about Miles and Daniau themselves? They know my face. If either of them sees me, our operation is blown."

"Last I checked, Miles was asleep on his office couch up on sixteen."

"How long ago was that?"

"I dunno. Couple hours ago."

"What about Daniau? Any idea what he's up to?"

"No. Only that he left earlier in his private plane."

Danny gave him an irritated look. "What do you mean by 'he left?' Don't you think you should've mentioned this before now?"

"I didn't think it mattered. He was out of the building and out of our way."

"It *does* matter. Remember the QSP scanner? Remember the safe that I need your help getting into? Remember that we need Daniau nearby to mirror his QSP signal?"

Marcio remained silent. He didn't care about that safe. He just wanted to retrieve the data for Beau Tie and get out of this building. Danny's greed would get them both killed.

Danny clearly wasn't pleased. His brow furrowed for a minute. "I know you think I'm just being greedy, and admittedly, I am. But we need some of the items in that safe to make our escape. Without the safe's contents, we can't get off world, understand? Besides, I'm not doing this for charity. That safe is my real payment for coming back into this deathtrap and saving your sorry, little mushroom. I'm not doin' this for the chump change Beau Tie offered me. We *need* to open that safe."

Marcio was surprised. He'd never mentioned Beau Tie's name to this guy. "How do you know I'm working for Beau Tie?"

"Other than the fact that you just said so?"

Crap! Marcio felt stupid as he realized his mistake.

"Kid, you're a Boater from Gonaways station who's spying off station. Who else could be holding your leash?"

"I'm not a Boater. I just...I'm working for them to pay back a couple favors is all."

"What, you think the Boaters issue membership cards? If they got you by the balls, then you're one of them, whether you admit it or not. And as long as you play by their rules, you'll never get off their leash. Like it or not, you're a Boater for life, now. Might as well wear that douchey boater hat they all wear."

Danny was wrong. Marcio only owed the Boaters two favors and this job would fulfill one of those. One more crappy job after this one and he would be free and clear of the Boaters. He wasn't in the mood to explain that to Danny.

"Look," Danny said, "we can't get into the safe until The Mushroom gets back but we can figure out the combination and see about getting your data. That's half the struggle. You said it's been a couple hours since you last checked on Miles? Any way to check on him again?"

Marcio thought for a minute. He could take Danny to his room where they could use his personal terminal to check the creeper cams. *No, that won't work*, he remembered. With the secure zone in lock down, Marcio's personal terminal would be offline. He wouldn't be able to get into Daniau's secret camera network from there. Marcio glanced back down the hallway towards the server room door. "Only place I can hack into the cameras is in there."

"Hmm. Would look suspicious if we went back in there." Danny gave a casual shrug. "Oh, well. Guess we better just hope Miles doesn't catch us, then." The conman had his nihilistic self-confidence back.

"How can you be so blasé about this?"

"Lots of practice. How can you be so uptight about it?"

This guy was infuriating.

Danny laughed.

Marcio sighed.

"We should use the back stairs," Marcio said. "Since they won't let us use the elevator, most people are using the front stairs. Much less chance of running into anybody on the back stairs."

Marcio had been intending to lead Danny to the front stairs, but now he turned and walked back in the direction from which they had come. He led Danny back past the closed server room door and down a short hallway that ended at the back stairwell door. He pushed the door open to a small landing.

The stairwell only led up from this point. The stairs leading downward were blocked by a vault-like security door with an alarm on it. This door, meant to protect the secure zone from any intruder, was made of solid crystalanium two centimeters thick. Although the expensive, transparent door looked like glass, it would never shatter. It would require a special plasma torch to cut through. Marcio could see the stairs leading down to his freedom on the other side of the door, but he couldn't reach them. If his sister, Lyssa, were here, she'd be able to cut through that door. As an aviation mechanic, she knew all about cutting crystalanium. Marcio was glad she wasn't here, that she was safe and sound on Gonaways.

"Even Mr. Daniau's goons can't open that door," Marcio explained to Danny. "Only the boss himself or possibly Mr. Miles can open it while we're in lock down."

No way out via the stairwell.

Danny shrugged. "Looks like we can get out through the stairwell easy enough," he said. "This door won't stop us."

Marcio wasn't entirely sure he trusted Danny's bravado, but what choice did he have but to trust this man?

"What about that data we need to retrieve?" Danny asked. "Where's it at currently?"

"I'd imagine it's up on seventeen, same as the safe."

"That's convenient," Danny said.

Time to Get a New One

Mr. Daniau

14:05

Eddie was tired. He was probably too tired to be flying a plane, but here he was, flying amidst the tall buildings of Harvest Junction's skyline. He'd been up all night, but it couldn't be helped.

He'd needed to get assurances from the other bosses of the Impulse Syndicate that none of them were involved in the attack on his servers. He'd gotten assurances from all the other bosses that their organizations weren't involved and he'd gotten official syndicate sanctioning to take whatever action was necessary when he found out who was behind the attack. If it turned out to be one of the other bosses, he would go to war. He very much hoped it was one of them. He would wipe that boss off the map and then take over their organization and their territory.

He'd also warned them to check the security on their servers, but they had mostly blown off his suggestion. Their arrogance blinded them to their own vulnerability. They were stupid.

One day, Eddie would unite the entire Syndicate under his own control. He would push out the other bosses and consolidate their holdings and influence under his control. One day, Eddie Daniau would run Harvest Junction from the 17th floor of the Paradox Hotel. But that day was definitely not *today*. Today was a huge setback. Admitting the breach in his security had made him look weak in their eyes and had cost him some influence. He would recover, but even now, Eddie's sleep-deprived mind was already seeking ways to turn this setback to his advantage. Through their arrogance, their sense of invulnerability, the other five bosses of the Impulse Syndicate had all unwittingly showed him some of their weakness.

In the dusky, ever-reddish, light of Distortion's sun, Eddie saw the rooftop landing platform of the Paradox come into view as he banked the *Fulmine* around the glittering structure of a massive skyscraper. His building seemed so small from this altitude, but he knew that one day very soon it would be one of the most significant buildings on all of Distortion.

He pulled the *Fulmine*'s main engines back to idle and let the airspeed begin to bleed off. The little sportsplane's stick began to feel mushy in his hand. Eddie reached down, grabbed the collective beside his seat, and lifted it up slightly. This brought the plane's three vertical thrusters online only slightly too late. The stick shaker engaged briefly as the wings stalled. The plane lost lift for half a second before the vertical thrusters spun up to speed. He never lost control, but it was sloppy flying. He was tired. He needed sleep.

Now that the plane was in vertical flight, the control stick between his knees functioned as a cyclic, controlling the plane's horizontal direction of flight. Eddie used the collective lever beside his seat to control the amount of thrust produced by the vertical thrusters, and by extension, the plane's altitude. He put the sleek, little plane into a controlled descent towards the landing platform on the Paradox's rooftop and lowered the landing gear. Just over a minute later, Eddie set the plane down roughly on the landing platform. It was an embarrassing landing, but his MxBot wouldn't complain. Eddie was extremely tired, but now he was home. He could sleep soon.

He shut down the main engines and the vertical thrusters and then climbed out of the cockpit. MxBot climbed out of its storage socket at the edge of the landing platform and walked over on its six mechanical limbs to the parked plane. At the plane, the bot shifted its weight onto its four aft limbs and reconfigured its two front appendages to serve as something approximating hands. As the bot got to work tying the plane down and refueling it, Eddie walked down the roof access stairs into his hotel. First, he went to Oswin Miles's office down on the 16th floor to get an update on how things were going.

"Not much has changed while you been gone, sir," Miles said. He then told Eddie about the nerds speeding up the decryptors and having to call in one of the local union electricians from an affiliated electrician service.

"What about the conman, Sid Stone? Any news on him?" Eddie asked.

"C-Clamp and Ball Peen had a hard time remembering which alley they dumped him in last night. They finally found the spot and a local diner owner says the guy robbed him of some clothes and his wallet and then disappeared. Got boys watching the steamer terminal and the spaceport, but no sign of him yet. Maybe he's laying low, maybe he sneaked past the guys and made it up to the starhopper. I dunno."

Eddie thought about this for a moment. Something felt wrong here. He had eyes all over the city. How could this lowlife hustler have managed to avoid them all? This was the same guy who'd run a scam out of Eddie's hotel for three weeks and only got caught because he tried selling to a prominent congressman. Something about the disappearing Mr. Stone just didn't feel right to Eddie.

"Alright," Eddie said to his lieutenant, "I'm going to try to get some rest. Let me know as soon as you hear anything from the nerds or anything about Stone."

"Sure thing, Mr. Daniau," Miles said.

With that, Eddie left Miles's office. He took the elevator up to the penthouse floor. When he stepped off the Elevator up on seventeen, he was really looking forward to just getting naked and slipping between his cool, silk sheets.

But Mika was waiting for him.

He could tell right away that she wasn't happy with him. "Mika, my dear." He tried sounding glad to see her. He kind of wanted to choke her.

"Eddie, please don't 'Mika my dear' me. What's going on here? Why do I have to stay cooped up in this tomb all day? I keep asking and no one will tell me anything. I was supposed to have lunch and go shopping with Jen today, but your guys won't even let me leave the building. Even my phone's been locked out." Mika held her phone up for emphasis. "I can't even call Jen and let her know I can't make it."

Mika went on "shopping trips" with her "friend" Jen almost every day and seldom came back with any purchases. She was having an affair with Jen, obviously, but Eddie didn't consider that any of his business. As long as she made herself available for him whenever he wanted her, Eddie didn't care what she did on her own time.

"Mika, I'm sorry, but it can't be helped. We're having a security situation today. Nobody can leave or communicate with the outside world until it's resolved." He spoke in the tone of a father appeasing a spoiled child. He really didn't want to deal with her right now.

"But *you* left and came back. And I'll bet *your* phone still works. I feel like you don't trust me, Eddie."

I don't trust anyone, Eddie thought. Aloud he said, "Of course I trust you, Mika. But you know our security staff has strict protocols in place to deal with these kinds of situations. I left on official hotel business and I came right back. The nerds downstairs say it shouldn't be much longer."

He moved to take her in his arms, but she stepped casually away. *Like a cat turning her back and staring into a corner, she's mad at her master*, he mused. *Grow up*. "Mika, don't be like that. Not with me. Please, I've got a lot on my mind. I've been up all night and I'm exhausted. I could really use your support right now."

"I got a lot on my mind too, Eddie."

Eddie wondered if it was time yet to think about getting rid of Mika. She had been with him for over three years now. She was still attractive, but at 25 she was getting a little old. In Eddie's line of work, appearances mattered. The woman he kept mattered. Not just for his own satisfaction, but also for how she made him look in the eyes of other powerful men. Before long, Mika's appearance would *really* start to matter. Eddie would offer her a hundred thousand dollars severance, get her to sign a nondisclosure agreement, and send her back to her parents' farm on the mainland. Then, he would have to find and train someone new to decorate his arm and warm his bed.

"Mika, I respect that you've got a lot on your mind as well." Honestly, he wasn't sure she even had a mind. If she did, anything she might have on it would almost certainly be frivolous. "It's just that this situation has really messed up a lot of our lives today, but I have to deal with it. This security situation is the priority for today, you're just going to have to accept that."

"I have priorities too, Eddie. I have things I need to do today too, but cutting off my phone and not even letting me call and cancel my appointments is just too much. You need to tell the nerds to reactivate my phone at least."

Eddie didn't *need* to do anything she said. She was *his* employee. She seemed to forget that. *Yeah, it probably is about time to replace her.* "No, Mika. I don't *need* to do any such thing. The security protocols are in place to protect the organization, and you will abide by them. As for your 'appointments,' I'm sure Jen and the Hamilton Marshall Hotel will survive if you miss your 'appointment'." Eddie knew it was the wrong thing to say, but he was too tired to care. He said it anyway. He felt the need to lash back at her, so he mentioned the name of her lover and the place where they typically met for their dalliances. Her affair had been an open secret between them since almost the beginning of their arrangement, but bringing it out into the open drew fresh blood. Eddie was glad.

Mika's face reddened and her eyes widened. Then, after a moment, the shock of what he'd said wore off. Her eyes narrowed.

This was about to get ugly. *Good. Let it.*

"Eddie, you think you're so smart and I'm just some dumb blonde from the mainland. Well, I know things too. I know what goes on around here. I know you're as crooked as a paper clip. I know about the dirty money that goes through this place. I know why you've got a small army of large men working for you. And I know Congressman Harmon was here late last night. What was that all about, huh?"

Of course she had some idea what Eddie really did, but what actually bothered Eddie about this little speech was that she was talking about his work. He couldn't abide her talking about what she knew. He demanded absolute loyalty from his employees. He would have to kill her. No severance, no one-way ticket back to the mainland, just a long fall over the side of the nearest crossover bridge into the ocean below. *The stupid bitch just signed her own death warrant.*

"And who was the other guy your pet gorillas drug out of your office naked and unconscious at, like, one or two in the morning?" she continued, digging herself in deeper. She obviously didn't know nearly as much as she thought she knew. If she had any idea what Eddie was actually capable of, she'd never be opening her mouth about all this. He might have to make her suffer before he killed her.

"Mika," he said quietly, stepping closer to her. She tried to step away, some animal instinct in her sensing danger, but he just followed her until she backed up against the wall. "Mika, Mika, Mika." He kissed her ever-so-gently on the lips. There was no kindness in the gesture, though, only a quiet malice. She was becoming afraid and... *angry*, he realized. Yes, she was angry. But was she angry at him for frightening her or was she angry at herself for allowing him to do so? *Both*, he decided.

Eddie stared intently into her blue eyes, trying to guess her thoughts. He could see that she was trying to be strong. She was expending tremendous effort to hold his gaze. She was trying not to look away, but she was afraid. They held each other in this staring contest of wills for several seconds, neither of them ever in doubt of how it would end. Finally, her will gave out and she looked down. He had made sure she still understood who was boss around here.

He cupped his hand firmly but not roughly on her jaw. He could throw her across the room by her jaw if he wanted to. He did want to. He let her feel that he wanted to, let her feel the danger she was in. But he didn't do it. Instead, he gently, tenderly lifted her head back up to meet his gaze. The underlying anger was still in her eyes, but the challenge was gone. She was defeated.

That was how he needed her.

When he spoke, his voice was soft, but there was an undercurrent of threat. "Go to your room," he said to her as though she were an impertinent child, "and think about the mistakes you've made here. I don't want to see you the rest of the day, understand?"

She nodded.

"Good. Now go."

She scampered sideways out from between him and the wall. She hurried off to her own well-apportioned flat without another word. Eddie noticed that her hands were clenched tight with rage.

Yes, definitely time to get a new one.

The Safe

Marcio

13:50

(7hrs, 18min remaining)

Of course, Danny and Marcio didn't *actually* go to the canteen on the 15th floor as they'd told Sky they were. Though admittedly, Marcio could use something to eat. He hadn't eaten anything all day. He could use another cup of coffee.

Instead, they went to the forbidden 17th floor, the private domain of Mr. Daniau himself. Just as Marcio had hoped, they hadn't encountered anyone else as they'd climbed the back stairs. Though the stairwell doors on most floors were unlocked to allow easy travel within the secure zone, the door on the 17th floor landing was a different story.

Before he approached the door, Marcio stopped them about half way up the final flight of steps. "Hold up," Marcio cautioned Danny. "That door has an AI-equipped security scanner on it that I doubt will allow me to pass." He held up his access card for Danny to see. "If it doesn't, then I'll have only a short time to hack it before it sounds an alarm."

"Okay, you try first," Danny said.

Marcio didn't know what he meant by that, but he decided it probably didn't matter. Holding his card up in front of him, Marcio pulled Sid Stone's phone out from where he still carried it in his pocket. He climbed the last five or six steps to the 17th floor landing. As soon as he set foot on the landing, facing the locked door, Marcio heard the mechanical, pseudo-male voice of the security scanner admonish him:

"Warning! Access denied. Turn around immediately and step away from the door or I shall be forced to call security!"

Marcio dropped his security card and immediately went to work on the cell phone. He needed to get it to interface with the door scanner so that he could send an all clear command to the AI.

The AI was resisting him. It didn't want to allow the phone to connect to it.

He tried again.

The AI resisted again. He was about out of time. He could maybe try one more time...

"Access granted! Welcome, Chisel."

Marcio was confused for a moment even as the door lock chimed merrily and the door clicked unlocked. He hadn't even managed to get access to the AI. Then he was alarmed for a moment.

Chisel was the name of one of Daniau's henchmen. Had one of the large men somehow quietly followed them up the stairwell? Was Chisel coming from the other side of the door? Then, Marcio figured it out.

Danny stood, reaching around him, with a Paradox Hotel security access card in his hand. It had the name "CHISEL" written on it in all capitals and a picture of the big man that Danny had apparently stolen it from.

"They were so interested in checking my tools when I got off that elevator, that they weren't paying much attention to their own stuff," Danny said. "Like I said, I hack people just like you hack computers, kid." Marcio wasn't overly fond of being called "kid" by somebody who was probably no older than himself, but just at this moment he couldn't complain.

Once through the door and on the 17th floor, they were relieved to find it deserted. With the lock down, housekeeping couldn't get up here to clean. Since the goons were understaffed, they had apparently left the top floor mostly unguarded. Perhaps they assumed that since the 17th floor had the best AI security, it didn't need additional security.

Danny handed Marcio something. It was his own security card. He'd already forgotten that he'd dropped it in his rush to try and hack the door AI. "You and Chisel both need to keep better track of your stuff," Danny said, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

Two thirds of the 17th floor were just Mr. Daniau's own private, penthouse apartment. The other third was the boss's office and the smaller, but still impressive apartment of the woman he kept. Danny took the lead as they made their way to Mr. Daniau's office. They kept mostly to the back corridor for as long as they could.

They made it to Mr. Daniau's office without any problems. Marcio wondered if perhaps it was going *too* well. As they entered the office, he expected to find Mr. Miles and some goons waiting for them, but no one was there. He found himself wondering if Sky knew about Daniau's creeper cam network. Was that little weasel watching them at this very moment? Marcio was pretty sure that only he knew about the network, but he could never be entirely sure.

Marcio had never been in the boss's private office before and he was amazed at how plush the furnishings were. He'd seen the office on the creeper cams before, but nothing had prepared him for the experience of seeing it in person. Growing up a poor kid from the Lower Stem section of Ciudad Estrella, he had known that rich people lived a better lifestyle than he, but he never imagined that anyone lived like this. The floor was carpeted thickly and warmly. It felt softer underfoot than most mattresses he'd had in his life. There was a bar covered with expensive-looking alcohols, a fireplace, leather chairs, and the most amazing desk he'd ever seen. Behind the desk was a short, waist-high bookcase below an expansive window letting in the rose-colored sunlight from the outside world.

Danny didn't hesitate. He knew exactly where he wanted to go. Marcio watched as Danny made straight for the area behind the desk, knelt, and slid open a false panel in the book shelf to reveal a hidden safe. Marcio let the conman go to work on the safe as he looked around the room, not paying much attention. He examined some of the art hanging on the wall, the liquor on the bar, the wood of the desk, and he even noticed a small spot of what looked like blood on the floor in front of the desk.

Danny glanced across the desk and saw Marcio staring at the floor. "What's wrong?" Danny asked.

"There's blood on the floor," Marcio explained.

Danny stood up, looked at it briefly, and said, "Yeah, that probably came from my plonker." An awkward silence passed between them before Danny simply explained, "Last night was kinda weird," and then went back to work on the safe.

By the time Marcio finally made his way behind the desk, Danny had already deciphered two of the numbers in the sequence for the safe's mechanical lock. The conman had used a pencil to write the numbers in small, barely noticeable print down the side of the safe door near the hinges.

77

12

Danny was using a medical stethoscope to listen to the safe's internal mechanism as he slowly turned the dial. Marcio watched him for a couple of minutes as he turned the dial with excruciating slowness. Eventually, he wrote the third number in the sequence below the other two.

77

12

84

When they had first talked that morning, Danny had claimed to have a photographic memory, but Marcio now saw that that had obviously been a lie. Why else would he need to write numbers down? Marcio wondered what else this guy was lying about. He wondered if he was planning on betraying him. He wondered if he could really get them both out of this building. He watched Danny work for a couple more minutes, wondering.

Marcio was getting restless, just standing around. He felt useless. "Anything I can do to help?"

"SHH!" Danny hissed at him, straining to listen as he gently nudged the combination dial another fraction of a degree. Then he stopped and pointed to the terminal display on the desk. "Any chance you can get onto The Mushroom's secret camera network and use it to keep an eye out for trouble?"

Marcio looked at the terminal. In all likelihood, Mr. Daniau's personal terminal was one of the few still online. If any terminal outside of the server room would work, it would be this one. It was worth a try. He entered Daniau's access codes he'd stolen on day one and was relieved to see the display come alive with camera feeds from all over the secure zone. He saw Sky working diligently

at his desk in the server room just as they'd left him. Marcio checked the feed to the rooftop landing platform and saw that Mr. Daniau's plane wasn't back yet, so presumably Daniau himself was still out of the hotel. Next, he checked on Mr. Miles and found him in his office having a conversation with a couple of goons. The creeper cams had no audio, so Marcio wasn't able to hear what they were discussing. Next, Marcio checked the various security checkpoints and all revealed only bored-looking goons sitting around waiting for something to do.

Marcio heard a *beep* followed by a sexy, female computer voice say, "*Access denied. Please try again. You have two attempts left.*"

Danny rose to stand beside Marcio as he looked at the creeper cam displays. "Can you see the room directly beneath this one? Room 1608?"

Marcio looked back at the safe and noticed that now five numbers had been written faintly in pencil along the safe's hinge. He wouldn't be able to see them if he weren't looking for them.

77

12

84

11

20

"Do you have the whole safe combination?" Marcio asked Danny in response.

"Yeah. Now all we need is Daniau's QSP and we can open it and get the heck out of here."

"*With* the accounting data for the Boaters," Marcio reminded him. Odd how Danny seemed so much more focused on getting the stuff out of that safe than retrieving the data. Marcio had real doubts that Danny even planned to get the data.

Danny looked at him bemusedly. "Don't worry, kid, I'll get your data, but only if you can get me past that safe's QSP scanner. Lemme see 1608."

Marcio threw Danny a warning glance. *You better.* He then called up the creeper cam feeds for room 1608. This room was very different from any other room in the hotel. From the outside it looked like a normal hotel room. Inside, however, it was Mr. Daniau's killing room. There was no one in the room at the moment.

"That's how we get into the safe," Danny said. "You said Daniau would have to be in the next room for you to mirror his QSP off of your own, right?"

"Yeah, but that's on a diff—" Marcio was going to point out that room 1608 was on a different floor, but then he understood. It was directly beneath them. It was, effectively, the next room if one thought three dimensionally.

Danny nodded, smirking.

"But we'd need to figure out how to get Mr. Daniau down there at the same time that we're up here. How do we do that?" Marcio asked.

"That's where our friend, Sky, comes in," Danny said. "We pin the data theft on him. You hack a back door into Sky's personal data pad. Once we have the data back, you make a copy of it and put that copy onto Sky's pad. Then, once that's done, redirect your proxy network to lead directly there as soon as the next proxy is decrypted. When Daniau's goons take Sky to 1608, we have our window to get into the safe, clean it out, and sneak out of the building while everybody's thinking about Sky. Easy."

It worried Marcio how ready Danny was to throw Sky to the wolves. Sky was a nasty person, but even he didn't deserve to be mushroomed or killed for something he wasn't involved in.

Danny clearly sensed Marcio's misgivings. "Don't worry. Sky should be okay. The Mushroom won't hurt him for a while. He'll want to question him and before long, they'll notice that we've escaped. I'll call Daniau from the shuttle as we're burning up the escape corridor off planet and let him know he's got the wrong guy. Worst Sky will get will be some bruises." Danny shrugged, then added, "Maybe."

Marcio didn't really like this plan. He wished there was another way.

Before they could discuss it any further, however, there came from above their heads the rumble of a plane making a vertical landing on the rooftop landing platform. Marcio switched the display back to the rooftop and there was Mr. Daniau, landing his douchey sportsplane.

I Wouldn't Trust Me.

Danny

14:05

(7hrs, 3min remaining)

Danny quickly closed the false panel which concealed the safe and motioned towards the data terminal on Daniau's desk. Marcio took his meaning and shut down the secret camera network. Without waiting for Marcio, Danny moved quickly to the office door and opened it a crack. No one was there. The time to move was now, but before Danny could step out into the empty hallway, Marcio tugged on his shoulder, halting his movement.

"Wait," Marcio said to him.

"We have to go now. It'll be bad if The Mushroom catches us in his office."

"But he's on the roof, directly above us and I'm all set up to mirror his QSP. We can open the safe right now."

"No, we can't." Danny stepped out into the hallway without further comment. He moved swiftly and silently towards the back stairs, grateful once again that the 17th floor was empty. He heard Marcio, less skilled at the burglar's silent arts than himself, hesitate for a moment behind him and then begin to follow. Above their heads, The Mushroom shut down the plane's engines. When they were at the door to the back stairwell, Danny brought them to a stop.

"Why didn't we open the safe right then?" Marcio demanded. He was clearly annoyed and ready to get the job done and get out of there. "Mr. Daniau was within range and my QSP is already set up to mirror his."

"Because safes like that have a lot of security features on them. As soon as you mirror that signal, the safe's gonna send a confirmation alert back to either Daniau's QSP or his phone. Maybe both. Regardless, he'll know pretty quick that his safe is being opened. Once we open that safe, we'll have only a couple of minutes to clean it out and get out of the building."

"We can't leave without that data. The Boaters will throw us out an airlock if we do."

"Exactly. That's why we can't open the safe until we have the data."

"So let's get the data and get out of here."

Danny had to suppress an exasperated sigh. The kid really wasn't going to like this next part. "You can't come with me to get the data."

Marcio was visually perturbed at that. "Why can't—"

Danny cut him off. "Because you need to get to work hacking that back door into Sky's data pad. And besides, you're about as stealthy as a draft horse."

Marcio opened his mouth to dispute this point, but fell silent as they suddenly heard, from the other side of the stairwell door, footsteps rapidly descending the stairwell from the rooftop landing platform. Eddie The Mushroom. Danny's heart stopped in his chest as he pressed himself against the wall. Marcio followed his lead and did the same. Danny had gambled that The Mushroom would use the front stairs, but he'd used the back stairs instead. That went against what he knew of The Mushroom's character. Had he not clearly read the gangster?

Danny mentally readied himself for a fight. If The Mushroom caught them here, they would have to use violence to subdue a man who was almost certainly armed. Danny knew that he himself would be next to useless in a fight and as for Marcio...well, Danny *was* next to him. Violence was for people too stupid to find a less dangerous way, in Danny's opinion. He may be about to become one of those stupid people as he saw no alternative here.

Thankfully, they never had to find out. The footsteps on the other side of the door proceeded past the the 17th floor and continued downward. Danny heard The Mushroom open the door directly beneath them. He was on the 16th floor. They were safe for the moment. It bothered Danny that he'd been wrong about which stairwell The Mushroom would use. He needed to know if his read on the man was off. "Do the front stairs have rooftop access?" he whispered to Marcio.

"No," Marcio whispered back. "Only the back stairs."

So that explained it. His read on The Mushroom was accurate, after all. The Mushroom must be going downstairs to check in with his chief goon, Miles. As soon as all matters of state were taken care of, the crime lord would want to get some sleep. He must be exhausted after having been up all night and then going and doing bad guy stuff all day.

In Danny's mind, the pieces of the plan all fell into place and lined up like the gears on a complex machine. The gears all fit together perfectly and the machine hummed merrily along. Good. This was going to work nicely. "You go back to your desk in the server room and I'll retrieve your data," he said to Marcio. Marcio opened his mouth to protest again, but Danny held his finger up to silence him. "I know what I'm doing. You're going to have to trust me, here. Unless you want to try your hand at burglary and trust me to hack into Sky's data pad. I mean, how hard could it be to hack into the personal device of a hacker? I'm sure I can handle whatever booby traps he's got on his data pad."

The kid needed some busy work and he needed to get out of Danny's hair.

Danny could see that Marcio was taking his point. "Alright," Marcio said reluctantly. It was clear that Marcio still didn't fully trust him, though.

He's wise not to trust me. I wouldn't trust me.

Another thought occurred to Danny. "Also, we're gonna need a bag for all the stuff in the safe. You got a backpack or something in your room downstairs?"

"Yeah," Marcio said.

"Good. Get it and keep it with you. We're going to need everything – and I mean *everything* – in that safe to bribe, cheat, or steal our way off this forsaken planet and onto that starhopper." Danny looked at the four unmarked doors nearby. They were clearly access doors for housekeeping, maintenance, and servants. "Which door do I need?"

"This one," Marcio indicated one of the four doors. "Be careful, I haven't seen her all day. She's probably in there somewhere."

"Don't worry, kid. This is what I do. You go do what you do and get that back door set up in Sky's data pad. As soon as we get that data planted, we can drop the dime on Sky, move on the safe, and get out of this building. Then, it's just a matter of getting to the spaceport before the last shuttle leaves."

"Okay," Marcio nodded reluctantly. He was scared, but Danny felt confident that the kid had more strength than even he himself realized. Marcio wanted to survive this and he wanted to see his sister again. Marcio would do his part when the time came. Danny held Chisel's stolen security access card up to the stairwell door.

"Access granted! Welcome, Chisel."

While the door was open, Danny used a screwdriver from his tool belt to disconnect power to the Door's AI and to disabled the door's locking mechanism. "That should prevent that thing from causing us any more trouble."

Marcio began towards the stairs leading down, but Danny caught his arm.

"One more thing: keep an eye on me when I come out of here." Danny indicated the door leading into Mika Claire's apartment. "When I wink at the camera, that's when it's go time, understand?"

The kid nodded and disappeared down the stairs. Danny used Chisel's security card to access the servants' door and got to work burgling the apartment of The Mushroom's girlfriend, Mika Claire.

The Game Is On.

Sky

14:24

(19 proxies decrypted, unknown number remaining)

For the love of Christ, Sky thought as the the 19th layer of encryption fell away to reveal not the stolen accounting data he sought, but yet another bouncing proxy, another layer of encryption. How many proxies did this paranoid scumbag use? The scumbag was, of course, wise to be paranoid, for now he was being hunted by Sky Meussen, a true master of both the binary and the trinary. It's okay, I'll get you eventually. It's only a matter of time before you run out of layers of encryption to hide behind. And when that happens, I've got you.

As if on cue, the server room door opened and Marcio entered carrying a sandwich and a giant cup of coffee from the 15th floor canteen. Sky estimated he was about 80% sure the Estrellan was the scumbag he was hunting, but until he could prove it, he had to bide his time. Rest assured, however, Sky would be keeping an eye on him.

Though it might be counterintuitive, Sky was glad Marcio was back in the server room. Not only would it be easier to keep an eye on the Estrellan, but now there was always the hope that Marcio would try to do something to interfere with the decryptors. While Marcio had been gone, Sky had hidden a monitoring program on the server. It would monitor any attempts that any user made to modify the decryptors. *Go ahead, dirtbag. Just try and screw with my decryptors. I dare ya.*

He'd also hidden an activity monitor on Marcio's access terminal. Now, he'd be able to see anything that Marcio did at his workstation. The traps were set.

Marcio entered, asked Idiot Ivan and Camilla the Thick if either of them had found anything on any of the hotel's guests. Of course, they hadn't. If they had, Sky would have already made Mr. Miles and Mr. Daniau aware.

But of course, you know that, don't you? You know they won't find anything on the guests, because it's all you, isn't it?

It occurred to Sky that it was possible that either Idiot Ivan or Camilla the Thick could be smarter than they let on, but he doubted it. They were, for all their flaws, at least native Gonians like himself.

Marcio, though was a slippery, little Estrellan. Estrellans are predisposed to crime.

After checking in with the two junior techs, Marcio came over to stand behind Sky's desk and look over his shoulder. Sky had to resist the urge to elbow the traitor in his stomach right then.

"Any luck with the decryptors, yet?" the Estrellan asked.

Of course, we haven't gotten anywhere yet. If we had, don't you think I'd have said something? If we had, you'd probably be on the floor getting the ever-living crap kicked out of you by the big guy watching us from the door. But you know we haven't found anything, don't you? You already know how many encrypted proxies we need to take apart to find that data, because you stole the data and built the proxy network that's protecting it, didn't you?

Aloud, Sky answered, "Not really. We've cracked open nineteen proxies, and now we're working on the twentieth." Then, in a moment of inspiration, an idea occurred to him. He asked, "How many are there, total?"

"Th—" Marcio started, hesitated as all the blood ran out of his face, and then started again, "There's...no way of knowing."

An awkward moment passed between them. Marcio had almost answered his question. The only person who *could* answer that question accurately, the only person who *could even know* the answer to that question was the one who'd built the proxy network, the thief himself. Sky now knew — *knew* — with absolute certainty that Marcio was the hacker who had stolen the data. It was Marcio he was hunting. Slimy, little Estrellan lowlife.

Sky knew, and he could see from the look on Marcio's stunned face that *he knew* that Sky knew. Good. Enough of all this sneaking around and pretending.

"Keep me posted," Marcio said weakly as he turned away and sat at his own terminal on the other side of the small room.

Idiot Ivan had kept working, but Sky noticed that Camilla was watching them over the top of her terminal displays. She, thick as she was, obviously perceived the significance of what had just happened. Even without evidence, he could probably ask the enforcer standing at the door to lock Marcio up until they got to the bottom of what was going on here. Camilla would back him up. He could tell by the confused way she glanced between himself, Marcio, and the enforcer. Sky thought about it, but no, that wouldn't do. If Sky reported Marcio to the big man standing at the door, then likely the enforcer himself would get the credit for the capture. Even if the big man didn't take the credit, Sky would have to share it with Camilla the Thick. That was unacceptable. Sky wanted to be the one to catch Marcio himself. He needed to defeat this Estrellan at his own game, and he needed for everyone to know that he, Sky, was the greatest hacker of them all.

He caught Camilla's eye and shook his head at her. Then he sent a private message to her terminal.

We don't have enough evidence yet. I've laid a trap for him. Follow my lead.

She responded:

Okay. What can I do to help?

*Just keep at your busy work and
let him dig his own grave. I got
him right where I want him.
Play dumb for now.*

That shouldn't be too hard for her.

*Okay. What happened to the
electrician?*

That surprised Sky. He'd been so focused on Marcio that he'd forgotten all about the electrician. What was the guy's name? Dennis? He was pretty sure the electrician's name had been Dennis. Dennis had seemed like a decent, if stupid man. Could Dennis be a part of Marcio's plot? No. Sky had called Dennis out to upgrade the server's power supply himself. Marcio had had nothing to do with calling the electrician. Still...

Good question.

Sky looked over the tops of his displays to where Marcio sat across the room. The other hacker sat opposite him, their displays facing away from one another. He couldn't directly see what was on Marcio's screens, but of course there were ways around that. Soon he would be receiving data from the monitoring program he'd hidden on Marcio's terminal.

Sky called to Marcio across the room, "Marcio, whatever happened with the electrician, Dennis or whatever his name was?"

"Danny. I left him at the canteen," Marcio answered. "He said he'd fix the broken drink machine since he had nothing else to do."

"Think it's a good idea to let the guy roam around without any escort?"

Marcio hesitated. "He seems okay to me. He's from the electricians' union, so he's basically one of Mr. Daniau's guys."

Something about the vague, nonchalance of this answer didn't sit well with Sky. Could it be that Dennis (no, Danny) could be working with the traitor Marcio? Now that he thought about it, the electrician didn't really look like a Distortioneer. His skin was too dark, too tanned to be from a planet with only one sun, and that one a relatively dim red giant.

"Hmm," Sky said to no one in particular. Then, to the big enforcer at the door, "You guys should probably keep an eye on the electrician. Leave nothing to chance."

"You don't tell me what to do, nerd," the ogre said. But even as he said it, the big man opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. "Nobody leave this room," he said and then disappeared down the hallway, presumably to go find the errant electrician.

Sky looked back across the room at Marcio, but Marcio did not meet his eye. He appeared to be working. *Likely working against me and my decryptors*, Sky thought derisively. *Go on then, scumbag. I'm keeping my eye on you.*

Sky waited for the spy software he'd installed on Marcio's computer to show him what the Estrellan was up to. As soon as he had something concrete, he'd nail this guy.

Sky licked his lips and pushed his glasses up on his face. Now, the game was on. Sky would destroy this lowlife tub of rancid biocurd.

An Invitation to Follow

Danny

14:12

(6hrs, 56min remaining)

After Marcio had disappeared back down the stairs to go hack a virtual back door into Sky's data pad, Danny had stealthily entered Mika Claire's apartment via the servants' literal back door. He took off the clunky, noisy tool belt he'd stolen earlier and left it by the door. He needed to be able to move quickly and silently here. Among Danny's many illicit skills, burglary was one of his oldest.

At first, he moved through the apartment slowly and with great caution, but he quickly discovered that the apartment was empty. This wasn't entirely a good thing. Mika's absence from the apartment meant that her phone would almost certainly be likewise absent. And the phone of The Mushroom's girlfriend, Mika Claire, was the place Marcio had chosen to hide the crime lord's stolen accounting data.

Unless they retrieved that phone, the Boaters would kill them. Getting caught attempting to steal it would mean a horrific death at the hands of The Mushroom. This was the most critical part of Danny's plan and it needed to come off perfectly. Yes, Marcio would have been a liability here, but Danny had other reasons for sending him away. He had his own reasons for getting his hands on the data.

It might seem reckless to hide the data right under Daniau's nose, but even Danny had to admit it was kind of brilliant once you thought about it. Danny had gotten a far better read off of The Mushroom last night than he'd ever hoped to get. While Danny knew almost nothing of this Mika Claire, he did know that The Mushroom wasn't the kind of man to go falling in love. He knew that Mika and The Mushroom had separate penthouse apartments and that Mika's was the smaller of the two. She was a kept woman. A sociopath like The Mushroom would never suspect that his pet girlfriend was walking around with his stolen accounting data in her pocket.

Marcio had explained to Danny during their initial phone conversation that Mika, as the boss's girlfriend, wasn't subjected to the same rigorous security protocols as most people. Like the boss himself, her phone was never scanned as she entered or left the building. Marcio's plan had been to let Mika unwittingly carry the data out of the Paradox Hotel and then he would get someone, likely another Boaters operative, to steal her phone from her outside the hotel.

Since Marcio was only stealing *copies* of The Mushroom's accounting files and the originals were still on the servers, there was nothing to be missed. All Marcio would've had to do was take down his proxy network and cover up any evidence of his theft on the servers. It would look like just a random cell phone theft, the kind of thing that happens all the time in the city.

It was a simple plan. It likely would have worked just fine if Danny hadn't gotten caught, The Mushroom hadn't ordered a security audit, and the secure zone hadn't gone into lock down. Now, it was a safe bet that even Mika's cell phone would be scanned the next time she left the building.

Once sure that Mika's apartment was empty, Danny quickly searched all of the obvious places where she might have laid her phone: countertops, bedside tables, coffee tables. Of course, Danny knew she likely had her phone with her, but there was a small chance she may have left it here in the apartment, especially since the lock down would leave the phone nearly useless.

Failing to find the phone, Danny resigned himself to await Mika's return. It would be tricky, but he would have to steal the phone from directly under her nose.

But then, a light flickered over the kitchen sink and another light came on in Danny's head. The light over the sink flickered again. He looked down at the clothes he wore. The heavy boots, so ill-suited for stealth anyway; the blue collar, button-up work shirt; his current name stitched just above his breast pocket. He was an electrician in an apartment whose occupant was a woman accustomed to having servants come in through the back entrance and move around her.

All he had to do was retrieve his tool belt, wait for Mika to return, and claim that he was there to fix the flickering light above her kitchen sink. Like most wealthy people, she would likely not look twice at him. She would dismiss him as just another of the lower life forms sent to serve her in some capacity. This could work.

Danny quickly went back to where he'd left his tool belt by the servants' door, retrieved it, and returned to the kitchen to await Mika's return. He didn't have to wait long.

Shortly, he heard muffled voices coming from the elevator lobby just outside the apartment. The voices were muffled by the closed front door and he couldn't really make out the words. He resisted the urge to place his ear to the door and listen. It wouldn't do for someone to open the door and find him eavesdropping. One of the voices he was pretty sure was The Mushroom's, and the other voice sounded like that of a woman. Mika Claire, he assumed. He remained close to the servants' door just in case The Mushroom came into the apartment. It would be very bad indeed if he were to be recognized.

The muffled conversation only lasted a minute before a tall, blonde woman opened the door just wide enough to allow her slim figure to pass through. She immediately closed and locked the door behind herself. Danny could tell that she was afraid and angry at the same time.

Danny had looked up Mika Claire before coming back to the Paradox. He had found several pictures of her on the local exnet. Mika didn't see him as she paced back and forth in the foyer. She seemed to be struggling to contain her anger, restraining her urge to throw something.

Then, she gave in to that urge and threw the object she happened to have in her hand. Danny barely noticed what the object was as it went sailing into the living room and out of his field of view. It was a cell phone.

"AAAGH!" Mika gave voice to a rage which clearly defied any more articulate expression.

She still had not seen the "electrician" in her kitchen. Danny cleared his throat quietly, not wanting to startle her. Far from being frightened, however, she turned her gaze and her anger towards him. Despite himself, Danny took a small step backward, instinctively recoiling from the feral rage emanating from the woman. He wondered if perhaps the electrician ruse might turn out to be a mistake. He wondered if he should just excuse himself from the apartment. He could return in a little while after she'd had some time to calm down and try the "fixing a light above the sink" routine then.

"Uh, sorry, ma'am. I was just here to fix the light above the sink, but I can come back later if this is a bad time."

Mika's expression went from angry to perplexed to the very beginnings of a frightening, mirthless smile. From behind her pretty face, Danny perceived the keen intellect she tried so hard to keep hidden from the world. And he saw recognition.

There was no doubt about it; she recognized him. He could see it clearly in her face. They had never met, but somehow she recognized him. There was obviously much more to Mika Claire than Danny had expected. He might actually be in over his head here. She glanced back at the apartment's front door for just a moment. The Mushroom was just on the other side of that door. Danny wondered if she might sound the alarm.

She turned back to him. "You're the one they're all looking for," Mika said, the malicious smile on her face growing to a wicked grin. She let the dumb blonde persona she normally presented to others fall away and Danny had a real and very frightening feeling that he was seeing the real Mika Claire. This woman was smart and cunning. With a single shout, she could end him.

She had all the power here. She could shout for help before he could even think about closing the distance between them. But so what if he could get to her? What would he do? Strangle her? Danny was a big man and strong as well. He was certainly physically capable of killing her, but that wasn't his style. Of Danny Jake's many talents, violence was not one. He was a talker, not a fighter.

But presently, his words were failing him. "Uh..." he said stupidly.

"Are you going to hurt me?"

"N-No, ma'am." Why couldn't he make his words work for him?

What she said next utterly surprised him. "Do you need a place to hide?"

"What? Um, yeah." The gears in Danny's mind sprung into motion. She was offering to help him. What's more, she was obviously deriving some kind of mischievous glee from doing it. Whatever had transpired between she and The Mushroom on the other side of that door had made her so mad she was willing to risk a lot just to thwart her boyfriend.

"Good. I could use the company," she said coolly and walked into the living room without looking back. "And bring the tool belt."

Danny knew an invitation to follow when he saw one.

So he followed.

Just Enough Rope

Marcio

16:28

(4hrs, 40min before the last shuttle leaves Distortion)

What could be taking Danny so long? Marcio glanced nervously at the clock. It had been over two hours now since Danny had disappeared into Mika Claire's apartment. The faux electrician's absence had been noted and now an exhaustive search of the entire secure zone was underway to find him. Daniau's enforcers were everywhere, looking in every corner of every room. They were now openly carrying their large autoplasm rifles. What's more, since Marcio had been the last one to see the "electrician," he was now under much more suspicion himself. Mr. Miles had even pulled him out into the hallway for questioning. Marcio had played stupid, swearing that he'd left the electrician up in the canteen on the 15th floor and hadn't seen him since. Mr. Miles seemed to accept this story, but only tentatively, allowing him to resume his work under a cloud of suspicion.

Back at his terminal, Marcio was starting to lose his mind with worry.

Had Danny abandoned him? Had this all been a ruse? Had he been tricked into helping Danny get past security and into the building? Marcio felt foolish now at how easily he'd given Danny the location of the data upon which his own life depended. Had Danny stolen the stolen data from Marcio? Something told Marcio that doing so would appeal to Danny's sense of irony. Danny was a conman, after all.

But if Danny had only been interested in the data, what was all that about with Mr. Daniau's safe? Was all that just a ruse to make Marcio trust that he, Danny, wasn't interested in the data but the money which he *claimed* was within the safe? Danny couldn't open the safe without Marcio's help bypassing the QSP scanner. But then, how did Marcio really know that safe even had such a device? The whole point of quantumscale processors was that they were sub-atomically small and easily concealed. Nothing on the outside of the safe indicated the presence of a QSP scanner. Marcio had nothing but Danny's word that the safe even had a QSP scanner. Had Danny retrieved Mika's phone, cleaned out the safe by simply entering the mechanical combination, and left with everything? Was Danny on a shuttle to the starhopper at this very moment laughing at the poor, stupid nerd he'd left twisting in the wind?

Marcio was certain he could feel an ulcer forming in his stomach. He poured himself another cup of coffee.

And then, as if all that wasn't enough, Marcio was having to endure withering glances from Sky. Though the junior tech had obviously suspected him for some time, Sky now *knew* that Marcio was the culprit who'd stolen Mr. Daniau's accounting data. But why didn't Sky turn him in? He must be looking for more evidence. There was a difference between knowing something and being able to prove something. Marcio could only assume Sky was giving him rope and hoping he'd hang himself with it.

It may literally come to that, Marcio thought darkly.

The only upside was that now Sky himself was also under increased scrutiny. It was Sky, after all, who'd initially called the "electrician" out and had agreed to be responsible for him. When Mr. Miles had questioned Marcio, he'd also called Sky out into the hallway for questioning. It had been several tense minutes for Marcio as he'd worried that Sky would inform on him, but apparently he hadn't. After being questioned by Mr. Miles, Sky had just reentered the room and resumed his work at his terminal. Marcio enjoyed a temporary relief as neither Mr. Miles nor any of the enforcers under his command paid any particular attention to him. The relief was only temporary, however, as Sky stared menacingly at him over the tops of his terminal displays.

After Marcio had first returned to the server room, Sky had tricked him. Marcio had nearly let slip to Sky how many layers of encryption he had protecting the data. Marcio felt really stupid for having fallen for such an obvious trick. He really wasn't cut out for all this cloak-and-dagger stuff. Now that Sky was definitely on to him, he had to be extra careful. As soon as Marcio had sat back down at his terminal, the first thing he'd done was check to see if Sky had set any kind of monitoring program to spy on him while he'd been gone.

It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you.

And Sky was definitely out to get him. Marcio's healthy dose of paranoia had payed off right away as he quickly found a hidden monitoring program on his terminal. He had nearly just deleted the program, but then he thought better of it. Instead, he edited Sky's spy program to show only whatever video he told it to show. As the exnet was offline due to the lock down, Marcio did a quick search of the video selections available on the in-house servers for guests of the Paradox Hotel. He found a perfect one, just for Sky. It was an interracial bit of smut featuring a virginal Gonian girl at the center of a group of unkempt Estrellan men. The film was odious on its own merits, but it would be extra offensive to a Gonian Nationalist like Sky.

Enjoy the movie, you racist douchebag.

With Sky's attempts to spy on him thwarted, Marcio then accessed Daniau's creeper cam network. He spent most of the next couple hours worrying as he watched both the front and rear exits from Mika Claire's apartment for Danny. He couldn't see inside of Mika's apartment itself, as that was one of the few areas not covered by the creeper cams. He watched Daniau's goons move meticulously

through the entire secure zone conducting their search. He saw no sign of Daniau himself, but that was nothing unusual.

He also worked on trying to set up the back door into Sky's data pad just in case Danny hadn't betrayed him after all, but he knew it was likely a futile effort. Setting up the back door was proving harder than he'd expected. Since he was trying to hack into the personal data pad of a fellow hacker, he had to be careful. Sky had set up all kinds of traps and anti-hacking mechanisms on the data pad

He watched, he waited, and he hacked as he pretended to work. He hoped it wasn't all in vain as yet another hour passed. On the cameras, Marcio watched as Mr. Miles entered Mr. Daniau's personal apartment. Several minutes later, both men emerged together.

That's when the hammer really started to fall.

The End of Mercy

Mr. Daniau

17:31

Eddie Daniau was sleeping fitfully when the tentative knock on his bedroom door awoke him. With so much on his mind, he was lucky to get even a few hours of restless sleep. Only sheer exhaustion had allowed him that much.

At first, he awoke momentarily confused. It was a daring thing someone was doing knocking on his door. Instinctively, he reached for his plasma pistol, but stayed his hand as his higher brain came more fully awake. Anyone who meant him harm likely wouldn't be knocking politely. Likely this was one of his lieutenants here to give him some urgent news. Likely it was some news he wasn't going to like.

Eddie sat up on the edge of the bed as the knock came again, this time slightly more loudly. He still didn't answer it, allowing his mind a little more time to wake up. He blinked hard, trying to squeeze the sleep from his eyes and rubbed his face. The knock came again. This time, Eddie felt he was ready to answer.

"Who is it?"

"It's Miles, sir."

"Come on in, Miles."

"Yes sir." The door opened and Miles came in. He looked tired too. Eddie doubted if Miles had gotten much more sleep than himself.

"Take a seat." Eddie indicated one of the armchairs where he often sat to read in the evenings. "What's going on?"

"Thank you, sir," Miles said as he sat in a chair facing his boss. As soon as he sat down, Miles began bringing Eddie up to speed on the events which had unfolded as he'd slept. Miles knew it would only annoy Eddie if he didn't get right to the point; that was one reason Miles was his chief lieutenant. "You remember I told you the nerds called in an electrician from the Local 171 to upgrade our server's power supply? Well, uh, we can't seem to find the electrician."

"That's... unprofessional of you."

Miles suppressed a wince. "Sir, there's more. Awl came to me and said the nerds that were supposed to be keeping an eye on him had lost track of him. I asked Awl to describe this 'electrician' to me and, well, he sounded familiar to me."

Eddie narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

"So I went ahead and checked the security feeds from the ground floor lobby." Miles handed Eddie a piece of paper. It was a printed photograph, a single frame of the video from the main lobby. The man in the picture was dressed as an electrician with the name "Danny" stitched into his lapel and a tool belt slung around his waist. His long, black hair was tied neatly back in a ponytail. Of course, Eddie recognized this bogus electrician right away. It was none other than Sid Stone. The arrogant conman even had the gaul to wink at the camera.

Eddie was now fully awake. He could feel his blood pressure rising as he ground his teeth together. So Sid Stone was the one who'd stolen his accounting files after all. He'd shown this man mercy last night as Stone had unwittingly done him a great service with Congressman Harmon. This time, there would be no such mercy. This time, Eddie was personally going to take that man apart, piece by literal piece. He was going to pull all of those perfect teeth out one by one. He was going to break that perfectly squared jaw and those sharp cheekbones. He would dislocate those broad shoulders and flay that beautiful, dark-honey skin off the man's flesh. He was going to take out that winking eye with a hot poker. He was going to tear that man screaming from limb to limb and he was going to add another "mushroom" to his collection. But he was going to start with that hair. He was going to shave that bastard bald.

"I assume you've ordered a thorough search of the secure zone," Eddie said. His tone, even and quiet, betrayed none of the seething anger he felt.

"Y-Yes, sir." Miles was obviously frightened by his boss's lack of outward reaction to the photograph. Good. He should be. "We've searched everywhere except your apartment and, um, Miss Claire's."

Eddie nodded. "I want a thorough search of my apartment and I want guards posted outside Mika's. No one is to enter her apartment without my say so, got it?" After the earlier scene with Mika, Eddie didn't want to send any of his enforcers into her apartment unless he was very sure Sid Stone was actually in there.

"Yes, sir," Miles said.

As an afterthought, "And make sure you cover the back servant's entrance as well."

"Of course, right away, sir."

Miles got up and made to leave to carry out his boss's orders, but Eddie stopped him. An idea had just occurred to him. "And send somebody down to the server room. Tell them to bring their office phone online and to call me on my cell. And tell them to call me on speaker. I want to talk to all the nerds at once."

The Last Encryption

Sky
17:39

(25 proxies decrypted, unknown number remaining)

After a full day of watching decryptors hack away at Marcio's encrypted proxies and waiting for the stupid Estrellan's network to slowly be exposed one laborious step at a time, finally things were happening. Sky still hadn't found the stolen data, but he now had an elaborate map of the scumbag's network. It looked like after he'd stolen the data, Marcio had just bounced it off of everything he could access in the secure zone's network. It had passed through personal cell phones, data pads, and room service menus, all without the users of those devices being any the wiser.

The task of decrypting the network up to this point had been laborious and frustrating as the slippery Estrellan had no doubt intended. Sky had resigned himself to an unknown number of sleepless hours as he slowly continued the process, but now there was a potential break in the case. Just a few minutes earlier, one of Mr. Daniau's enforcers named Tin Snips had come into the room. Tin Snips had spoken briefly in hushed tones with his fellow who was overseeing the server room. He had then ordered Sky and the other technicians to bring their office phone online and to call Mr. Daniau directly on his personal cell phone.

Sky didn't really know what this meant, but by the draining of the blood in Marcio's face, he knew it was bad news for the Estrellan. That meant it could only be good news for Sky.

Once the office phone was back online, it could only be used to make calls within the secure zone to any of the few other phones which were online. One of those few active phones was, of course, that of Mr. Daniau himself. Tin Snips said that Mr. Daniau had ordered that all four techs call him on speaker phone. He wanted to talk to them all at once. Sky, Marcio, Ivan, and Camilla all gathered around the phone and made the call.

The phone didn't even complete its first ring before Mr. Daniau picked up. The boss wasted no time. "Are you all four there? I want to hear from all of you."

"Yes, sir. We're all here. This is Marcio Ruiz." Marcio, as the team leader started off. The others followed in order of their rank on the team.

Enjoy being team lead while you can, fucker, Sky thought at Marcio before announcing his own name to Mr. Daniau. "Sky Meussen here, sir."

"Camilla Mays here as well, Mr. Daniau."

"Ivan Law, sir."

"Good." Now that Mr. Daniau was assured that all four members of the IT team were on the call, he began issuing them their new marching orders. "I want you all to drop whatever you are doing and I want you to immediately check Mika Claire's phone for my stolen data."

There was silence around the phone as the gravity of what Mr. Daniau was telling them set in. He apparently had reason to suspect that the missing data was on his own girlfriend's personal cell phone. Sky glanced at Marcio and saw that he was sweating. The Estrellan swallowed nervously. Sky knew then that whatever they found on Mika's cell phone would expose Marcio. He could see that Camilla saw it too. *Welcome to the end game, scumbag.*

Mr. Daniau continued, "Do it now, while I'm still on the phone."

"Yes, sir," Sky answered for the whole team. Sky stepped away from the phone as the other three watched him. He went back to his terminal. He paused the decryptor that was currently running. Almost instantly, the server load graph dropped from nearly 100% capacity to only 3%. Sky accessed the network devices list and enabled Mika Claire's cell phone. He bypassed Mika's basic biometric security lock and began searching the phone's memory. Mostly all he found was the normal kinds of things he would expect to find on the phone of any bubble-headed bimbo like Mika.

Camilla and Marcio came to look over his shoulder. Sky really hated having people behind his desk, especially that lowlife Estrellan traitor, but he said nothing. He was a professional. Sky scanned the phone twice and his scan turned up nothing.

"Scan is showing clean," Sky said, disappointedly. He projected his voice to carry across the room to where Mr. Daniau was still on speaker phone.

There was something here, Sky could feel it. His every instinct told him there was something here and Marcio's apparent nervousness confirmed it for him.

It was Camilla who figured it out. "Wait something's not right," she said loudly enough that Mr. Daniau would be able to hear. Sky sensed Marcio grow tense behind him, as Camilla leaned in closer. Idiot Ivan just watched from over by the phone. Camilla continued, "I know that model of phone. It's a nice one. I nearly bought one a few months ago, but it's outside my price range. I know all the tech specs of that phone. The memory capacity on that phone is eight hundred googolbytes."

Camilla touched the capacity readout of Mika's phone on Sky's display. Normally, that would have annoyed Sky, but this time he said nothing as Camilla continued, "If you add up all of the used space and free space, you get approximately seven hundred and ninety six googolbytes, total. So where's the other four? A hidden partition, maybe?"

"That's a good point," Marcio said. "I'll get right on this, Mr. Daniau."

"No," Mr. Daniau said emphatically. "I want you *all* working on this. Together. As a team, got it?" Sky made no effort to hide his glee. Marcio had doubtlessly wanted to work on it alone and

cover his tracks somehow, but Mr. Daniau wasn't going to fall for that. The smoking gun they needed to catch Marcio was definitely here. Sky could feel it.

18:36

(the last encryption)

It had taken some work, but after Mr. Daniau had disconnected, Sky had managed to find the four missing googolbytes on Mika's phone. Just as he'd expected, the data was on an encrypted and hidden partition. What he hadn't expected was how strong the encryption protecting the data was. All day long his very best decryptor programs had been battling some pretty advanced encryption, but this was something else entirely. It was an encryption with a relatively sophisticated AI paired to it. The AI attempted to evade Sky's decryptors by moving, hiding, and disguising the data it was protecting as innocuous data. It was like fighting a living thing. No way did some stupid Estrellan write this thing. Marcio must have bought it off the black market somewhere.

For about an hour, Sky, his decryptors, Camilla, and even Idiot Ivan had worked as a team as they attempted to battle the AI encryption on Mika's phone. Marcio, meanwhile, had communicated back and forth with Mr. Daniau, found busy work, and generally did whatever he could think of to avoid helping catch himself. By this point even Idiot Ivan had picked up on the fact that Sky and Camilla strongly suspected Marcio of being the thief. As soon as they could break into the encrypted partition, they'd be able to see who had stolen it.

As the team finally pinned down the encrypted partition and obliterated the AI component trying to hide it, all that was left to do was let the decryptors work on the actual encryption itself. Once that was done, Marcio's crime would be easy enough to prove. Sky wanted to be in the room when Mr. Daniau tore Marcio apart. This was going to be glorious.

"Glad I'm not the sorry bastard that stole this," Sky said mainly for Marcio's benefit. "As soon as we break in, that guy is in real deep, biblical-level shit." Sky openly leered at Marcio. Was Marcio on the verge of tears? Oh, this was too good.

"Just do your work and get the job done, Sky," Marcio said weakly. Marcio tapped a few keys at his terminal and then got up from his desk. "I need to use the restroom. I think my stomach trouble is coming back again."

As Marcio made for the door to the hallway, the babysitter goon at the door stopped him. It was the one they call Vice back again. "Boss says none o' you guys goes anywhere alone."

"You want me to be sick in here? You know what that'll smell like in this small room?" Marcio said to Vice.

"Use the trashcan," Vice commanded.

"It's not that kind of sick," pleaded Marcio.

"Huh? Oh! Okay, go ahead. But you better come right back, got it?"

"Sure," Marcio said as he bolted through the door and disappeared down the hallway.

As gratifying as it would have been to see Marcio crap his pants in front of everybody, Sky didn't believe for a second that Marcio was really sick. Wherever he was going, it couldn't be any good. "You should probably send somebody to follow him," Sky said to Vice. "You know, just in case he's involved in all this somehow."

Sky really wanted Vice to get his meaning, but the big oaf just said, "Shut it nerd. You do your job and let me do mine." And then Vice just went back to reading his trashy fag novel. The only thing Sky hated more than Estrellans was faggots.

Sky really wished the secure zone had a camera system so that he could watch whatever Marcio was really up to. He watched his decryptor slowly chewing away at this very difficult encryption. It was painfully slow. This encryption was much tougher than anything they'd dealt with all day. It was like the final boss fight at the end of a long video game. Even with all of the servers' resources supporting the decryptors, the encryption was still only 3% decrypted. This could take hours. Sky hadn't slept in over 24 hours by this point. He was exhausted.

If only he knew what Marcio's password was. There would be no need to wait for the decryptors if he only had that password. That password would open the encryption right up and give them all the data they were trying to recover, and more importantly, it would give them proof of the thief's identity.

Sky glanced back and forth between the progress bar and the password entry field on his display. What could the password be? It would be something complex and impossible to guess.

Red Handed and Zipper Down

Danny

18:11

(2hrs, 57min remaining)

Mika was sound asleep as Danny very carefully held her phone against her skin. Mika's phone was one of the fancier models which used DNA biometrics to identify its user. The phone detected Mika and unlocked itself.

Danny accessed the phone's file system and entered Marcio's secret command to bring up the hidden partition of the phone's memory. It was on this small region of the phone's memory that Marcio had stored all the data he'd stolen from The Mushroom's servers. The secret commands only brought the AI which protected the data out of hiding. To actually access the data, a password was still required.

A password entry dialog box popped up on the phone's screen. Marcio had told Danny during their first call that morning, when they were planning the job, how to access the data. The kid had been nervous about telling Danny, but Danny had insisted on it. He'd told the kid he wanted to verify the data was actually still on the phone before they left the Paradox Hotel, which was true, but it was only half the truth. Danny had his own reasons for wanting to access the data.

Now, Danny entered the password Marcio had given him into the dialog box. He'd expected the password to be something very complex and hard to guess. But the password revealed that there was some dimension to Marcio that Danny had yet to understand. He would have to find out about that if they didn't die today.

Within seconds of entering the password, the hidden data on Mika's phone opened like a flower for Danny. It was a huge, almost indecipherable trove of accounting data. Records of monies coming in from a multitude of sources and going out to yet another multitude of destinations. There was way too much data here for Danny to make sense of at the moment. Whatever story these numbers told, Danny had no doubt would prove a compelling one.

He popped the bottom button off of his electrician's shirt. He wouldn't be needing that shirt anymore. He'd already discovered that The Mushroom kept a walk-in closet full of very expensive designer suits in his girlfriend's apartment. The Mushroom and he weren't the exact same size, but they were close enough that Danny would be able to leave the Paradox more well-dressed than he'd entered. He figured Daniau owed him a suit after wrecking his Louka Pascal suit last night.

The button he'd removed from the electrician's shirt was actually a clever bit of spy tech. It was a small data storage device disguised as a shirt button. It had plenty of capacity to hold all of the data Marcio had secreted away on Mika's phone. Danny had found the button drive in a small shop a couple platforms over which specialized in easy-to-conceal tech. Now, he set the phone to copying the stolen data onto the button drive. Whatever else happened, Danny would have his own copy. It was valuable data and he would find someone to buy it.

While the data transferred, he dropped the rest of the electrician's shirt into the garbage can atop the wreckage of the condom he'd gotten from Norbert Marshall's wallet early that morning. The ancient prophylactic had ruptured at the most inopportune moment. *Guess the expiration date was important after all.*

He checked to make sure that Mika was still sleeping. He didn't want her to wake up before the data was finished copying onto his button drive. Far from being the spoiled princess he'd been expecting, she was an extremely intelligent woman. It was too bad The Mushroom didn't appreciate her. Men like that never did.

After only a few minutes, the data was done copying. He re-locked Mika's phone and padded naked into the closet where The Mushroom kept his clothes. If this was just an ancillary closet of clothes he kept in his girlfriend's apartment, Danny could only imagine what the crime lord's main closet in his own apartment must look like. The spacious, walk-in closet in Mika's apartment, completely separate from her own closet, was like a small men's clothing store. And not a cheap one, either. Danny saw suits of all the major designers, jewelry, shoes, an impressive selection of ties. He even found an Emiliano Piazza tuxedo. This tux was worth \$10,000 if it was worth a cent. Danny glanced at the clock and decided it would soon be late enough in the evening for a tuxedo.

He found a small sewing kit in one of The Mushroom's drawers and began adding one new button to the tuxedo's shirt.

In the bed, Mika stirred, but did not wake.

18:33

(2hrs, 35min before the last shuttle)

Danny straightened his new bowtie on his new tuxedo. The tux was a little tight in the shoulders and a little loose in the waist, but Danny could have it altered. Surely the *Twilight Elegance* would have a tailor shop on board.

Thinking of the starhopper, *Twilight Elegance*, Danny reminded himself that it wasn't going to be in system all night. Likely the massive ship was already aligning itself along its departure trajectory. The planetary shuttles ferrying passengers and freight between the ship and the planet were likely

having to burn hard to intercept it. Danny knew he needed to get the next phase of the plan moving if he wanted to make his flight.

Everything depended on making that flight. If even one cog in the complex machine of human behavior failed to behave as he predicted, Danny would meet a gruesome end down in room 1608. Good thing Danny had pulled all the levers on that machine properly. All except one. There was only one lever left to pull. He felt confident the machine would work properly to get him off the planet with The Mushroom's accounting data and the money in the safe. Danny was good at what he did.

Mika appeared in the mirror. She was wearing only panties and an old but comfortable-looking yellow t-shirt with the word "Rotors" across the chest in navy blue lettering. It was exactly like the one Danny had started his day with, only cleaner. It looked better on her. "You look sharp," she said. "Going somewhere?"

"You look even better." He smiled his most winningest smile at her. He wasn't even lying. "As for me, I've got a plane to catch."

"Eddie isn't going to appreciate you 'borrowing' his tux."

"Tell him I broke in and stole it."

"The tuxedo burglar. He should buy that." She gave him a sly, side-eyed smile in the mirror.

Danny smiled back at her in the mirror and then his expression got heavy. "Seriously, he's going to find out I was in here. What are you going to tell him?"

"I *should* tell him to go to hell. He doesn't own me."

A dark silence fell between them as they both realized her last statement wasn't entirely true.

"He's going to kill me; I'm sure of it. He thinks I'm too stupid to know how evil he really is, but I have eyes and ears and a brain. I know what happens around here."

"You need to get yourself out of here, far away from that evil, sadistic man. I can get you a ride off the planet if you come with me tonight," Danny said. She furrowed her brow at him slightly. "I don't mean it like that," he clarified, "I'm not trying to be the next Eddie The Mushroom. You wouldn't owe me anything. I'm just offering you a way off world if you want it. No strings attached."

"No, it's not that... it's... There's someone else. Someone I care about. And that person needs me."

Danny cocked an eye at her. She had been very careful to avoid using pronouns. "Well my offer stands. You can come with me, but I'll be leaving very shortly."

"Thanks, but I can't."

He turned away from the mirror and faced her directly. He worried that by leaving her here, he was leaving her to a terrible fate. He would only help her if she wished his help. Danny was a man of few morals, but that was one of the few. "Well, if you should reconsider after I'm gone, call Mrs.

Ethel Kundertson on the Lonesome Penny exchange. She's a crotchety old bag, but she's a friend and she will help you if she can. Understand?"

Mika seemed a little confused by this, but she said, "Okay..."

"You got it?"

"Mrs. Ethel Kundertson on the Lonesome Penny exchange."

He kissed Mika lightly on her forehead, trying not to draw parallels between her situation and the one his mother had been in. "Okay, I need to go. It's showtime." And with that, Danny left her standing there in The Mushroom's closet. He didn't look back. He never looked back. He only hoped she would make that call and ask for help. But he would never — *could* never — look back. Looking back was always too painful.

Danny felt casually at his breast pocket as he made his way to the apartment's front door. The small bulge of Mika's cell phone was there, reassuring him. He really needed to get out of here before she realized it was missing. He needed to pull that last lever and set his machine into full forward motion.

At the front door, he looked through the peephole. The coast was clear. Everything was going according to plan.

He opened the door, stepped out into the small lobby, and realized that he'd forgotten to zip his fly. He was in the process of zipping it when the door to The Mushroom's apartment flew open and several armed men rushed out into the small lobby. Several more, Miles among them, came out from down the hallway where they'd obviously been hiding outside of the peephole's view. Within a couple of seconds, Danny had gone from being alone in the small elevator lobby to surrounded by perhaps a dozen of The Mushroom's enforcers. His hand still on his fly, Danny found himself looking down the accelerator tubes of a dozen plasma assault rifles.

Across the small lobby, from the opened door of The Mushroom's private apartment, stepped The Mushroom himself, carrying a smaller, though equally lethal plasma pistol in his right hand. Danny calmly zipped his fly up and held his hands in the air. He was caught.

The Mushroom's men cleared their boss a path to Danny without ever taking their eyes off their quarry. The Mushroom held his empty left hand out to Danny while keeping his pistol pointed at Danny's center mass. "I think you have something that belongs to me, Mr. Stone," The Mushroom said.

"It's Danny today, Mr. Mushroom. Danny Jake." The Mushroom's eyes narrowed. He apparently didn't like being called 'Mr. Mushroom.' Danny *very* slowly reached into his breast pocket and removed Mika's cell phone. He placed it into The Mushroom's hand.

"And Mika?"

"She's okay. She's in the back." Danny nodded with his head back towards Mika's apartment.

"Check it out." Daniau never took his eyes off of Danny as Miles stepped around Danny and disappeared into Mika's apartment.

They stood there for a couple of minutes and then Miles came out of the apartment, supporting Mika with his arm. His plasma rifle was slung over one shoulder. Gone now was the intelligent, brave woman Danny had just left in The Mushroom's closet. The Mika Claire that Miles helped out of the apartment looked frightened. Her lower lip was swelling up where something had hit her.

"Found her tied up and gagged with a couple of your suit ties in the back closet," Miles said.

Danny was impressed. She'd managed to give herself a fat lip and tie herself up in just the couple of minutes since he'd left her back there. With quick thinking like that, she might just survive The Mushroom after all.

"Eddie!" Mika threw her arms around The Mushroom. "I knew you'd save me." She even managed to cry a little bit. Looking terrified of Danny, she played her part of the damsel in distress perfectly. If Danny didn't know better, even he might believe he'd done all of that to Mika.

Danny offered no resistance as Miles secured electrocuffs around his wrists and patted him down for weapons. During the search, Miles found the security access card Danny had stolen from the gorilla called "Chisel" earlier. Miles gave Danny a dirty look as he slipped it into his own pocket.

"Well, *Danny Jake*," The Mushroom said with a sneer, "it appears you're caught red handed and zipper down."

Meltdown

Marcio

18:37

(2hrs, 31min left)

Marcio couldn't take it anymore. He needed to get out of the server room and away from everyone. He needed to be alone. All hope was lost. He was screwed.

Sitting at his desk, he'd watched as Sky, Camilla, and Ivan, had gotten closer and closer to breaking into his last layer of encryption. They all suspected him now.

He watched on Mr. Daniau's creeper cams as henchmen had taken up hidden positions outside of Mika Claire's apartment. He watched as Danny Jake, now inexplicably dressed in a tuxedo, blundered right into their trap. Marcio watched as Danny, hopelessly and foolishly caught, handed over Mika's cell phone to the mob boss. And as if all that wasn't enough, Marcio watched as Mr. Miles led the frightened-looking, half-naked, and obviously brutalized Mika out of her own apartment. What had Danny done to her? Had he hurt her? Had he raped her? Whatever the brute had done to the innocent woman, Marcio knew that he himself bore part of the responsibility. Marcio watched on the cameras as they cuffed Danny and escorted him down to room 1608. Marcio was watching as that arrogant jerk, Danny, even winked at the hidden camera in Mr. Daniau's torture chamber.

It was all over now. It was only a matter of time before Mr. Daniau sent his goons after Marcio. There was no hope. Even if he could somehow escape, the Boaters would kill him. Worse, now that he had failed, his debts would be transferred to his sister. His unique skill set as a hacker had made him valuable to the Boaters, but Lyssa had no such useful skills. She was a mechanic. The Boaters had no use for a swarthy, foul-mouthed mechanic. How would they make her pay back his debts? He dared not imagine.

Sky said something nasty just then, directed at Marcio, but Marcio barely processed what it was. He just told Sky "to do his work and get the job done" but it came out weakly.

Marcio felt the need to be alone. He was fighting back tears by that point. He was determined not to let that vile, bigoted toad, Sky, have the satisfaction of seeing him cry. He decided to go back to his room and see if he had the courage to end it all himself.

Vice, the goon keeping an eye on them, tried to stop him, but Marcio threatened to be sick there in the server room. Vice didn't want to deal with that, so the big man ultimately let him pass.

Once free of his babysitter, Marcio went straight to his room at the other end of the 14th floor.

Marcio knew there was nothing for it.

He was screwed. Lyssa, was screwed.

He had let her down. He had failed at everything.

He had placed his trust in that stupid Danny Jake or Sid Stone or Ethel Kundertson or whatever that idiot's name was.

Alone in his room, he briefly entertained fantasies of escape, but he knew they were just fantasies. He looked at his personal data terminal set up on his small, hotel room desk. Its display was showing an offline icon. It was unable to connect to the exnet. Marcio wished it could connect. He would like to go into the datasphere one last time. He would like to see his meadow, to see Clovis again. Marcio longed for the tranquil escapism of his meadow and his feline friend.

He wished he could call Lyssa one last time. He wished he could tell her to get on the first transport out of the Darklands. He wished he could tell her to just go somewhere, to not tell anyone where she was going, to change her name, and to never look back. He wished he could tell her he loved her, but Mr. Daniau had taken his phone early that morning.

Overcome with rage, he screamed. "ARRRRGH!" Marcio raged at the futility and the failure of his situation. He picked up his data terminal and slammed it back onto the desk once, twice, thrice, but the terminal proved more robust than he'd expected. He slammed it onto the floor and stomped it.

He let all of his rage flow into his foot, ignoring the pain. He kicked the terminal against the wall. He picked it up and threw it against the wall. Within a minute the expensive, high-tech piece of equipment lay in pieces all around the room. Shards of glass and shattered circuit board turned the room into a hazard.

Marcio contemplated the sharp shards. Would he have the courage? That way out would be easier than whatever Daniau would do to him. He cast about for something else to smash.

A lamp was handy and so was duly destroyed.

Marcio had always thought of himself as a peaceful man, but now he was seeing the savage side of his own nature. He felt powerless to escape his fate, but the wanton destruction seemed to salve his feelings of futility, failure, and rage.

Next, a chair flew against the mirror. The chair didn't break, but rebounded back to hit Marcio in the arm. He barely noticed the minor injury to his arm as he watched the shards of mirror fall to the floor.

He needed something else to smash. Nothing good presented itself at first, but then he felt the weight the object in his pants pocket. He'd forgotten all about it. It was Sid Stone's cell phone. He grabbed it, meaning to throw it, but then he remembered that *this* phone wasn't a part of Daniau's locked-down network. *This* phone had signal. He could call Lyssa on it.

He stared at the phone for a moment, not entirely believing what he was looking at. It seemed miraculous. He was going to get to talk to his little sister on Gonaways Station one last time.

He jumped through all the hoops to get a quantum-entangled connection between the local exchange and the distant Gonaways exchange. Once he heard the Gonaways dial tone, he dialed Lyssa's number from memory.

Lyssa's phone rang twice. Then a third time.

Then her voice message greeting came on. Marcio was disappointed he wasn't getting to hear her actual voice, but it was still nice to hear her one last time, even if it was only her normal, profane inbox greeting. "*Greetings and salutations, motherfucker!*" Lyssa's prerecorded voice came on with her normal obnoxious glee. "*If you're hearing this, then I'm probably elbow deep in engine grease trying to fix whatever jacked-up shit some dumbass throttle jockey's done to one of my planes. Otherwise, I'm pushin' bush at your mom's house. Leave a message and MAYBE I'll get back to you.*"

The phone chimed and Marcio began recording his message. "Lyssa? It's me, Marcio. I'm calling you from a phone that belongs to a guy named 'Sid Stone' but that's a long story. Listen this is the last time you'll ever hear from me. I'm in some real bad trouble here on Distortion. It's a long story, but just say both the Boaters on Gonaways and a crew called the Paradoxes from Distortion want me dead. I'm in debt with the Boaters and they'll transfer my debts to you after I'm dead. They'll probably sell you. You have to get off of Gonaways. Get out of the Darklands altogether, understand me? Change your name and go somewhere else. Pay cash and don't tell anyone where you're going. I'm sorry to have to lay all of this on you, but I need you to take this seriously. Please. I love you. I've done this all for us. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. I love you, grease monkey."

With that, he hung up the phone and waited a few minutes, hoping she'd call him back, but she didn't. Rage and frustration overtook logic and patience as he sent Sid Stone's phone flying against the wall.

He looked down at the floor covered with broken glass. Time was running out. Soon, Daniau's goons would come for him. If he was going to do this, he needed to do it soon. He picked up a likely looking shard of broken mirror. He looked at his face in the reflective side of the shard. He wished he had demanded more help from Beau Tie. He wished he'd not trusted his fate to that moron, Danny Jake.

The last image of Danny that Marcio had seen on the creeper cams came back to him now. Danny, in that ridiculous tux, his hands cuffed, being led into Daniau's torture chamber by the gangster himself and winking arrogantly up at the camera. He must have known Marcio was watching and he'd winked.

Then, like a shot, something Danny had said earlier came back to Marcio.

"One more thing," Danny had said just before they'd parted ways on the seventeenth floor. "Keep an eye on me when I come out of here. When I wink at the camera, that's when it's go time, understand?"

"When I wink at the camera, that's when it's go time."

Marcio grinned, finally understanding. At the time, when Danny had said it, Marcio had assumed that "go time" meant time to copy the stolen data from Mika's phone to Sky's data pad via the back door Danny had told him to set up. Marcio understood now that hacking that back door had just been busy work. Danny had intended to get caught all along, hadn't he? Yes, the more Marcio thought about it, the more he was sure Danny had. Why else had Danny taken him up there, shown him the safe, and made sure that Marcio saw where he'd written the combination down? Why else had Danny even needed to write down the combination, if he truly had a photographic memory, as he'd claimed? No, the more Marcio thought about it, the more certain he was. This had been Danny's plan all along.

That slimy bottom feeder.

A Lucky Guess

Sky

19:08

(13%)

Before they'd even been able to start decrypting the hidden partition on Mika Claire's cell phone, they'd needed to kill the AI that Marcio had put in place to evade them. Every time they found the hidden partition on the phone, that cunning artificial intelligence just moved the data to another sector of the phone's memory and they had to try to find it all over again. It all would have been so much easier if they had the actual phone down here in the server room. Then, they could hardwire it into the servers. Instead, Mr. Daniau had insisted that they hack into the phone remotely. For reasons unknown to Sky, the boss wanted to know what exactly was on the phone before he retrieved the actual device from Miss Claire.

The process had been infuriating, but eventually they'd managed to corner the AI and the data it was protecting on a particular section of the phone's memory. There, with nowhere left for the AI to hide, Sky had finally been able to kill it. Once the AI was dead, Sky and his team (for they were undeniably *his* team at this point) set the decryptors to work dismantling the encryption protecting whatever was hidden on the phone.

Of course, Sky already knew what would be hidden there. It could only be Mr. Daniau's stolen data and it would have metadata and access logs showing Marcio had stolen it. It had been a half an hour and even with all of the servers crunching the complex algorithms, the partition was still only 13% decrypted. No way did any Estrellan write this encryption. Marcio must have bought it somewhere. Maybe that was what he did on his little private datasphere domain.

Sky had broken into Marcio's room earlier and snooped through his personal data terminal hoping to find some trace of the stolen data in there. Unfortunately, he hadn't found anything useful, but he did notice that Marcio spent a lot of his off hours in the datasphere, in a private domain interacting with some advanced AI called "Clovis." This AI file was almost certainly a sexbot. Figures Marcio would turn out to be some fag that can't even get a real man.

People like that disgusted Sky. It was like they couldn't even run their own station without imploding their reactor, so they needed to come to his station and mooch off of the system. And they brought all of their crime and their depravity with them. Gonaways used to be a nice place, the biggest, most prosperous, and most powerful of all the station worlds in the Darklands. That had all

changed three years ago when thousands upon thousands of Estrellans had flooded in and set up their dirty refugee camps in the corridors of the Lower Stem section of Gonaways Station. Sky was a proud Gonian patriot and he hated all of the scum and riffraff that was ruining his home world. At least Marcio wouldn't be going with them back to Gonaways when their contract was up in a few more months. There would be one fewer dirty Estrellan on Gonaways. Sky was proud to have played some small part in that.

He stared at the progress bar. He stared unblinking, willing the bar to move until it eventually did. 14% now.

Sky glanced back and forth between the progress bar and the password entry field on his display. If only he knew what Marcio's password was, there would be no need to wait for the decryptors. What could the password be? It would certainly be something complex and impossible to guess.

Sky figured it wouldn't hurt to try to guess Marcio's password. Sky tried typing the name of Marcio's sister, "Lyssa" into the field.

INCORRECT PASSWORD!

Next he tried "Marcio."

INCORRECT PASSWORD!

"Ruiz"

INCORRECT PASSWORD!

This was probably pointless. The password was likely something fifty characters long which could never be guessed. Next, he tried "Marciosucks" just out of frustration.

INCORRECT PASSWORD!

Then a thought occurred to him. He knew it wouldn't work, but he typed "Clovis" in to the password field.

There was a momentary delay and then the encryption fell away revealing the complete file structure of the partition hidden on Mika's cell phone. It took Sky a moment to understand that here, at last, was the data which Marcio had stolen from Mr. Daniau's servers. And the stupid Estrellan had protected it with only a simple, six-letter password. That beautiful and difficult encryption algorithm yielded to a simple, proper name password. *Figures. Stupid Estrellan.*

"What the...?" Camilla said over his shoulder. She'd been silently watching him the whole time. He'd forgotten all about her being there. "How did you guess that?"

"Just a lucky guess. I looked into Marcio's data earlier and the word 'Clovis' showed up pretty prominently."

"That's a pretty stupid password," Camilla said.

"Marcio is a stupid guy," Sky answered her.

Sky got up and went over to the phone. He tried calling Mr. Daniau on his cell phone, but the call rang to voice message. He left a quick message letting Mr. Daniau know that he'd recovered his data and that Marcio Ruiz was the thief.

The big guy, Vice, at the door looked up over his trashy novel at Sky. "The tall, skinny nerd that got sick? He's the one that stole from Mr. Daniau?"

Sky looked up and addressed Vice. His voice emanated contempt. "Yes, he's the thief and you let him go. He's not sick; he just used that as an excuse to get past you. He's been using it all day. Something he ate at breakfast didn't agree with him, he claims."

Vice looked confused at that. "Nuh-uh. Mr. Daniau says some joker named Stone is the thief. I heard he's got the guy cornered upstairs. Probably has him in custody by now. Besides, I'm the one that woke Mr. Ruiz up this morning. He came straight here. Skipped breakfast."

That surprised Sky. This idiot, Vice, had had the evidence all day long that Marcio was faking his illness and was just now putting it together. Vice was a certified moron. But who was this "Stone" guy...and why did that name sound familiar? Then it clicked. Sky hadn't thought about Sid Stone since early that morning. He was the conman whose phone Mr. Daniau had wanted Sky to search. Sky glanced at the countertop where he'd left Stone's cell phone that morning and wasn't the least surprised to see it missing. How had he not noticed that?

He hated himself for not seeing it until now, but clearly Marcio and this Sid Stone were working together. Then, Sky remembered Marcio leaving the server room with the electrician. And then the electrician had disappeared. Had that been Stone in disguise? Yes, of course it had been. Sky saw how Marcio had manipulated him into calling for the electrician. Somehow, Marcio had faked those brownouts. Sky saw that he'd been an unwitting accomplice in the whole thing. Sky had even vouched for the "electrician" when Stone had first stepped off the elevator.

Ah, crap!

It occurred to Sky that Marcio and Sid Stone were trying to blame their crime on him! He'd played right into their hands! Sky felt foolish. He needed to clear his name. He needed to talk to Mr. Daniau right now. Mr. Daniau needed to know that Marcio, and not Sky, was the thief. Sky decided to try Mr. Daniau on his office phone. The phone rang and rang until Sky lost count. He was about to give up and assume that Mr. Daniau wasn't in his office, but then the ringing stopped as the line picked up.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Daniau, but this is Sky Meussen down in the server room. I just need you to know that we have unlocked the data hidden on Miss Claire's phone. We can now prove that Marcio Ruiz is the thief and we believe he was working with the conman from last night. That Sid Stone guy."

At first there was no response on the other end. After a long silent moment, Sky heard something that made his blood run cold. Without another thought, Sky ran past Vice, out the door, and down the hallway to the front stairs.

A Tux to Die in

Mr. Daniau

19:11

The rest of Sid Stone's or Danny Jake's or whomever's life would be short and painful. Eddie would see to that. What really pissed Eddie off wasn't that Stone had stolen his data. It wasn't that he'd sneaked back in through security during a lock down (though Eddie would be sure to get the details of how Stone had done that before he allowed the conman the release of death). It definitely wasn't that he'd beaten Mika and left her tied in a closet. What really irked Eddie about this man was that he had the utter nerve to sit there across the table in Eddie's killing room, looking smug and wearing Eddie's own Emiliano Piazza tuxedo. This fool probably had no idea how much that tux was worth. And now that he'd worn it, Eddie would never be able to bring himself to wear it again.

No, Mr. Stone, if you like that tux so much, you can die in it.

Stone smirked at Eddie from across the table. Even with his hair mussed and his hands cuffed, he managed to look handsome and debonaire as he sat slightly reclined in the uncomfortable polymeric metal chair. The soon-to-be-dead conman sat with his legs casually crossed, as though he had not a care in the world. "I'll make you a deal, Mr. Mushroom," Stone said.

Eddie knew that Stone was just trying to get under his skin, of course. "Oh yeah? What could you possibly have to offer me that I'm not going to just take from you before this evening is out?"

"The password for the data we both know is on that phone. You give me my money you stole from me last night and a ride to the spaceport and I'll give you the password to that data. You need never see me again."

Eddie would get the password out of this man over the next several hours and it wouldn't cost him a cent. Stone would give him that password bloody and screaming. In answer to the conman's offer, Eddie said, "Do you know why they call me 'The Mushroom,' Mr. Stone?"

"I've heard a few things..."

"After our little chat last night, I should think you'd have a pretty good idea. By the end of the night, by the time you draw your last breath, you will find out for sure. But I'll save that for the coup de grâce. There's so much more ground to cover before then."

The arrogant conman didn't even flinch. "There is indeed."

Eddie's phone chimed. He pulled it out of his pocket and saw that it was the server room again. He assumed it was that annoying nerd, Marcio again. Ever since he'd let the server room reactivate

their office phone, Marcio had been calling him incessantly giving him meaningless updates. Eddie loathed a suck up. He ignored the message and put the phone back in his pocket. Here, as he did so, he saw something in the conman's expression change only momentarily. He tried to hide it, but Eddie saw that Stone was interested in his phone.

"That was the server room giving me an update. You see, Mr. Stone, my nerds are already working at this very moment to unlock the data." For emphasis, Eddie tapped Mika's cell phone where it lay on the table between them. "They're remote decrypting it as we speak. Even without the password, we'll get into the data. But I'm going to squeeze that password out of you anyway. Just because I can. Just because I don't like you. Just because I want the satisfaction of hearing you scream the password as you beg for death."

Across the table Stone remained unflinchingly calm. "You're going to wish you'd taken my offer, Mr. Mushroom."

"Is that so?"

"That's so."

The two men stared at one another for several long moments across the table. Eddie's phone chimed again, but he ignored it.

Stone smirked. "Sure you don't want to check that?"

"What I want to do is get started taking you apart piece-by-piece." Eddie began rolling his sleeves up. One of Eddie's enforcers rolled in a cart which looked sort of like a room service cart, but this one had a locking lid and the words "Toy Chest" stenciled on it. Eddie touched his thumb to the electronic lock on the top of the box and the lock opened. The "Toy Chest" was made to open at the top and the front, revealing its contents to the victim. Normally Eddie loved the look of fear on his victims' faces when they saw the array of implements he intended to use on them. But this time, he was disappointed. The array of glinting knives and surgical equipment didn't seem to disturb Sid Stone in the least. Okay, fine. Eddie selected a simple straight razor. The first thing he would do is shave that lovely, long, black hair from this arrogant fool's head.

"You really should check your phone, Mr. Mushroom." Stone was grinning widely now. What was he on about?

Annoyed, Eddie checked his phone and saw that the latest notification was a routine notification from his office safe letting him know that User: Eddie Daniau had accessed his safe. He got those notifications all the time from the safe and he always just deleted it. But how could *he* be accessing the safe at this very minute? He was down here in Room 8.

"Problem?" Stone asked. "I'm guessing by the slightly confused look on your face, you've just gotten something very confusing on your phone. I'll bet I can guess what it is"

"What have you done?"

"Me? I've been here the whole time. My *accomplice*, on the other hand, is cleaning out your safe."

Eddie didn't hesitate. "Guard the prisoner," he said to one of his enforcers, a man called Tin Snips. To Miles and the other two men in the room, "You guys. With me."

And with that, he was out the door running for the front stairs. He was going to catch this little bastard in the act.

Interloper

Sky
19:19

Sky was desperate to tell his side of the story, lest he be falsely labeled Marcio's accomplice. He needed to talk to Mr. Daniau right away. But his security card didn't allow him access to the 17th floor. Only Mr. Daniau and his security staff could access the top floor. That meant that Sky needed to get Mr. Miles to let him up there, but Mr. Miles's office was empty.

After finding Mr. Miles's office on the 16th floor empty, Sky had not hesitated. There was no time to hesitate. He saw a security access card on Mr. Miles's desk for one of the enforcers named "Chisel." He grabbed the card and went straight up to the 17th floor. He used Chisel's card to get past the electronic door lock's AI and went straight to Mr. Daniau's office. He was surprised to find the door to the boss's office standing open.

"Mr. Daniau?" he said to the empty room as he tentatively entered. Something didn't feel right here. The desk chair had been rolled off to one side of the room and away from the kneehole at the center of the desk. A trashcan was overturned beside the desk. They were just here a minute ago when Sky had called from the server room. Where had they gone? Sky shouldn't be in here all alone. He shouldn't even be on this floor.

Something had happened in this room only recently. Imagining that Mr. Daniau may be on the floor behind the desk, possibly in need of assistance, Sky forgot propriety and stepped around the desk. "Mr. Daniau?" Sky repeated.

He found nothing behind the desk except a whiskey tumbler on the floor next to the bookcase. He glanced into the kneehole, checking to see if anybody (Marcio, perhaps?) may be hiding there, but found nothing. It was then that he noticed what was up on Mr. Daniau's terminal display.

The display was covered with a collage of small windows, each showing the feed of a hidden camera. On one of the small windows, Sky saw this very office, but he couldn't see himself on the display. The camera in this room was angled so that it didn't reveal the area behind Mr. Daniau's desk, where Sky now stood.

He shouldn't be standing here.

But he was intrigued by the hidden camera system. He looked to the wall where he estimated the camera must be, but he could see no trace of it. He looked at other windows on the display. He saw

one showing the server room. On that one, Camilla and Ivan seemed to be working with the recovered accounting data. Vice leaned against the wall by the door, still reading his trashy novel.

On other camera feeds Sky saw countless corridors, elevators, hotel rooms, and even bathrooms. He was just thinking to check if he could see into his own room when he noticed one feed showing the front stairwell. In the image, Sky saw Mr. Daniau himself running up the stairs. Mr. Daniau was followed closely behind by Mr. Miles and two other enforcers. Sky suddenly remembered where he was and that he shouldn't be in here. It would be hard to explain if he were caught in here.

He ran around the desk, tripped on the overturned trashcan, and fell to the floor. The impact hurt, but nothing was broken. He scrambled to his feet as quickly as he could and continued his retreat from the boss's inner sanctum. He rushed out into the hallway just in time to collide with Mr. Daniau himself.

Lightning

Mr. Daniau

19:20

The nerd had blundered directly into him while trying to escape. The impact had rattled Eddie's bones, but he'd managed to keep his footing. The nerd, on the other hand, had fallen hard to the floor. To stop his fall, Sky had held his hand out awkwardly before himself. Eddie could see that something in that arm was going to break even before he heard the *pop!* Sky was half his age. It should be Eddie on the floor cradling a broken arm, not the young nerd.

I'm guessing this kid doesn't make it to the gym very often.

Eddie didn't even have to say a word. One of his men fell upon the kid, held him down, and electrocuffed his wrists. The kid howled in pain as his broken arm was forced into the cuffs. Miles and the other enforcer, whose name was Spanner, fanned out, secured the scene, and made sure there were no other thieves to be caught.

Eddie crouched down beside the kid on the floor. Before he could even ask a question, the kid started babbling. "Mr. Daniau, it wasn't me. It was that that dirty Estrellan, Marcio. He's been in your office, I'm sure of it. I think he was doing something on your terminal. He stole your data, but we got it back. He's in the building somewhere. You have to find him before he can get away. You have to belie — OUUUU!"

The kid's rambling, incoherent story was interrupted by a scream of pain as Eddie squeezed hard on the little thief's broken forearm. Beads of sweat appeared on the thief's face and his eyes rolled back in his head as he lost consciousness briefly.

"That's the one that helped Stone get in through security, Mr. Daniau," said Channel Lock, the enforcer who'd just cuffed the nerd. "I was working elevator security down on fourteen when that scumbag came in disguised as an electrician. This guy here vouched for him."

"Is that so?" Eddie asked Sky who had already regained consciousness.

"Please, Mr. Daniau," the thief said. "You have to believe me. It was Marcio. I was tricked. I never betrayed you."

"Mr. Daniau," Miles said from just inside the doorway to Eddie's office, "you'll wanna take a look at this."

Knowing it could only be bad news, Eddie stood up and followed Miles into the office. Eddie normally kept his office tidy. Now, however, the office was in disarray. He followed Miles behind

the desk, righting the overturned trashcan as he went, and he saw what he somehow knew he would find there. His safe was hanging open and it was completely empty.

"You found it like this?" he asked Miles.

"I just slid open the false panel in the bookcase and the safe door just swung open. Nothing inside."

"Hmm." What really bothered Eddie was the empty whiskey tumbler on the floor. This little nerd had had the nerve to enjoy himself a drink as he'd cleaned out Eddie's safe. "Find the other one, the Estrellan, Marcio. We'll take them all apart if we have to, but I will get down to the bottom of this."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir." With that, Miles left to go find the other nerd.

Eddie went back out into the hallway where Channel Lock still stood over the sniveling Sky. Eddie crouched back down beside the crying nerd. Though Eddie was boiling with rage, he kept his tone intimately, malevolently quiet as he asked, "So, tell me what happened, Mr. Meussen. I'd advise starting with where my money and everything else from my safe is."

"What safe?" Sky asked. And he screamed as Eddie squeezed his broken arm again. "Ahhhhh!"

"Don't. Play. Dumb. With me."

Sky took several sobbing, gulping breaths but managed not to pass out. He began telling Eddie the story about how he was totally innocent and he was duped by Marcio and the fake electrician. Eddie wasn't buying any of it, of course.

After a few minutes of the kid's rambling, Eddie was just about to hurt him again when there came a loud and unexpected

BANG!

accompanied by a bright flash of light from outside the hotel. The flash came from the darkened night sky, in through the windows in Eddie's office, and shined briefly out into the hallway where Eddie crouched over the injured nerd. Everyone started at the thunderclap, even Eddie himself. Then, a momentary quiet settled over the hallway.

"Was that lightning?" Sky asked.

It was several moments later when Eddie realized what the sound had actually been. He realized it as another sound, distant, shrieking, and familiar, began to make itself heard. Eddie's quick mind put together what was happening before anyone else could. He turned to Spanner and shouted "Watch him!" and then to Channel Lock, "With me!"

He didn't check to see if Channel Lock was actually following him. He knew the big enforcer would be. Eddie just started running, drawing his plasma pistol from his shoulder holster as he went.

That Slimy Bottom Feeder

Marcio

19:01

(2hrs, 7min remaining.)

(*Maybe* enough time to make the shuttle.)

Danny was up in the murder room with the data that Marcio needed. Danny might be a prisoner, but Marcio now understood that Danny was exactly where he wanted to be. Mika's cell phone was outside of Marcio's reach, and Mr. Daniau's safe was outside of Danny Jake's reach. But Marcio could get to the safe. That slimy bottom feeder, Danny Jake, had planned it like this all along.

Marcio grabbed the backpack from his closet, made sure it was empty, and slung it over his shoulder. He took one last look at his demolished hotel room. He had no intention of ever returning here. He cracked the door and peeked out into the hallway. Coast was clear. He moved as quickly as he dared down the hallway without moving too quickly. There was only a dim light of hope at the end of this long, dark tunnel and it wouldn't do to draw attention to himself right now.

He made his way to the back stairwell without encountering anyone else, opened the door and slipped quietly into the stairwell. After letting the door click shut quietly behind himself, he turned and bumped into one of Daniau's enforcers.

It was Awl. The big man had a bemused expression on his face as he cocked an eyebrow at Marcio. Marcio was stunned. He had just been caught sneaking into the stairwell. Why had he even been sneaking? He was authorized to be here. How would he explain this unnecessarily suspicious behavior? "I, uh..." Marcio's words failed him.

But to his surprise, the large man wearing a business suit and carrying a plasma assault rifle just laughed. "It's okay, nerd. You ain't the only one what sneaks back here to have a smoke on duty." For the first time, Marcio noticed that the enforcer held a pipe in one hand and a laser lighter in the other. He raised the pipe to his lips, shined the intense laser beam from the lighter into the pipe's bowl, and took a few puffs of the aromatic smoke. He offered the pipe to Marcio.

"Thanks," Marcio said, taking the pipe. "It's been a stressful day. I just had to get away from the server room for a while." He took a couple puffs from the pipe and immediately decided he'd never take up smoking. The smoke burned his throat. His eyes and mouth began to water. He frantically swallowed the saliva, but it seemed his mouth was producing it faster than he could swallow it. He worried he might throw up.

Awl laughed and took the pipe back. The big enforcer took a couple more puffs before saying, "I think that's enough for now, kid. Don't worry, we'll make a man o' you yet." With that, Awl took a final puff, tapped his ashes out on the concrete of the stairwell landing, and stepped back through the door to the 14th floor.

Marcio gave himself an extra minute to recover. That had been close. He felt jittery and his hands were shaking. *Why would anybody smoke that stuff*, he wondered. As he stood there recovering, he listened very closely to the stairwell, but heard no signs of anyone else. He looked through the transparent, crystalanium security door leading down to the lower floors and the freedom beyond. If he did everything right, if he could rescue Danny, they would be going through that door very soon. If all went to plan, they would have just enough time to make the 21:08 shuttle off world.

It was going to be close. No time to dally. Marcio ignored the jittery, sickening feeling in his body and climbed the stairs as quickly as he could.

19:08

(2hrs left)

Marcio had crept through the back hallways of the 17th floor, wary of being seen. He had absolutely no legitimate reason to be on this floor. If he were caught here, he would have no explanation. If Danny hadn't thought to disable that lock on the back stairwell door earlier, Marcio wouldn't even have been able to access this floor. That slimy bottom feeder had planned for that. Marcio was sure.

Now, he stood in Daniau's office looking at the bookcase behind the desk. That bookcase, he knew from earlier, had a false panel that would slide sideways and reveal Daniau's safe. Marcio was nearing the point of no return. Once he opened that safe, things would happen very quickly.

He slid the desk chair aside and used Daniau's own terminal to access the crime boss's creeper cam network just as he had done earlier. The cams would give him early warning if anyone was coming. Now that he was sure that no one was about to walk in on him at any second, Marcio bent down, slid the panel open, and revealed the safe itself. There, very faintly, beside the hinge, were the numbers Danny had written earlier. They were so faint Marcio wouldn't have noticed them if he hadn't already known they were there.

77

12

84

11

20

Marcio now understood that Danny had written those numbers there for him. It had always been Danny's intention for Marcio to open the safe. That slimy bottom feeder.

Marcio gave one last glance at the creeper cams displaying on Daniau's desk terminal. Danny was in Room 1608, directly beneath him wearing that ridiculous tuxedo. He appeared unharmed, relaxed even. Marcio couldn't escape the feeling that Danny knew the safe was about to be opened, that his plan was about to be carried out after all. What an arrogant, manipulative bottom feeder.

Down in the server room, Sky was still at his desk babysitting his decryptor as Camilla peered over his shoulder. The creeper cam gave Marcio a partial view of Sky's display over his and Camilla's shoulders. The decryptor's progress bar looked to be at about 10-15%, but Marcio couldn't make out the exact percentage. That would take them a while. The final layer of encryption he'd placed on the actual data itself was extra strong.

Eddie Daniau was in the hallway just outside of 1608 talking to Miles and a couple of other goons. That was too far away for Marcio's quantumscale processor to mirror the signal from Daniau's. If he tried to open the safe now, it might set off an alarm. He had to wait until Daniau was actually directly beneath him inside the killing room itself.

He hated waiting. The longer he waited, the more likely it was he would be caught. The jitteriness left over from the tobacco was making his skin crawl. He needed to calm down. He tried deep breathing, but that never works. Finally, he spotted Daniau's minibar with its many fine, crystal decanters full of undoubtedly expensive liquors. Marcio never drank, but he thought that a small drink might calm him down and counteract some of the effects of the tobacco. He poured himself a tumbler of something brown (he had no idea what) and returned to his spot behind the desk where he could see the creeper cams. He took a gulp of the foul liquid and instantly decided he would never do it again. The stuff burned all the way down his throat and caused him to cough loudly and involuntarily. He set the tumbler on the floor.

On the display, he saw that down in the server room Sky had... *accessed the data!* How? But he knew. Somehow, Sky must have guessed his password. It was a stupid password, the very kind of password that he, Marcio, normally told people not to use. Marcio had know it even when he'd set that password, but he'd been feeling depressed that day and "Clovis" meant so much to him he just couldn't resist. Now, he had to just hope they wouldn't think to remotely clear the data from the phone before he could power it off.

Sentimental fool, Marcio silently admonished himself. Add "weak password" to the list of things Marcio would never do again, right below "smoke" and "drink." Now Sky had all the proof he needed that Marcio was the thief. Soon, Daniau's goons would come looking for him. They were definitely in the endgame now.

In room 1608, Mr. Daniau now sat across the table from Danny. Atop the table, Marcio could see Mika's cell phone. The two men on the monitor almost appeared to be having a casual conversation if you ignored Danny's mussed hair, electrocuffed wrists, and the steel murder table between them. The important thing was that now Eddie Daniau and his QSP were directly beneath Marcio's feet. Danny had done his part and gotten the crime boss into position. Now, it was time for Marcio to do his part.

Marcio's own QSP was integrated with the neurology of his brain. Thousands of subatomic switches in his head interacted to function as a basic input/output device. With it, Marcio could interact with various other bits of tech as he'd done earlier in the day when he'd set up the program that allowed him to cut power to the server room at will. The QSP, interacting with his personal data terminal (the one he'd smashed earlier) allowed him to access the datasphere, to see his private meadow and his friend, Clovis. Now, that same QSP would allow him to access the personal safe of a dangerous mobster.

He accessed his own QSP by simply thinking about it and told the subatomic computer to activate the simple mirroring program he'd written earlier. He *felt* more than anything that the QSP had responded. All he had to do now was enter the combination and turn the lever while Eddie Daniau was directly beneath him. He knew that time was short. He would only get one shot at this.

"Gotta get it right," he said aloud to the empty room. He imagined that Clovis was there, purring him on, encouraging him. He really needed to get some real friends.

His hands shaking, he nervously but methodically entered each number in the combination. As he entered the final number in the combination, as the dial stopped at 20, the safe beeped. Marcio *sensed* the interrogator signal from the safe's QSP scanner as it was mirrored through his own QSP, through the floor, and to the QSP of Eddie Daniau directly below. Almost immediately Marcio *sensed* the return signal from Daniau's QSP as it passed through his own and then to the safe. A short delay, not even a second, took an epoch to pass as Marcio waited for the safe to decode the signal.

When at last that excruciatingly long moment passed and the safe's internal electronics decoded the signal, a sexy, female computer voice came from the safe. "*Access granted. Welcome, Mr. Daniau.*" Marcio glanced at the terminal display on the desk, as though he were worried someone had heard the safe speak. In the room below, Eddie Daniau seemed not to have perceived the brief, small intrusion into his brain.

Marcio wasted no time now. He turned the handle and opened the safe's heavy door, revealing its contents. There were stacks of holostamped papers, a cigar box, a rather phallic-looking silver-and-gold colored electronic device of some sort, and a LOT of money. There was more money in the safe than Marcio had ever seen in his life. He had no doubt that Danny really only wanted the

money, but Marcio didn't care. He grabbed everything in the safe, just as Danny had told him to do, and began piling it into his backpack.

By the time Marcio was done cleaning the safe out, the zipper on his backpack barely closed. After he got done fighting with that, he glanced at the terminal display just to get the time. 19:17. His mind quickly did the calculation. 1hr, 51mins until the last shuttle would leave the spaceport to intercept the *Twilight Elegance*.

Then, Daniau's desk phone rang. In the silence of the office, the sudden noise made Marcio jump. He glanced back at the small windows on the terminal display. The phone rang again. The lines to the outside world were still cut off and there were only a couple of phones within the secure zone which could be calling Mr. Daniau's office phone. The phone rang a third time. Marcio could see on the creeper cams that down in the server room Sky held their office phone to his ear. The phone rang again. Sky must be calling to report to Daniau that he could now prove Marcio was the thief.

The phone rang again. Marcio wished it would stop ringing. He was pretty sure the 17th floor was almost completely deserted, but even with Daniau's creeper cams, he couldn't be 100% sure.

The phone rang a sixth time. Marcio, panicking and desperate to stop the grating noise on the otherwise silent floor, picked up the handset. He didn't say anything into it. He just held it to his ear, listening.

As soon as Marcio picked it up, Sky began talking. "I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Daniau, but this is Sky Meussen down in the server room. I just need you to know that we have unlocked the data hidden on Miss Claire's phone. We can now prove that Marcio Ruiz is the thief and we believe he was working with the conman from last night. That Sid Stone guy."

Marcio was about to just hang up without saying a word. Let Sky think that the boss had simply heard him and hung up on him. But then, Marcio had a flash of inspiration that would make even Danny Jake proud. Marcio remembered from that morning how desperately Sky had wanted to be the one to tell Daniau that he had been the one to catch the thief. He remembered Danny's warning about Sky earlier in the day: "...he'll go straight up to *The Mushroom's* office the moment he thinks he's got you," Danny had warned.

"Sorry, Mr. Daniau," Marcio said to the empty room. "It's just my junior tech with a routine report."

Then Marcio hung the phone up.

On the display with all of the creeper cam feeds, Marcio saw Sky run out of the server room, down the hallway, and start heading up the front stairwell. *Perfect*, Marcio thought. *I'd like to see Danny Jake do better.*

But now, Marcio noticed something else on the display. He saw Mr. Daniau talking excitedly to Miles and his enforcers just before all but Danny and one of the enforcers bolted from the murder

room. They had plasma rifles and they were heading for the front stairwell. Everyone was coming here!

Marcio's bravery failed him and he panicked. Stupidly, he shut the safe without even locking it and slid the bookcase panel back over the safe door. There was no rational reason to do that and it wasted a couple precious seconds. By now, Marcio was like a frightened animal. He bolted around the desk, tripped over the trashcan, and ran out the door, bounding for the back stairwell. He heard the door to the front stairwell open behind him. Just as he rounded the corner, he glanced back and saw Sky come out of the front stairwell. Perfect timing.

Now all Marcio had to do was rescue Mika's phone and Danny Jake from the killing room.

All in the next couple of minutes.

19:19

(1hr, 49mins left)

Marcio peeked around the corner and down the hallway. The door to room 1608 was unguarded, though he had seen on Daniau's creeper cams that there was at least one goon still inside the room guarding Danny. He would have liked to have taken a few minutes (or maybe years) to collect himself, but Marcio knew time was short. He ran down the hallway and stopped before the door just long enough to calm his breathing and try to smooth his hair. If Danny could do this, then so could he. Marcio was going to have to talk his way into the room and then somehow, he and Danny would have to take down the guard. Could he kill someone? Marcio didn't know, but he was about to find out.

He steeled his nerves, opened the door, and walked in like he owned the place.

"Nuh-uh. No," protested Tin Snips, the goon guarding Danny. "Get out, nerd."

"Mr. Daniau wants me to question the prisoner," Marcio said, surprised at how calm and in-control he sounded. "He wants me to find out how this guy," Marcio indicated Danny sitting calmly in his stupid tux, "infiltrated our Clovis three-point-one-four nodes on our server without setting off our Kundertson security protocols."

The big man just shrugged. "Whatever that means."

It meant nothing, of course. Marcio looked to Danny and saw an amused twinkle in his eye. No doubt the conman was thinking he could've done it better. Then, Danny's eyes moved slightly and Marcio followed his gaze. A box full of torture implements stood open. Most of the things in the box were small, surgical tools intended to cause pain, not outright kill the victim. But Marcio saw one item in particular that caught his attention. It was about half the length of a baseball bat and nearly as wide around. This item was very familiar to Marcio. He'd seen many a stun stick in his lifetime, usually when a cop was threatening some local, foul-mouthed troublemaker (usually Lyssa) with it.

Marcio picked up the stun stick and turned it on. He stepped around the table to where Danny reclined casually in the uncomfortable-looking chair in his stupid tux. The big goon stood over Danny, guarding the conman. The Stun stick in Marcio's hand made a faint, electric hum that was somehow both comforting and menacing at the same time. He needed to get close enough to Tin Snips to get a clear shot with the weapon.

"Tell me how you stole Mr. Daniau's data in the first place," Marcio tried to sound threatening as he brandished the stun stick in Danny's direction, "or I'm gonna light you up like a thruster on a starhopper."

Danny shrugged and inched away from the end of the gently humming weapon. Though it looked like Danny was afraid of the weapon, Marcio could see that he actually was angling his body slightly out of the way. This allowed Marcio a slightly cleaner shot at Tin Snips. He would only get one try at this, and time was short.

"It wasn't really that hard," Danny said.

"Tell me," Marcio commanded, thrusting the stun stick again at Danny.

Once again, Danny inched slightly away, presenting a larger target of the enforcer behind himself. "You know, if you hit me with that thing, it'll just knock me out and you'll have to wait several minutes before you can ask me any more questions. But I presume that I'd still have some fight left in me. Better hit me twice, just to be sure you take me down."

Marcio immediately took Danny's meaning. The big enforcer, Tin Snips, would take at least two hits from the stun stick to go down for good. Marcio braced himself, knowing that hesitation would be death. He had to strike true.

"I think I'll do that," Marcio said as he lunged the business end of the stun stick at Danny. Just at the last moment, however, he shifted the direction of his thrust and hit the Tin Snips squarely in the stomach. There was an electric POP! and the air was filled with the satisfying smell of ozone as the stun stick fired. The big man doubled over. He was gasping for air and struggling to maintain his feet, but he still had the presence of mind to struggle clumsily for the plasma rifle hanging from his shoulder. Marcio immediately hit the man again and this time he fell to the floor, managing to catch himself on all fours.

"Again!" Danny said.

But Marcio didn't need Danny to tell him that. Letting his panic and adrenaline take control of him, Marcio struck the enforcer a third time and then a fourth time. The third had sent him sprawling unconscious on the floor, and the fourth had been unnecessary. Nevertheless, Marcio was so taken by panic that he was about to strike the man a fifth time when Danny caught his arm with his still-electrocuffed hands. "Stop. You'll kill him."

"So?" Marcio said, surprising even himself. Could he really kill someone? Yes, he felt he could. The thought frightened him.

"So, there's no need. He can't hurt us now."

The irony that Danny of all people was admonishing him against violence was not lost on Marcio, and he called Danny on his hypocrisy. "What about what you did to Mika? I saw her on the camera. Was that necessary, what you did to her?" Marcio still held the stun stick. It would be irrational to stun Danny right now; they needed to get moving if they were going to make the shuttle. Also, Marcio still needed Danny to open the stairwell door if he wanted to get out of the secure zone. But Marcio wasn't feeling particularly rational at this moment and he could tell that Danny saw it in his eyes.

Let him try to talk his way out of this one.

The slimy bottom feeder.

"I Read it in a Book."

Danny

19:20

(1hr, 48mins remaining)

"What about what you did to Mika? I saw her on the camera. Was that necessary, what you did to her?" Marcio still held the stun stick, and Danny could see in his eyes that he was thinking about using it.

Danny held his still-electrocuffed hands up in an open gesture that said, *It's okay. Go easy.* Aloud he said, "Hey, relax, Marcio. That was all an act. She couldn't very well let The Mushroom know she'd been helping me." Danny was pretty sure The Mushroom was suspicious of Mika's story, but Mika had proven such a good actress it was hard not to believe her. "She's more afraid of him than you or I are."

"I don't believe you." But even as he said it, Danny noticed that Marcio lowered the stun stick slightly. He was starting to believe him.

"Honest. I tried to get her to come with us, but she has...*obligations* here."

Marcio wavered a little more. "Wait...Did you? And she...?"

"That's none of your business." Danny held men who brag about their sexual conquests with contempt. A real man had nothing to prove, and therefore no need to brag. "I left her a lifeline. I gave her Mrs. Kundertson's number in case she changes her mind. Now, let's get out of here."

Marcio seemed mostly convinced now. He set the stun stick on the table and picked up the all-important cell phone with the crucial data on it. "You'd better not be lying, Danny."

"I'm not lying. For once."

As Marcio made for the door, Danny crouched down, searched the unconscious goon's pockets until he found the man's security access card. He used the card to release the electrocuffs from his wrists. Next, he scooped up the plasma rifle the man had dropped as he'd fallen to the floor. They might need that rifle to get out of the building.

"We have to hurry," Danny said. "Daniau will be back down here as soon as he realizes his safe is empty."

Marcio grinned as he stood in the door, powering down Mika's cell phone. "We've got a little time."

"Why? What did you do?" Danny asked, suspicious.

"I set up a distraction upstairs."

"What did you do?"

"I made Sky think that I was up in Daniau's office selling him a pack of lies. He came up the front stairs just as before I went down the back stairs. And *just before* Daniau went up there"

"You *what?! That's brilliant.*" Danny could see right away how Sky would rush to get to Daniau's office if he thought Marcio was up there manipulating the boss against him. If Marcio timed it right, Sky would have arrived in Daniau's office just before the boss himself. Probably right about now, Sky was trying to explain why he was in there alone with an empty safe.

"I think I'm a bad influence on you," Danny said as they started to run down the hallway toward the back stairs.

19:22

(it's too late to make the shuttle)

(but screw the shuttle!)

Marcio pushed open the door leading to the back stairwell with Danny close at his heels. He began to take the stairs leading down, but Danny stopped him. "Not that way, we're going up." Danny relished the confusion in the tall, skinny nerd's face.

"What? Why? You need to open the security door and get us out of here. You said you could do it. We need to get to the spaceport, like *NOW!*"

"We'd never make it in time. Besides, the last shuttle has been sold out since before noon. We can't even get on it."

"What? Wait? What?" Marcio was confused and Danny was enjoying every second of it. "Before noon? That was *before* you came into the secure zone."

"Our ride's this way." And with that, Danny took the stairs leading up.

"But you don't mean...? Daniau's plane? Can you fly it? You were planning on taking the plane all along, weren't you?"

Danny made no response, but just kept climbing the stairs. He climbed past the seventeenth floor up to the very end of the stairwell. A security door blocked their way and Danny stopped them just outside of its scanner's range. He checked the plasma rifle he'd taken from the big, dumb ogre they'd left unconscious down in Room 1608. Danny didn't really know much about plasma rifles, but he knew how to make sure the plasma magazine was active. He checked that the safety was off and he knew how to pull the trigger. He hoped that was all it would take to make the gun fire.

Next, Danny pulled from his new tux's breast pocket the security access card he'd taken from the same unconscious goon who'd been so kind as to loan him the plasma rifle. He held the access card out before him as he climbed the last few steps to the door.

The door's security scanner read the card that Danny held up and said cheerfully, "*Access granted! Welcome, Tin Snips.*"

"The guy's name was 'Tin Snips'?" Danny wondered aloud. He looked at the access card and saw the words TIN SNIPS printed on it. Sure enough.

"Yeah, they're all a bunch of tools," Marcio joked.

Danny laughed. "That they are," he agreed. Then, more seriously, "You have the control wand, right?"

"The what?"

"The control wand for The Mushroom's *Fulmine*. Should have been in the safe. Kinda looks like a fat, silver-and-gold ink pen. *Tell me you got that control wand.*"

"Oh! yeah!" Marcio said, sounding relieved. "I didn't know what that thing was, but I grabbed everything in the safe, like you said." Marcio began digging through his backpack and shortly came out with the control wand that would allow Danny to operate the spaceplane.

He offered the control wand to Danny, but Danny shook his head. "You hold on to it for a minute. Don't lose it."

Danny opened the now-unlocked roof access door. He stepped out into the night and onto the rooftop landing platform. There, in the middle of the platform, still on its tie downs, sat the beautiful, sleek, and extremely expensive sportsplane. It looked even more beautiful in the dim light of the landing pad. The small plane was about 8 meters long and its swept wings had a span of only about six meters. It was clearly built for speed. The *Fulmine* only seated four and was the type of multi-million dollar luxury item a man only really needed if he was extremely wealthy, extremely insecure, and extremely compensating.

Presently, a yellow safety light began flashing off to the side of the landing pad. Danny turned and saw a maintenance bot unfolding itself from its docking port. It was the kind that rich people often kept on their private landing platforms to refuel and perform basic maintenance on their planes. The MxBot stood itself up on its six appendages and faced them as Danny held Tin Snips's security ID card out for the bot's inspection. MxBots were typically not programmed with advanced security protocols. If they were lucky, the bot would scan the ID card, assume that Danny was Tin Snips, and then leave them alone. If they weren't lucky, the bot would have security upgrades.

They weren't lucky. The bot scanned the security card and then angled its robotic head to look directly at Danny. Then, it looked directly at Marcio. And then, back at Danny before saying in an a machine's version of an authoritative voice, "*Alert! Face does not match ID. Alert! Identify yourself. Alert!*"

"I'm Tin Snips. I'm in disguise. I have authorization from Mr. Daniau to use his plane." Danny tried to bluff the bot, but the bot seemed to be having none of it.

"Alert! Identify yourself or I will notify security! Alert! You have three seconds to identify yourself! Alert! Two! Aler – "

BANG!

A deafening sound like lightning ripped through the night air as a blinding light erupted from the end of Danny's plasma rifle. The light shot straight out of the rifle's accelerator tube like lightning made straight, which it essentially was. The shot instantly destroyed bot before it could finish its countdown, sound the alarm, or attempt to stop them from accessing the plane. On the other hand, someone was sure to have heard that plasma rifle fire.

The MxBot wasn't shielded. The plasma bolt blew much of the machine's skin right off before frying its internal circuitry and servos. What was left of the bot fell lifelessly to the landing platform's surface while smaller chunks tinked and clanked down all around it.

You just can't reason with machines, Danny thought as he examined the carnage he'd just wrought. He looked down at the powerful plasma rifle. He'd never fired one before. He cocked an eyebrow as he tossed the weapon to the ground.

"I can't even imagine what that thing would do to a person," Marcio said about the discarded rifle.

"Wouldn't be pretty," Danny said. "Come on, somebody's almost surely heard that sound. I doubt if they'll be fooled into thinking it was lightning."

"Right," Marcio said.

"You know how to undo those tie downs?" Danny asked, pointing to the straps securing the plane's underside to the rooftop landing platform.

"I think so, yeah."

"Do it. I'll get the engines started." Danny took the control wand out of Marcio's hand.

As Marcio crouched under the plane's wing to undo the first of the three tie downs, Danny climbed up into the cockpit. He slid the control wand into its receptacle, not missing the sexual implications of the act. Everything about this plane was meant to appeal to rich men who had something to prove.

A second or two after the control wand was in its place, the plane's systems came online. The navigation system began its initialization process as the primary flight displays, multifunction displays, comms panel, and engine displays all came online.

Danny was sure there was checklist somewhere, but checklists were for sissies.

He started the turbines spinning on the No. 1 engine, flipped the igniter switch on, and opened the fuel flow to the engine. The engine started up almost immediately, sending a shudder of seductive power through the airframe and up the control stick between Danny's knees. He repeated this process with the No. 2 engine and then ducted some of the engines' thrust to the vertical

thrusters. Within a half a minute of climbing into the cockpit, Danny had the plane ready to fly. It's amazing how quickly that could be done when you don't mess around with frivolous checklists.

Marcio climbed up into the cockpit's right seat and looked nervously at the array of complicated-looking displays, switches, and controls. "You sure you know how to fly this thing?"

"Kid, relax. I'm an ace pilot," Danny lied as he closed the canopy. It was obvious by the expression on Marcio's face that he was actively willing himself to believe it. Marcio secured the restraint harness and tightened the belts as tight as he could.

That reminded Danny that he should probably strap in too.

As soon as Danny had his safety harness secured, he reached down, grabbed the collective lever beside his seat, and pulled it up too abruptly. Danny felt himself being pulled violently down into his seat and he realized that he'd neglected to activate the inertial stabilizers. A lesser plane than the *Fulmine* might have cracked a spar, but this plane just cheerfully rocketed them straight up from the landing pad.

And not a moment too soon.

As they hurtled vertically upward, Danny noticed another flash of light in the dark sky. The thunderclap bang of the plasma rifle was mostly muffled by the plane's engines and soundproofed interior, but there was no mistaking it. Somebody was shooting a plasma weapon at them.

The Mushroom, Danny realized as he reacted quickly and pushed the control stick too violently forward. He felt himself pushed back into his seat as two more flashes went off around them. Two more bolts of magnetically directed plasma trying to shoot them down. They were sitting ducks while flying slowly on their thrusters. He had to get some airspeed so the plane would fly on its wings. He pushed the main engines' throttles partway forward, dropped the collective almost to the floor, and pitched the nose even farther over. He felt his intestines float up into his sinuses as the plane entered a steep dive right between two buildings. He really wished he'd remembered to turn those inertial stabilizers on before taking off.

Danny barely noticed Marcio screaming like a little girl in the right seat.

As the plane dropped back down past the rooftop landing platform of the Paradox Hotel, Danny caught just the quickest glimpse of *The Mushroom* himself before another bright light from a plasma rifle nearly blinded him. This plasma bolt hit them.

Alarms sounded and annunciators illuminated all over the control panel, but Danny had no idea what most of them meant. He did recognize that the the engine display indicated that the vertical thruster under the left wing had been hit and was now offline. Without its left thruster, the plane banked steeply to the left. They would have careened into a building, but the dive had produced just enough airspeed for the ailerons to begin to have some effect. Danny was barely able to hold the plane in the air and out of the side of the building. He advanced the main throttles farther and began

pulling the nose up, away from the rapidly approaching street and away from the gawking pedestrians hoping to see a plane crash.

By the time Danny got the plane more fully under control, he was several blocks from the Paradox illegally flying between buildings. He retarded the throttles and banked the plane hard around a building to break any line of sight between The Mushroom and themselves.

As he made the tight turn, the control stick began to shake in his hand. Had Danny been a real pilot, he would have recognized that shaking as the activation of the "stick shaker," a device meant to warn the pilot of an imminent aerodynamic stall. In other words, the plane was dangerously close to flying too slowly for the wings to continue to produce lift.

But Danny was no real pilot. Had Danny been a real pilot, he would have shut down the vertical thrusters now that he was flying aerodynamically, but Danny just left them running at idle. Had Danny been a real pilot, he would have remembered the inertial stabilizers and he would have remembered to retract the landing gear. Were he a real pilot, he would have understood the value of a checklist.

The stick shaker continued to try to warn Danny of the imminent stall as he and Marcio were pulled down in their seats by the G forces. Marcio continued to scream like a little girl. It was luck, and not skill, that kept the plane from stalling.

Danny righted the plane between the buildings as the airspeed began to build away from the edge of disaster. Through all the buildings ahead, he could see the light of one of Distortion's moons reflecting on the surface of the ocean, so he made for that. He would have to accelerate the plane skyward if he wanted to escape Distortion's gravity and intercept the *Twilight Elegance*, but first he wanted to get away from the city and out over the open water. If he got them killed, there was no reason to squash a bunch of innocent people on the ground.

"*Fulmine Six-Three-One-Papa-Hotel!*" came a man's voice over the plane's communications panel. "You are flying illegally! Climb and maintain one thousand meters, heading two-eight-zero and advise when ready to copy a number."

Danny was pretty sure air traffic control wasn't happy with him, so he just switched the comms panel off.

Soon they cleared the edge of the Harvest Junction flotilla and were over the open ocean. Military interceptors would likely be along soon, Danny assumed. If he didn't want to get shot down by whatever weekend warriors passed for a military here on Distortion, he needed to get the plane off the planet soon.

Marcio had finally quit screaming like a little girl, and he was now mostly not hyperventilating. "You nearly got us killed! Where did you learn to fly?!" Marcio demanded.

"I read it in a book."

"WHAT?! You mean you've never flown before?"

"I've flown hundreds of times." Danny had flown four times.

"Tell me you know how to escape a planet's gravity properly!"

"Done it dozens of times." Danny had never done it before, but he was reasonably sure they wouldn't burn up or disintegrate. Probably. How hard could it be? Just point the nose towards the sky and push the throttles, right?

One way to find out.

Before Marcio could complain any more, Danny pulled the stick back and pushed the main engines' throttles full forward. As he sank back into his seat, he realized that he still hadn't switched on the inertial stabilizers. Now that they weren't being shot at, he had time to reach up and flip the switch on the overhead panel. Were Danny a real pilot, he would have realized that the two remaining vertical thrusters were still running at idle, that the landing gear was still down, and that the No. 1 engine shouldn't be shaking like that.

Danny held the nose pitch at 90° from the horizon and he held the throttles full forward as both the altitude tape and the airspeed tape on the Primary Flight Display continued to climb. Danny made no attempt to execute a roll program, because what is orbit again?

As they passed 20,000 meters, Danny noticed the plane shaking violently. Before he could figure out what it was, there was a sudden bang and then the shaking was gone. The multifunction display switched automatically to the landing gear system readout. Danny noticed a red X superimposed over the icon for the left main landing gear.

Marcio noticed it too. "Is that what I think it is? Did we just lose a landing gear? Shouldn't you have retracted those?"

"I was a little busy getting shot at, if you remember."

"We'll need that to land on the starhopper, won't we?"

"It's okay. We can just use the vertical thrusters to set down gently on the deck."

"Can you land on only two thrusters?"

Crap. Danny was hoping that Marcio hadn't noticed the loss of the left thruster. Without all three thrusters, a vertical landing would be impossible and without the landing gear, a normal aerodynamic landing would be...*interesting*. "Uh... We *might* have to crash land on the starhopper's runway."

"CRASH LAND?! Are you serious?! 'Crash landing' is just what pilots say when they don't want to admit they crashed."

Danny just shrugged and flipped the gear lever into the UP position. The two remaining landing gear retracted into the plane's underside. "Then we'll have to crash. If you'd rather, I can just take you back and drop you off at the Paradox." Danny was really getting tired of Marcio's complaining.

"I'm never flying with you again," Marcio said.

Such ingratitude.

It was at this time that the shaking from the No. 1 engine began to become more pronounced, causing Danny to notice it for the first time. Danny flipped the multifunction display back from the landing gear system to the engines. He checked the No. 1 engine on the left wing and found that something called the "S/T compressor" was damaged and overheating.

That sounded serious.

Danny did the only thing he could think to do and just flipped the display back to another screen. Out of sight, out of mind. Likely the same plasma rifle blast that had destroyed the left thruster had also damaged the left main landing gear and done whatever was wrong with the engine. Marcio said nothing, but Danny could tell he too had noticed the damage with one of their two main engines.

Danny noticed their speed was 56,000 km per hour. He wondered if that was fast enough to escape the planet's gravity. A real pilot would have known that escape velocity for a planet the mass of Distortion was around 41,000 km/h and would have throttled the engines back to reduce strain on the damaged No. 1 engine. But Danny just kept both throttles pegged.

At a certain point, the altimeter tape flipped over to read in kilometers rather than meters. As they passed 100 km, they were high enough that they could see the massive, red sun over the curved western horizon. This created the strange optical illusion that the red giant was rising in the west. They climbed past 200 km of altitude and kept climbing. At about 250 km, Danny was pretty sure they'd officially escaped the planet's gravity and he decided that once they reached 300 km, he'd throttle the engines back.

He should have throttled them back right then. He should have throttled the engines back long before that point. The No. 1 engine held on until about 280 km of altitude. There was a sudden violent shaking from that engine. Danny had just enough time to look over his left shoulder and witness the engine shake itself to pieces. The catastrophic failure of the engine sent pieces of engine and wing flying out into the void of space. Flames ballooned out, strangely orb-like in the zero g of space for a moment before the lack of oxygen smothered them. Alarms and klaxons of all kinds sounded in the cockpit, but Danny didn't know what actions to take so he just silenced the alarms. He did think to pull the fire extinguisher for the No. 1 engine from the overhead panel, but only because the handle itself started flashing bright red with the word FIRE!

He pulled the throttles back to idle and the one remaining engine responded by idling down and purring like a well-tuned machine. At least they still had that engine. It could always be worse.

"S—So, how screwed are we?" Marcio asked. It was plain they were almost entirely screwed.

"Ah, we're good. This happens all the time."

Marcio crossed himself.

Danny checked back over his shoulder at what remained of the left wing to make sure the fire was out. The wreckage was encased in white fire-retardant foam from the fire extinguisher he'd just pulled, but showed no signs of continued burn.

Now Danny decided he'd better find the starhopper. A pilot would have known to just push the NAV button beside the multifunction display, but Danny just paged through the MFD's many pages until he found the navigation page. Then, he entered the *Twilight Elegance's* callsign into the nav computer. A second later, the MFD displayed the bearing he needed to fly to intercept the starhopper as well as its speed and heading.

Danny turned the *Fulmine* onto the intercept heading. The once sprightly little sportsplane now handled like an old battleship. Danny guessed that some of the maneuvering thrusters had been damaged when the engine had blown. He pushed the throttle of the one remaining engine almost all the way forward. Normally even a terrible pilot like Danny wouldn't ask their one remaining engine to work that hard, but Danny knew that if they were going to catch the starhopper before it slipped into transtachyonic flight, they needed to hurry. That engine was going to have to do the work of two.

A real pilot would have let the autopilot steer the plane, but Danny didn't know how to work the autopilot, so he manually flew the entire two hours of the flight.

Crash "Landing"

Danny

21:45

(on approach to the *Twilight Elegance*)

Danny was exhausted by the time they came in sight of the *Twilight Elegance*. He couldn't wait to get aboard the ship, find a quiet bar, and get a drink. Because he had no idea how the autopilot worked on the *Fulmine*, he'd been forced to hand fly the plane the entire way from the planet to the starhopper intercept. But now, the the *Twilight Elegance* was within visual range. They were almost there.

Starhoppers were generally about a tenth the size of the biggest space stations like Gonaways Station. On a ship like the *Twilight Elegance*, tens of thousands of people lived and worked. They made their living ferrying passengers and cargo across the vast spaces between settled worlds at transtachyonic speeds.

Like most such starhoppers, the *Twilight Elegance* was shaped like an oil drum turned on its side and impaled lengthwise by a rocket. The outer walls of the drum spun as the huge ship travelled, producing cheap and comfortable spin gravity for the human workers and passengers aboard. Up the center of the drum and protruding from both ends was the rocket-like, working part of the ship, known as "the spire." At the forward end of the spire, was the bridge, and at the aft end, the engineering section and the gigantic engine clusters. Along the middle of this central spire were the ship's two quantum reactors, the onboard spaceport, and the enormous arrays of transtachyonic field generators. All around the central spire and within the rotating drum were thousands upon thousands of shipping containers secured to the central spire itself and to one another, creating a vast, interlocking cluster of paid cargo bound for some stop along the ship's route.

Though it wasn't scheduled to enter transtach for another couple of hours, the *Twilight Elegance* was already aligning itself towards its intended destination. Its engines were still producing thrust, but soon the huge engines' output would be redirected to begin charging the ship's array of transtachyonic field generators. Without the TFGs, transtach flight wouldn't be possible.

The *Fulmine's* navigation computer was giving Danny a vector to fly which would align him with the starhopper's internal runway.

"Don't we need clearance to land or something?" Marcio asked.

"Yeah, probably." Danny switched the comms panel back on. He'd turned it off before they'd even left the city of Harvest Junction and hadn't given it another thought. As soon as he'd turned the comms panel on, a message came up on the panel display:

CONTACT
TWILIGHT ELEGANCE
APPROACH CTRL?
YES – NO

The *Fulmine's* computer had intuited what Danny wanted. Even half destroyed, it was a nice plane. Danny tapped YES on the touchscreen display and was instantly greeted by the voice of an annoyed-sounding space traffic controller.

"—again. *Fulmine* six-three-one Papa Hotel, if you are on frequency, squawk ident or state intentions. You ARE NOT authorized to land Twilight Elegance."

"Is she talking to us," Marcio asked.

"I guess." Danny noticed a discreet placard mounted above the comms panel which read 631PH. Yup, she was talking to them, alright. He pressed the black XMT button on the control stick and addressed the space traffic controller. "This is six-thirty-one-P-H. We need to land on the Twilight Elegance."

"Six-three-one Papa Hotel, be advised I do not have a flight plan for you. You'll have to return to Distortion. Remain clear."

"Um, I'm unable to return. We lost an engine, a landing gear, and a vertical thruster. We need to land. It's an emergency." Danny didn't know it, but he'd just used two of the magic words: "unable" and "emergency." This put the controller in a tricky spot.

When she came back on the frequency, she was much more accommodating, but also much more annoyed. "Six-three-one Papa Hotel, cleared for emergency landing, number one, onboard spaceport landing pad four."

"Um, six-thirty-one-P-H can't land vertically with only two thrusters. We're going to need to use the runway. Also, we only have two landing gear, one engine, and only one and a half wings."

"You what?" The controller couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Danny repeated what he'd just said.

"Six-three-one Papa Hotel, cleared to land, number one, onboard spaceport runway. We're rolling the equipment."

"Okay, thanks." Danny had no idea how to read back a landing clearance or what she meant by "rolling the equipment. He was more worried about the approach he was about to have to fly. He was going to have to fly directly up the starhopper's butt end right between the trust plumes of the huge ship's engines. A real pilot could fly the approach easily enough, but Danny gave their chances

70/30 that they would either make it or be crushed by the distorted spacetime of the starhopper's thrust plumes. But, he'd faced worse odds today.

Jordan Yamazaki

Jordan Yamazaki sat on the hood of her tug about forty meters or so from the edge of the runway. She had worked on starhoppers all her life. Her parents had worked on the enormous ships and she'd grown up on them. At age 47, Jordan was beginning to think she had seen all there was to be seen in a spacefaring life.

She had worked the ramp and driven a tug on the *Twilight Elegance's* internal spaceport for over ten years now and she'd seen distressed planes come in before. She'd seen the equipment roll out, she'd seen all the flashing lights of the fire engine and the ambulance before. Every time a plane came in distressed, it was always a bunch of buildup that always turned out to be no big deal. The pilots of spaceplanes might be a rough and rowdy bunch, but they usually knew what they were doing at the controls of their planes. This one coming in would be no different, she was sure. There might be a few tense moments, maybe even a few sparks, but ultimately the plane would land safe and sound. She would hook her tug up to the stricken plane and tow it to its parking spot on the ramp where she would tie it down.

But then the plane came into view beyond the vaguely rippling containment field which held the spaceport's air in against the vacuum beyond. She knew right away that this was going to be a good show. Rather than flying a normal, stabilized approach, this plane was all over the approach course. A couple of times, the pilot nearly strayed into the starhopper's thrust plumes. Those thrust plumes were compressed space/time. The gravimetric shearing of those plumes would smear that little plane across the vacuum like butter on toast.

Is that pilot drunk? Jordan wondered. She knew that most spaceplane pilots were alcoholic, cowboy types, but most remained reasonably sober in the cockpit.

The real excitement started when the plane crossed the containment field and entered the atmosphere of the *Twilight Elegance's* onboard spaceport. As soon as the plane hit the wind resistance of the ship's internal atmosphere, the pilot nearly lost control. The wind ripped several chunks off of what remained of the left wing. The plane banked sharply to the left and nearly smacked down hard on the runway, but the pilot got it under control.

It was about then that Jordan noticed that the gear was still up. This was going to be good. These idiots were going to die.

The plane tried to roll left again, but this time the pilot over-corrected and the right wing struck the runway. Some portion of the right wing sheered off and the plane began cartwheeling down the

runway. Now pieces were flying off of the plane as if even the plane's own parts knew to abandon ship.

After several cartwheel tumbles, the remains of the fuselage smacked down hard and began sliding along the runway. There were more sparks than Jordan had ever seen in her life, and then the inevitable happened. The fuel tanks ruptured, the sparks ignited the fuel, and the plane erupted into a massive fireball. The fireball lifted the wreckage off the runway for one brief, final flight before it slammed back to the deck and careened down the remainder of the runway. The once-expensive plane finally came to a violent stop as it smacked hard against the crash wall at the end of the runway.

Sitting on the hood of her tug forty meters away from the fireball, Jordan could feel the intense heat. She raised her hand against the heat, covering her face. No way did anybody survive that. She didn't care how good the cockpit safety features were on those fancy planes. Those guys would look like biocurd jerky when they were eventually pulled out of that wreckage.

The fire engines rolled in first and began dowsing the scene with flame retardant foam. Soon the fire was out and the blackened wreckage was dripping with white foam. Now that it was safe to approach, Jordan got into the driver's seat of her tug and drove up to the crash scene. They would need her to drag the wreckage off the runway as soon as possible. There was only one runway and other planes needed to use it. The death of some idiots wouldn't delay the *Twilight Elegance's* pursuit of commerce.

She nosed her tug up to within a meter or so of the wrecked plane. A couple of the firefighters immediately grabbed some chains and began securing the wreckage to the front of Jordan's tug. Jordan watched as one firefighter climbed up onto what was left of the cockpit section and tried to peer through the fire-blackened crystalanium canopy. The firefighter shrugged at his fellows and then shouted "FIRE IN THE HOLE!"

Jordan was already wearing her earplugs (as was required of anyone who worked on the ramp), but she covered her ears for extra protection. She had seen emergency releases pulled before and she knew how loud the exploding bolts would be. The firefighter pulled a lever on the outside of the wrecked cockpit. Jordan felt the *BANG!* as much as she heard it. The spaceplane's canopy went flying up into the air and several firefighters had to scramble out of its way as it came crashing back down to the runway.

And just as Jordan thought she had seen the most remarkable thing she would see that night, what she saw next was truly astonishing.

A tall, handsome man with long, black hair and wearing (of all things) a slightly ill-fitting tuxedo stood up. He thanked the firefighter who'd just liberated him from the wreckage and then jumped

down confidently to the runway deck. He straightened his bowtie as he strutted over to where Jordan sat in the driver's seat of her tug.

"Excuse me, ma'am," the tall, broad-shouldered, young man said to Jordan, "but do you know where I could get a good drink around here?"

"Um... Uh, yeah." Jordan had to struggle to make her words. God, he was fine! Finally, she was able to direct him to a ritzy bar in Alpha section of the habitation ring where his tuxedo would fit right in.

"Thanks," the man said. He then handed her a very fancy silver-and-gold control wand. "Park it in a good spot, would you?"

"Okay," was all she could think to say as he swaggered away. She was watching him go. He looked good in that tux, even if it was obviously second-hand.

It was at this point that she noticed another man had also emerged from the wreckage. In complete contrast to his compatriot, this man was dressed like a complete dork with a cheap button-down shirt. He had a backpack on his back and he was crying and kissing the decking of the runway. The firefighters looked on in disgust and Jordan was pretty sure her face looked much the same as theirs did.

The Liberation Paradox

Danny

22:15 (Distortion Time)

14:39 (*Twilight Elegance* ship time)

Danny had followed the tug driver's directions to a fancy, high-end bar called "The Twilight Club" on the starhopper's habitation ring. No one had stopped him, as in his new tux, he looked every bit the man of influence and sophistication. He looked like the type of douchebag who would crash a multimillion dollar spaceplane in a tuxedo and then ask where he could find a drink.

Danny had left both Mika's cell phone and the backpack with the safe's contents with Marcio. So confident was Danny in the read he'd gotten from Marcio, that he *knew* Marcio's innate honesty and need for guidance would cause him to follow Danny here. Indeed, Danny was only in the bar for a few minutes, sipping a brandy in a quiet, back booth, when the maître d' approached him about some man who was trying to get into the club. The man insisted that Danny knew him.

"Is he tall, skinny, with curly hair and bad taste in clothes?"

"I believe that may be the gentleman, sir," the maître d' answered.

"Is he carrying a backpack?"

"Yes, sir. He...is."

"Then in that case, I do know him. Please show him back and get him a drink on me."

A few minutes later, Marcio sat across the table from Danny sipping a cup of coffee. Marcio was wearing a black suit jacket which Danny assumed the Twilight Club had loaned him as a condition of entry. He passed Danny the backpack and Danny unzipped it slightly to make sure the money was still within. He had no idea what all the holostamped documents were, but he didn't want to examine them here. They would get staterooms on the ship and once he was in private, Danny would examine the documents, count the money, and look at the stolen accounting data he'd copied to the button drive sewn to his shirt.

Danny removed from the backpack the cigar box that had been in the safe. He cracked the lid, confirmed its contents, and then passed it across the table to Marcio. "This is for you."

Marcio opened the box, looked inside, and then slammed the lid shut. He slid the box back across the table at Danny. "You're a sick man!" Marcio said a little too loudly. Several of the club's other patrons glanced their way.

Danny laughed as he pushed the box aside. The box contained Eddie "The Mushroom" Daniau's notorious "mushroom" collection. Marcio stared at the box in revulsion and then shuddered.

Shortly thereafter, the *Twilight Elegance's* chief of security and no less a figure than the captain herself appeared at their table. They asked several questions about the "accident" on the runway. They seemed eager to sweep the incident aside. At first, Danny didn't know why, but then it quickly became apparent to him. Since the plane that he'd crashed belonged to the wealthy and influential gangster, Eddie Daniau, and since Danny looked like a man of wealth and influence in his new tuxedo, they had just assumed that *he* must be Eddie Daniau. What's more, when Danny offered to pay for the damages to the spaceport, the captain informed him that she'd already charged the damages against his corporate account on file. Apparently, The Mushroom routinely shipped freight on the *Twilight Elegance* and therefore had an account with the ship.

Danny knew an opportunity when he saw one. He thanked the captain for her wonderful help and ordered two first class suites, one for himself and one for Marcio. He charged them both against The Mushroom's account.

Once the captain and the security chief were gone, Danny instructed the maître d' to charge their bar tab against the same account and then he ordered two steaks, made of real-cow, not that vat-grown, formed-paste garbage. Marcio had never tasted real-cow before, but he refused to eat until the "mushroom collection" was off the table. Danny excused himself to the Men's room and dropped the box and all its contents into the recycler.

When he returned, their food had arrived. Marcio sat with a bite of the very expensive meat on his fork, scrutinizing it like some scientist who's just discovered a new species. Cows don't live in space. Though beef is a common enough food item planetside, people who live on starhoppers and space stations usually live their entire lives without ever savoring the taste of real-cow. In space, only the wealthy ever got to savor a good steak. As Danny sat down, Marcio seemed to decide that the meat was safe to eat. He put the bite of steak timidly into his mouth and began chewing it contemplatively.

Danny had eaten real-cow several times in his life, though never on his own dime. He didn't share Marcio's reservations about the meat. Danny just sat down and began eating in small bites, the better to savor the meal.

After Marcio had taken a few more bites, he remarked, "I think I like the vat-grown beef better. It doesn't have all these chewy bits and grease."

"Vacuum-dwelling, uncivilized barbarian," Danny said dismissively. "The grease is what makes it taste so good, and the chewy bits are called gristle. You're not supposed to eat them."

Marcio spat out a bite of half-chewed gristle onto his plate. Danny looked around to see if anyone had noticed Marcio's terrible table manners. "If we're going to keep working together, I'm really going to have to teach you how to fit in better with your surroundings."

"What? No. No way am I going to work with you again."

"Why not? Didn't I get you and your data safely aboard the starhopper, just as promised?"

"You nearly got me killed! I'm not sure who's more dangerous, you or Eddie Daniau! You're possibly the worst pilot I've ever seen! And what was wrong with the original plan? Why did you let Daniau catch you? It woulda been much safer to let Sky take the fall. That *was* the plan, remember?"

Danny took another bite of steak and allowed himself a long moment to savor it before he answered. "Nope, that was never the plan. That was just what I *told* you the plan was. I sometimes tell lies."

"No shit, you tell lies! That's the truest thing you've said all day. But why didn't we do that plan? It would have been much safer for us to use the backdoor – which I very laboriously hacked into Sky's data pad, by the way – and plant the data on there. It was a good plan. It woulda drawn suspicion away from me."

"It never would've worked. And it was riskier than you realize. Sky probably had monitoring programs on the server that would have alerted him to any outside attempt to access the proxy network or move data around. Sky's just paranoid like that. Also, The Mushroom would never have fallen for that. Too obvious of a frame up job. He'd have been suspicious of all of you in the server room and he'd have had you all detained."

Marcio pondered all of this, his expensive meal cooling and forgotten before him. Danny took another bite of his real-cow steak and allowed himself another long moment of silence to savor the meat. The steaks had been frozen, but they were still delicious.

"Besides," Danny continued after the long silence, "you should be thanking me for not going with that plan." Danny smirked mischievously across the table at Marcio. "I won't deny that I considered it. As long as I was able to get a copy of the data to Beau Tie, my contract would have been fulfilled. I could have just copied the data and left, free and clear."

"...and left me to die," Marcio spoke the part that Danny had left unspoken.

"...and left you to die," Danny agreed. "Beau Tie doesn't care about you. He just wants the data."

"You didn't do it out of kindness," Marcio said. "You needed me. Without my QSP, you wouldn't-a been able to get that safe open on your own. All you'd've gotten paid was the \$25,000 from the Boaters. What is it that we – I – took out of the safe? \$100,000?" Marcio nodded to the lumpy backpack stuffed full of cash.

"Closer to \$300,000," Danny said as Marcio's eyes widened. "And Beau Tie agreed to pay \$50,000 all up front." Danny made no mention of the extremely valuable favor the Boaters organization now owed him personally. That was perhaps the most valuable thing he'd gotten from this whole job today. He would keep that one under his hat.

Marcio's eyes now narrowed as realization dawned on him. "\$50,000? You went behind my back and negotiated your own deal with Beau Tie?"

"Of course. Beau Tie was expecting my counter offer. He never expected me to actually take that lowball offer he quoted to you."

Marcio was getting angry now. "You haggled over the price of my life. I'm just a pawn to you and Beau Tie, aren't I?"

"To Beau Tie: of course you're just a pawn. To me: no," was all Danny said as he took another bite of his real-cow steak. He made no mention of his plans to recruit Marcio to his favorite cause, self-enrichment. Marcio had already made it clear that he had no intention to work with Danny ever again, but Danny knew that would change. Marcio would change his attitude once he came to understand the real nature of his own relationship with the Boaters. Danny had told him earlier: once the Boaters have you by the balls, they never let go. Marcio was a Boater for life now, whether he wore the douchey boater hat or not.

But of course Danny said none of this. Doing so would only strengthen Marcio's cognitive dissonance against the realization of his own debt bondage. Better just to let the realization sink in gradually.

"So you planned to be captured all along?" Marcio asked. "That's a stupid and risky plan. What if Daniau had just killed you right away? What if I didn't figure out what you wanted me to do? Your plan left too many variables unaccounted for."

Danny finished chewing the bite of savory steak in his mouth and swallowed before answering. "And yet, here we are. Daniau would never have killed me right away. He would have wanted to torture me first. I had hours before he was going to kill me or even seriously injure me.

"Also, I knew you were a smart guy. I knew you would figure it out before it was too late. I knew you would make some lame excuse to get out of the server room, maybe go back to your room and probably contemplate suicide. But in the end, I knew you'd figure it out and come rescue me. As I said earlier: 'You hack the computers, and I'll hack the people!'"

Marcio looked shocked. Danny guessed he'd hit pretty close to the truth.

"Well what if I'd offed myself before I figured out that you wanted me to go to the safe? I'd be dead right now, and you'd still be in Daniau's murder room getting ripped apart. And why not just tell me that was the plan all along?"

Danny casually took another bite of his steak, chewed it slowly, and swallowed before answering. "If I'd have told you, that was my intended plan, you'd never have gone along with it." Danny paused to allow Marcio a moment to realize he was right. "As for you offing yourself: never happen. You don't have it in you to take your own life—probably the life of another, but not your own. Your need, your *fulcrum*, is your own survival. You want to live for yourself and for your sister. You'd never be able to actually kill yourself. You'd be looking for a way to escape and survive even as The Mushroom tortured you. I got a good read on you. Remember, I hack people just like you hack computers, and people are even more predictable."

"Hmph!" Marcio said sullenly. On some level, he clearly knew Danny was right, but Marcio seemed reluctant to give him the satisfaction of saying it.

After that, they sat in silence as they finished their \$500 real-cow steaks. They had a couple more drinks as they discussed lighter topics, just to clear the air between them. Eventually, each man retired to his own expansive and comfortable suite, courtesy of Eddie Daniau's corporate account.

Danny had started the day naked in an alleyway and now tonight he would sleep naked between silk sheets and rest his head on a real feather pillow. It was nice of The Mushroom to pick up the tab after trying to kill them and all.

Danny

Alone in his suite, Danny enjoyed a very fine cigar (courtesy of The Mushroom's corporate account) as he finally took the time to look over the holostamped papers from The Mushroom's safe. He'd had no way of knowing what the documents would turn out to be and he had really been more interested in the cash. But as he looked over the documents, it dawned on him pretty quickly what they were. He had seen a document like these before.

He put his shoes back on and crushed out the cigar in the ashtray. He headed out to find a consumer goods store on the promenade. Danny's body clock was still on Distortion time and even though it felt very late in the evening to him, it was only midafternoon on the *Twilight Elegance*. The starhopper's promenade was open for business and bustling. Danny found a store and purchased a new data terminal against The Mushroom's account.

He took the new data terminal back to his suite, set it up, and downloaded the data from his button drive onto it. He entered Marcio's terrible password, "Clovis," into the encryption system and it unlocked.

Danny spent the next several hours pouring over the data, any thought of cigars, silk sheets, or even sleep now forgotten. He was even less an accountant than he was a pilot, so the going was slow, but finally he found an entry in the data for something called "S.P.O.B." The entry had a dollar amount and an account number associated with it.

Danny had heard the acronym S.P.O.B. before. He leafed through the stack of holostamped documents Marcio had liberated from The Mushroom's safe. He finally found a document with a serial number that matched the account number of the S.P.O.B. It now became very clear to him what the Boaters wanted with this accounting data.

The *Twilight Elegance* was now in transtach. While a ship is in transtachyonic flight, it basically exists in a tiny pocket universe, completely isolated from the main universe. That meant, among other things, that there were no external communications. Danny couldn't call off the ship, but the phone in his room would work to call other parts of the ship. He dialed Marcio's room number.

The phone rang only once before Marcio picked it up. "Danny? What's going on?"

Marcio sounded wide awake. No doubt he'd also gone down to the promenade and purchased a data terminal on The Mushroom's account. And no doubt he was also pouring over the accounting data.

"Come to my room. Bring your data terminal and your copy of the data."

"Wait, how do you know I have a terminal? And what do you mean 'my copy' of the data? Did you duplicate the data? You jerk! You did, didn't you? I should have known!" Marcio was piecing it together in real time, but he was missing the big picture.

Danny told him so. "You're figuring it out, but you're missing the big picture, kid. Have you come across something called S.P.O.B.?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

"Do you know what that is?"

"Uh, it appears to be the primary investment that the Paradoxes have based their entire financial strategy around for the next ten years."

"Yes, but do you know what it is, exactly?"

"No. Some kind of commodity, I guess."

"What we stole today, that big pile of money, was nothing. Bring your terminal and come over. We need to talk. We need to plan."

"No. I told you already: *no way* am I making any more plans with you. I'm done with you. I'm going to go back to Gonaways. I'm going to deliver the data and hope I survive whatever the next assignment is Beau Tie sends me on. Once I'm done with that one, I'll have paid back the two favors I owe the Boaters. I'll be free of them and you."

"I told you, kid. The Boaters trade in favors. Once you owe them, you never get out of debt. They own you. Besides, you owe them three favors."

"How do you figure that?"

"It's not how I figure it; it's how Beau Tie figures it. And that's what matters. You remember asking Beau Tie to pay me to come into the Paradox and save you?"

Silence on the other end as the reality of what Danny was saying finally hit Marcio. All of this had been for nothing. He had owed the Boaters two favors when he'd left Gonaways for Distortion three months ago and now he owed them three. Once he delivered the data, he'd be back down to two. Right back where he'd started.

"Furthermore, weren't you supposed to gather data on the Paradoxes for six months? What do you have, three months' worth of data? I wonder if Beau Tie will round up and even consider *this* favor repaid..." Though Marcio was completely silent on his end, Danny could feel the rage coming through the phone. "The only way you'll ever be free of them, of their little game, is if you win the game. But the game's rigged against you. The more you play, the more the house wins. That's the paradox: how do you win your liberty from a game that's impossible to win?"

Marcio remained silent on the other end. Danny knew that Marcio wanted to cry and rage and escape into his datasphere fantasy world all at the same time.

Danny continued, "I propose an alternative way to play the game: we flip the game table. We cheat. Only losers play by the rules. Come by and we can talk about what S.P.O.B.s are. I think you'll find it very informative, Marcio."

Marcio hung up the phone without another word.

A full fifteen minutes passed before the doorbell rang.

Epilogue: Eighteen Years Later

Fatima Valentine

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: Backwater

Planet: Promisedland

Town: Catfish City

Today was a hard day for Fatima Valentine. She was saying goodbye to her son, Danny.

No, not Danny, she reminded herself. He insisted on being called "Dan" now. A man's name.

Much as it broke her heart, Fatima had to admit that "Dan" was almost a man now. Her sweet, little boy was nearly all grown up. Nearly.

He looked so much like his father. He was tall and broad-shouldered like his father had been. He had his father's toffee-colored skin, his father's high, sharp cheekbones, and his father's laser-straight, black hair. Unlike his father, who'd worn his luxurious hair long, Dan kept his cropped short. Dan was nearly a clone of his father, except that he'd inherited Fatima's blue eyes. In her opinion, her son was even more handsome than his father had been. But as his mother, she might be biased.

Fatima had named Dan after his father, a man with whom she'd spent only a single afternoon so many years ago. She'd only known the man named Danny Jake for that one afternoon, and she'd only slept with him to spite the man who was nominally her boyfriend at the time. But to her surprise, Danny Jake had given her so much she felt she'd never be able to repay him. He'd given her kindness. He'd given her a way out of her situation, the number of an old woman named Mrs. Kundertson. Most of all, Danny Jake had given her the greatest treasure of all: her son.

She'd called herself by the name Mika Claire back then. It was the name she'd been born with, but to her, that name symbolized a life lived which was not her own. Casting off that name, she'd cast off the string of men who'd owned her in one way or another.

She doubted if she'd ever have called Mrs. Kundertson's number if she hadn't gotten pregnant. She would probably have stayed with Eddie Daniau until he'd either killed her or sent her back to her father's mainland farm where she'd been born. But the baby growing inside her had changed the equation.

What would Eddie do if the baby turned out not to be his own? Eddie would insist on a paternity test. Fatima — *Mika*, as she'd been then — was almost certain, with that irrational certainty with which

mothers know such things, that Danny Jake was the baby's father. She'd needed to get out. She'd needed to get away from the man who would almost certainly kill her when he found out. She was pretty sure he already suspected.

She'd been in love with a woman named Jen back then. When she'd asked Jen to flee Distortion with her, Jen had refused to come. Jen had cared more about her own comfortable life as the wife of a senator. Mika had been devastated, but she couldn't look back at what she'd shared with Jen. She had to look forward. She had to keep her eyes on the future, and for her the future was the baby inside her.

Forget Jen and fuck Eddie.

So, Mika had called Mrs. Kundertson's number and left a voice message. "Hi, Mrs. Kundertson. Sorry, I know you don't know me, but my name is Mika Claire. I'm in a difficult spot and a friend gave me your number. He said you might be able to help me out. Please call me back. Thanks." With that, Mika had ended the call.

The enigmatic Mrs. Kundertson had never returned her call, and they'd never met. The old woman, whomever she was, had sent agents who'd essentially abducted Mika. They'd scared her at first, but once she understood who they were, she went with them willingly.

These agents of Mrs. Kundertson's had gotten her private passage off of Distortion, a new identity, and even some money to get herself started in her new life. The mysterious Mrs. Kundertson had come through for her after all.

And she'd lived a happy life all these years since. Mrs. Kundertson's hired muscle had escorted her to a small backwater settlement called Catfish City on a planet called Promisedland. The small town of Catfish City was in the tenebricite shadow, so no complex electronics worked here. People here relied on horse and wind and their own labor to get things done. The occasional steamboat churning its way up the Great Catfish Lake or the rare rumble of an airplane's internal combustion engine were the closest things to advanced technology around here. It was much like the town she'd grown up in on the mainland of Distortion. Fatima, as her name now was, had never heard of this place and that was probably what made it a good place to hide.

Fatima had considered leaving Catfish City after the baby was born, but by then she'd become a part of the community. She decided to stay there and put down roots. She'd married a fisherwoman named Ayako Cooper and in the intervening years, Fatima had gotten *very* good at cooking catfish.

She'd watched her son, Dan, grow into the man he now nearly was. He'd always loved airplanes. When he was a little boy, he'd carved airplanes out of wood. Later, he'd made actual flying models with windup springs to power their lovingly carved propellers. Fatima had been obliged to buy her son a subscription to the *Aviator's Guild Journal*. At first, he'd only flipped through it, looking at the

illustrations and pictures of planes and engines. He'd cut those pictures out and decorated the walls of his bedroom with them.

As time went on, he'd started to actually read the articles in the journal. At first, he'd read the narrative stories written by pilots celebrating their own exploits. Later, he'd begun reading the more technical articles about the complex minutia of airplane construction, design, and operation.

By the time Dan was 13, he had his heart set on an a life in the sky. It had been difficult, but Fatima had eventually consented to allow him to take an apprenticeship with a local aviator. It had scared her to death every time Dan had flown away with his instructor, ferrying mail, cargo, and the occasional passenger out to Shallasea. But Dan always came back to her.

After today, however, he might never come back. He was a Senior Aviator with the guild now. Rather than pursuing the rank of Master, Dan had decided to go to spaceplane school at the guild's Darklands headquarters on Home Hearth Station. He would make his living not in the sky of Promisedland, but in the stars above. Who knew when he'd be back to lowly Catfish City. Perhaps never.

Fatima didn't cry when she'd held Dan one last time. She didn't cry as they'd said their goodbyes. She didn't cry when he'd walked across the grass runway of the local airstrip to the waiting biplane. She didn't cry as the slipstream from the plane's idling propeller had trailed his scarf out behind him.

She managed not to cry as Dan pulled his leather helmet down over his father's luxurious hair and she held her tears as he put his goggles on over the blue eyes he'd inherited from her. She didn't cry as his long legs hoisted him into the plane's passenger seat alongside a bag of mail and she maintained her composure as the plane taxied, took off, and disappeared over the horizon.

She was silent and composed as her wife, Ayako, drove their small, horse-drawn cart back to town. Ayako said nothing as Fatima climbed down from the cart, went into their small, modest house, and went straight into Dan's room.

The room's walls were papered with pictures of airplanes, aviators he admired, schematics of engines, and even the occasional scantily clad woman leaning against an airplane. All around the room were model airplanes and unfinished model components. Outside the open window, a set of wind chimes tinkled gently on the breeze. Dan had made those chimes for her one Mother's Day from broken and discarded pieces of glass.

Finally, Fatima cried. She held Dan's pillow to her face as the sobs came, gasping and undignified. He'd just slept on the pillow the previous night and it smelled strongly of him. She breathed in the scent as deeply as she could, knowing it wouldn't last. Soon, even his lingering scent would be gone. At some point, she wasn't sure when, Ayako had come in and now held her. Ayako had been in Dan's life since he was very little and she too loved him like a son. Like that, they passed much of the afternoon, holding one another and missing the son who may never return.

As for Dan Valentine, his story is written in the stars.

23 July 2019. 05:36.

© 2019 Sarah McKee

<https://darklandschronicles.com>