



Libertas Per Scientiam: Just Another Day

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A Little Introduction

LPS? That group? Libertas Per Scientiam, right? Yes, I've heard all about them. They're an anti-corporate hack 'n' free squad. They're a bit different than those other rage-against-the-corps groups. A dime a dozen those groups are. And those groups don't seem to last very long, either. I did a story about a bunch of anti-corporate groups and made the mistake of mentioning them in with the rest of them. I didn't think too much about it; it was just another story for the news. Then, I got a visit during lunch at the café I frequent. I took my normal table. A few minutes later, I put down my reader to see three people staring right back at me: A young punk, a young woman, and a heavily clothed man. The man raised his head and said in a most dark and creepy tone, "We need to have a word with you."

It's not the first time I gotten in trouble for what I wrote, but I get it from the higher ups in the usual passive aggressive manner. Never had anyone take the time to interrupt my lunch hour. I was scared to death. I mean, I just did an article about all these anti-corporate, nanotech and biotech modified "freedom fighters" and how destructive they could be... And there were three of them in front of me. Just as I was sure I was going to piss myself, they all laughed. "Did you see the look on his face?" "I thought he was going to pass out." "That was mean... But still really funny."

Turns out they were just having a little fun with me. It dawned on me that this was a pretty unique chance to get actual first-hand accounts and information. They also wanted to set me straight about their group and the real scoop about all the different groups. I couldn't pass it up.

It was a pretty big eye opener. While it didn't change my opinion of the groups that make the news a lot, I really started to like these three from LPS. LPS doesn't seek to stop the corporations, but make sure no one gets hurt by them. The bundled up man said it best:

"The bad thing about corporations is that they are all about the money. The good thing about corporations is they always keep their eyes on the money. So, as long as you don't stand between them and their money, you are only a minor itch on the ass cheek to them. The most they'll ever do is blindly scratch after you. So, LPS only deals with stuff that means no real money to the corps. Basically, the poor folks from all the places they robbed and abandoned. We spend our efforts helping them, instead of being target practice for corporate enforcers."

I got a bunch of stories out of them, but I wanted to do a piece on what a typical day for them is like. One of those slice of life bits... A slice of the dystopian, cyberpunk life, but it's still a slice of life. So, here it is.

Just Another Day

“I want this to be done by the book. You are to enter into the city, remain inconspicuous, reach the designated target areas, conduct your tasks, and leave. I do not want any incidents and the second there is any suspicion you’ve been compromised I want you on your way out. Do I make myself clear? In the last operation, there were several violations of our standards of practice and...”

“Wow, she just goes on and on.”

“I apologize, she’s trying to indirectly punish me for *getting into trouble* last time.”

Three figures occupy the uncovered boulder in the field: A young man stretching out who seems eager and ready; a young woman sitting down on an edge of the boulder gazing up into the clouds; and a man covered head to toe in some form of a garment laying prone on the boulder acting out his boredom by flicking debris into a drainage pool nearby.

The woman turns her head to look at the heavily clothed, prone figure. “Hey, Madison?”

“Yah?”

The young woman draws her legs up, rests her chin on her knees, and wraps her arms around her green, camouflage patterned cargo pants. “Didn’t you write most of the standards and practices she keeps on talking about?”

“Well...” Madison rocks his head side to side while digging into the dirt below the boulder with a stick. “Goodlettsville was the one really responsible for writing all that stuff down. I, mostly, was really just a beta tester of sorts.” He rolls over, belly up to the sky, and seizes for a moment as a gust of wind picks up. His scarf, fedora hat, and trench coat ruffle about at the mercy of the wind. It is a struggle to keep everything from coming undone.

The young male stops stretching to watch Madison squirm about and secure bits of his clothing. He smugly allows his own black, worn looking jean vest to move as free as the wind wills. “Why the hell are you always so covered up like that? It’s almost summer and you look like my dad before he’s about to shovel snow.”

Madison gets his wardrobe under control and relaxes as the gust dies down. “I’m guessing you want something more than “don’t want anyone to see me”, correct?”

The young man and woman look at each other, turn to Madison, and nod in unison.

“That’d be nice.” The young man ends with a smirk.

The young woman turns her head and attention to her Madison. “I’ve been curious about that, too.”

Madison takes a breath in. “Fine. I’ll explain, but first...” He pauses with his hand up, and then drops his hand back down. “Sudo is about halfway done with her speech. So, be ready for the key words “So in summary” in about five minutes.” The rest of the group sighs and nods, begrudgingly. Madison continues his explanation. “With nanomods and biomods, the easy part is getting the intended enhancement. The hard part is always cosmetics. It’s still true today, but doesn’t hold a candle to how it was a few years back. To make a long story short, you start to not care about cosmetics when you need the edge a mod gives you bad enough.”

“So, you, um- modded yourself, uh- “ The young woman scratches her short, bright red hair while her faces contorts in a vain effort to find a less direct, less sharp wording for her thoughts.

“I modded myself ugly. Is that what you were trying to say, Firefly?” Madison turns his head to face Firefly’s overtly embarrassed expression and nervous pantomimes. Not much expression usually makes its way through the dark blue scarf, tinted goggles, and brown fedora hat for everyone else to see, but this grin manages to surface with the assistance of a chuckle. “Don’t worry about it. I was born before the Internet and grew up with it before everyone with money, power, and a cause got around to neutering it. I welcome the day I get offended by an insult again.”

“Oh no, he’s going into old fart mode. Gonna tell us the days of the World Wild Web and when there was actually more content on web pages than ads,” sarcastically jeers the young man, standing over the other two with his hands tucked into his jean pants’ pockets.

The group shares a laugh together.

“No, really, Hal. There were actually web pages WITHOUT ADS!” Madison gestures with his hands while gazing into the sky.

“OOOoooo!” Hal mocks as he shifts his faux surprise between the other two.

Madison sits down, points at both of them, and glares “Websites didn’t have to pay preference fees to ISP’s!”

“Shocking!” gasps Firefly, joining in the sarcasm fest.

“And get this! You had to use a big, bulky external screen to see anything on the computer!” Madison traces a computer screen in the air before the other two to further emphasize his point.

“... So in summary...” The group pause the antics to listen to their leader remotely broadcasting. “I want you to perform to the best of your abilities and follow everything by the book! This should be a routine operation, but be on your guard. We never know what the corps will come up with next to combat us. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Hal faux salutes while rolling his eyes.

Firefly straightens up her posture a moment and meekly voices, “Yes, Ms. Sudo.”

“Um, ditto?” Madison shrugs.

“Ditto?” The voice sighs over the feed to all the group’s radios.

“Yah, ditto. Means-“

“I know what it means. Never mind. Just get going.”

The three stand up and ready themselves. Madison brushes off the dirt from his clothing, Firefly slips on her knick-knack decorated satchel on top a strap of her black tank top, and Hal quickly fixes up his blonde, trimmed hair with a comb from his vest pocket. Madison jumps down from the boulder, purposely splashing his boots in a puddle near the boulder. He looks forward and sighs while dropping his shoulders. “Dammit! It’s just too nice a day to crawl into that cesspool of a city.”

Rundown, dirty, and busy are only a few of the words to describe Harrisonburg. The city is so poor and lacking that it couldn't afford the outer perimeter walls that a majority of the corporate city-states normally construct. Harrisonburg isn't a strict one corporation town, but serves as a neutral ground of sorts. "Neutral ground" in this case meaning a perfect place to do less-than-legal and other unscrupulous activities with no real threat of being caught.

"Damn, this place is a hell hole."

"Oh, I'm sure it has its good qualities, Hal."

Firefly pinches her nose while covering her mouth. "If you completely ignore the smell of garbage and whatever else that is. Ungh. Why are we here again?"

"To do our job?" Madison glances over to Firefly, making sure to relate the mutual disappointment with a slightly dropped head and hanging shoulders.

"No. Why this particular town? There are network access terminals in practically every major town in the area. Why are we going to this particular city?"

Madison decides to educate the two while walking along the sidewalk. "Aha! I can answer that one. You see Harrisonburg is backwater burg that no corporation sees any interest in investing in. This works to our advantage. Since the corporations don't seem to care about the town-" Madison steps ahead and spins around to point at Hal.

"Um... The town doesn't care about the corps?" Hal shrugs.

"EXACTLY! We can take full advantage of this mutual apathy and conduct a number of our activities with a very hefty F.U.B.-"

Firefly raises her hand.

"Yes?" Madison points to Firefly.

"What's a F.U.B.?"

"Fuck Up Buffer."

Firefly takes a moment to think before a response, holding a finger in front of her mouth. "Oh! Okay. Is that same as a M.O.E.?"

Madison tilts his head to the side. "A what?"

"Margin of Error." Hal follows up with the rolling of his eyes.

Madison drops his head, shakes briefly, and looks back up. "Did Sudo come up with that one?"

"Yes," begrudgingly moan both Hal and Firefly.

Madison can only continue to shake his head. "I swear by the time she's done with all these acronyms I'll need to install a decoder matrix into my NES core to translate everything she writes or says." He switches back to the original subject and faces towards both Hal and Firefly. "Anyways, the nice thing about these forsaken burgs is that they still have multiple network access points to all the common public, government, and private networks and relatively recent hardware to interface with. But, what's even better is what a burg like this doesn't have." He continues backpedaling facing

Hal and Firefly, taking a moment to side step into a path between all the sidewalk garbage. “Question to the both of you: What don’t they have?”

“City wide surveillance systems that work?”

Madison holds up a hand each towards Hal and Firefly to keep count. “One point for Hal.”

“Um, people acting as corp watchdogs.”

“Ding! Firefly is on the board.”

Hal thinks a bit. “Hmm...”

Firefly perks up and energetically answers, “AH! Updated and security patched systems and any central authority on network traffic.”

Madison nods his head in agreement. “Nice! Two for one special for Firefly.”

Hal dons his trademark smirk and snorts, “Cops that are effective AND actually care.”

“That one I’m counting for two. “

“What?! That’s not fair! That’s one thing!” Firefly shoots a displeased glare at Madison.

Madison holds his hands up to gain a moment to explain. “It’s two things. You can have cops that are effective but don’t care, and have cops that are ineffective but try really hard. You’ll learn to respect the first group and laugh at the second in time. Speaking of time...” Madison trails off.

Hal stares for a moment as his attention momentary shifts. “I think this is where we split up.”

“Correct. Okay, we break and y’all get to your targets. When you get to your target hop onto the local radionet comm server and join the channel “XXX Live Teen Chat ” with the passphrase “big bazongas”.”

“Oh god, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Firefly manages to mumble pass her disgust.

Hal scratches his head and looks at Madison a bit puzzled. “There’ll be like a hundred or so those! How do we tell which one is yours?”

“There’ll be three control characters at the end of the name for mine. They won’t map out to any letters, but you’ll see them if you check the name carefully.”

Firefly holds her face by her hand and sighs. “Can we name it ANYTHING else?”

“Nope. Me leader, you follow. Anyways, as Hal stated there’ll be close to a hundred of those channels with similar names. It’s a good way to hide out in the noise and chatter. And if certain people are not paying attention they’ll miss our channel completely for another one with those control characters stuck on the end.”

Firefly rolls her eyes and shakes her head looking at Madison. “You must think you’re so slick, don’t you?”

Madison puffs up his chest and strikes a pose. “What? Are you jealous of my esteemed abilities at subterfuge?”

The group reaches an intersection. Firefly breaks off of the group continues walking towards her destination, shaking her head and mumbling quietly the whole time at the commentary of her leader. Hal shrugs and goes in the opposite direction. "Catch yah in a few, Mad."

Madison switches between looking at the two before putting his hands in his pockets and hanging his head low to pout. "Man, no appreciation for honest skill."

Madison approaches his target. An old public network terminal located in an old, abandoned housing project. There is hardly an intact, unbroken window left in any of the buildings. Judging by the garbage and decay, not a single city service has visited this place in years. The area is forsaken and has been left to rot. "Woof. This thing looks rough."

He examines the terminal. It roughly resembles an old public telephone, but seems to not have shared the same durability they once possessed. The screen is surprisingly intact albeit dirty and scratched. Most of the keyboard buttons remain with most still having visible lettering. But the interface port isn't crammed full of cigarette butts. It's serviceable. Madison uses his gloved left hand to reach into his other coat sleeve and retrieves a plug and cable. The plug is a rough mate to the interface port and the cable seems to attach to something inside Madison's coat sleeve. With a quick change of hands and a swift motion, the plug meets its mate. "What do we have here? Ah! An old UniTerm 2600. Such a reliable and rugged model. And fortunately, very exploitable." Madison stares blankly ahead as his attentions seem to be elsewhere. He places his hands on the side of the terminal and drums his fingers. "Okay, let's see what it's going to take to crack this one. This one? Nope. Hmm, this one? Miss. Maybe this one? Strike three. Okay, maybe it actually has gotten a few patches and updates. Figures I'd get the one they bothered taking care of. Let's try a curveball. Ah. This looks promising. Getting there... Getting closer... Hasn't rejected me yet- HA! And the doors are opened." Madison slowly swings his arms out from the terminal the same fashion a magician finishes a trick. Madison sighs slightly. "Time for the boring part. Connections established and time to churn through the D-Lists."

A quarter hour later, the familiar voice of Firefly voice echoes in Madison's head. "I'm in, finally. I can't believe how many channels are named like this one."

"Heh, I told yah it would be a good cover."

"Please. I'm not agreeing with you. Just because something works, doesn't mean it's the best idea ever."

"Okay, fine. No appreciation of skill, today. Anyway, you got your D-List ready?"

"Yes."

"How much do you know about D-Lists?"

Firefly's voice hints with embarrassment in her tone. "Uhm. Nothing."

"Don't worry. They're pretty straight forward. I'll start off with the basics. D-Lists are Death Lists. They're a collection of lists about the recently deceased and whatever accounts they had."

“All of their accounts?”

“Nah. Just any that are either publically seen or could house anything strictly personal. Most corps and companies have their own procedures about cleaning up the dead accounts of employees. The only accounts that get released are usually those with personal storage systems and personal communications accounts. Stuff that most relatives and family members might want or need to know about.”

“So, why are we looking through all of them?”

“Ah, that’s because you never know what some people will take home with them. The D-lists we got are from someone we’ve got on the inside of the government. They haven’t been released to the families and other interested parties yet. So, we get to take a look at them before the corps and others get a chance to clean them up.”

“They can do that?”

“Oh yah, those employment contracts are pretty strict about this stuff. You die on their payroll and they can tear through just about anything you had access to. But most of the people, usually, are pretty clean; so we only have lists of people that have a high chance of having something interesting.”

“So, we just look at the lists, try the accounts, and look through everything?”

There’s a heavy tinge of sarcasm in Madison’s voice. “Yep. Loads of fun.”

Firefly sounds more confident. “So, what do I do if I find something?”

“Depends. If it’s something minor, just dump it to your nanite enhancement system’s storage matrix and keep on looking.”

“What if it’s not so minor? Do I still dump it to my NES?”

“Oh yes, but with one key difference.”

“Which is?” Firefly asks.

A very stern tone comes over Madison’s voice. “You tell us what you got and get the hell outta Dodge.”

“Just up and leave?”

His tone develops a deeply contrasting seriousness and instructs Firefly. “YES. You give us the heads up, go silent, make it to safe distance outside town, radio for an immediate pick up, and hide until you are told to come out.”

“Whoa,” an off guard Firefly manages to mutter.

A momentary pause is shared between them.

“It’s pretty serious stuff when you stumble upon something big. But, if you follow the procedures, the cops and corps will be too busy trying to get your trail to know you’ve given them the slip.”

Only silence comes from Firefly’s side.

“Firefly?”

“Y-yes?”

“Got a serious question for you that I’ve wanted to ask.”

“Okay. Um, ask.”

“Okay. Here it goes.” A slight pause tenses up the moment. “Does the carpet match the drapes?”

A long pause follows the question and a confused Firefly answers, “What?”

Another familiar male voice comes into the channel. “So? Do they?”

Madison musters all the dramatic and epic voice acting he can bring forth over the channel. “Come on Firefly! Hal and I HAVE to know. We’re deadlocked in debate; it’s UP TO YOU to settle this issue once and for all. And. Well. There’s a twenty in limbo depending on what you say.”

“Wha- Tha- Oh my god, you guys are PERVERTS!”

“Perverts?! We’re just inquiring minds. We just want to know what your real hair color is, since we’re guessing it’s the reason behind your handle, Firefly.”

“Ungh, THEN why didn’t you JUST ASK what my real color is?”

“I think he did,” Hal chimes in.

“I think I did, too.”

A very indignant Firefly sternly bellows, “I’m not continuing this conversation! I’ll talk to you later, WHEN you get your minds OUT OF THE GUTTER!”

Hal only laughs. “That’ll be awhile.”

“She assumes they can leave gutter,” remarks Madison.

Silence comes from Firefly’s corner.

“Alright, get to work Hal. We’ll have to leave this debate unsettled for now.”

“Dammit. I thought I would be eating good tonight on Mad’s dollar.”

The city continues as normal, even for a backwater burg. People move about, vehicles drive on the streets and a few hover in the air within the designated channels. The often heard police sirens echoing through the alleys and breezeways are all too common for this burg. The only things that seem to break the standard are three individuals holding a vigil at their own respective network terminals. These three have one thing in common; each is bored out of his or her mind.

The young lady sits on top a stack of old pallets, a padding of newspaper beneath her, with her back against the dirty red brick wall making up one side of the alley. She stares far into a glowing visor worn on her head. Various charts, windows of text, images, and other assorted figures flicker by as she sighs again, rolling her eyes. The only break from this routine is the occasional few moments she spends rotating a sections of an old puzzle cube resting on top of her satchel next to her.

Elsewhere on the other side of the city, a young man performs a whole martial art workout routine in a desolate subway station. Only yellowed, dim lights give any visibility to the majority of the station. The only exception is a device resting on a much abused network terminal. The backlight of a small flat screen casts a far brighter and whiter hue to the surrounding area. The decay and disrepair of the station only shows up more apparent in this light. Not only encouraged, but delighted, the young man uses any all debris and garbage as practice dummies for his routine. The only stranger aspect to this display is the strange distant gaze the man maintains through this routine. It is as if his attentions are constantly shifting to some inner thoughts.

The last, the excessively garmented man pulls a large skeleton of a crate towards some other bits of junk that are part of his construction project. The final piece of the odd puzzle gets put in place. It now forms a collection of junk that roughly resembles that of furniture. The man throws another layer of discarded cardboard before placing himself on top of the heap. With a bit of tossing and turning, he stops upon a comfortable spot and look to the clouds. The nearby network terminal is quite lively. A cable runs from it, draping across the floor of the breezeway, and up the coat sleeve of the man. Unlike the others, his odd stare strictly focuses on the clouds above.

Firefly moans over the channel, dragging out the vowels, "I'm so bored!"

"I KNOW! There's only so much practicing I can stand to do in one day," an annoyed Hal replies.

Across a sub-channel a stream of data flows in synchronous to Madison's voice, "I think this one looks like a duck. Anyone else?"

"Come one, Mad! You know I hate image streams when I'm practicing. Hmm, wow. That actually does look like a duck."

Firefly looks up and searches through the gap between the buildings making up the alley, "I see it, too. Cool."

"Next time, someone else can get stuffed underground. Apart from the stuff I can kick around down here, it sucks! It's so dark and nasty down here; rats don't even want to be here. I've seen three claw out of here and not one has come back down here."

"Okay. I'll take the next underground terminal target. Can't enjoy cloud watching with you whining every five minutes."

A disgusted groan comes from Firefly. "I think I've developed a whole new level of hate for FacePage, MyPlace, and Chitter. I don't know why these people had accounts to those things. They had NOTHING to say, but didn't know it."

"If you think that's bad, have you SEEN some of these guys' grandchildren? People have some ugly kids."

"Word to the wise, you two can just skip FacePage, MyPlace, and Chitter accounts. Usually, there isn't anything interesting that the data diggers haven't already found. Your best bet is to search through e-mail and any personal private storage accounts."

"Are you sure about that, Madison? I remember Ms. Sudo telling me to check every account."

A dismissive snort and Madison continues. "Unless they only have one of those accounts and nothing else, don't bother. Most of the time, you'll only find some racy messages between mistresses or some dealings with another corp. Great stuff for blackmail; if they weren't dead. "

“Can’t you just blackmail the families?”

A sharp gasp precedes Firefly’s admonishment. “HAL! That’s pretty low, even for us.”

Hal emits with an anger tinged grumble, “Fly, these are corporates. They set the standard for low.”

“Points for being a manipulative bastard, but blackmailing family usually doesn’t do much. Most corp families don’t have access to anything we’re interested in and it’s just crappy PR all around. Also, you start blackmailing enough and you’ll put yourself on the short shit list of every corp real quick.”

“Yah, you got a point there, Mad.”

“Plus, it’s still a pretty mean and low thing to do someone’s family... after they’re dead,” Firefly continues to berate.

“Christ, Fly. I get it.”

“No, YOU DON’T. “

“Yes, I DO!”

Madison interrupts maintaining a tone similar to a teacher keeping the class in line. “Now, now, you two; keep focused. The sooner you are done with your lists the sooner we can go home.”

“Okay,” Hal and Firefly say in unison.

A few minutes pass of silence as all involved go about their tasks, until Madison receives a private channel request from Hal. Madison blinks, now distracted from cloud gazing, and accepts the invitation. “What’s up?”

“Dude, Mad, you got a psych profile or something on this guy?”

“Nah. Why?”

Hal lightly laughs unnerved. “This dude was SICK in the head.”

A momentary pause and Madison’s intrigue peaks. “Okay. What kind of sick? Mental or Physical?”

“Mental, man. This guy had some WEIRD porn stashed away.”

“Weird porn? Is that all?”

“Not weird, but WEIRD.”

“Okay. Hal, you need to understand; weird lost its meaning to me when cybernetics and biomodification came into style a while back. I was around before the Internet, was around for the start every bad Internet shock fad, and I’ve seen some sick and weird stuff in my days. You are going to have to be a bit more EXPLICIT.”

“I’ll send you a picture then.”

“That’ll work.”

“Okay, here it is.”

“Let’s see how weir-“

A distinctly involuntary series of twitches, spasms, and shakes momentary shock through Madison’s body, almost stunning him off his makeshift couch.

“Mad, you there?”

“Whoa! That’s been awhile. Wow. Really should have sampled a thumbnail of that first. That was a little too much full size. Ewww. I think I almost tasted horror there.”

“See. Weird, huh?”

“By the definition of. Ungh, that’s enough to make me get religion.” Madison shakes his head, trying to recover some semblance of normal as he tries to find his comfortable spot on the makeshift couch, again.

Hal chuckles in a snarky way, “Heh. You want the rest of them?”

“Sure.”

“WHAT?!”

“Change the file type over to something other than an image, tar them up, and do a simple encrypt on them.”

“Okay, why?”

An evil, menacing laugh follows. A dark, sinister tone comes over the private channel. “I’m gonna give Firefly a test.”

A moment of silence comes over the shared channel between Madison and Hal.

“You’re a sick man, Mad. A sick, brilliant man. I’m sending the package over now.”

“Got it. Let us see how it goes.”

Not too long after this exchange.

“Hey, Firefly?”

“Yes, Madison?”

“Could you take a look at this encrypted file for me? I’m backlogged with all the stuff I’m churning through and won’t be able to get to this one for awhile. ”

“Sure, I guess. It’d be a good reason to try out the decryption module I installed.”

Madison struggles as he tries to keep his tone of voice from giving up the ruse, “Sending it over.”

Firefly starts to work on the file, various tools and utilities flicker on her display visor. “Okay, looks like a pretty simple encryption. Shouldn’t take long to brute force and guess the key. Let’s see how

well this new module works.” A few more windows and menus open and close and a new window stays open, replacing the others. This one has a progress bar that quickly slides across one side of the window to the other side. “Wow! This new decryption module is FAST, Madison.”

“See, I got skills. I’m just SO underappreciated in this organization,” Madison sarcastically whines.

Firefly humors Madison. “Hey! Everyone in the whole group knows you’re the reason we have some of the best biomods and nanomods out there. Well, despite Holmes and Com acting like they made them.”

“Holmes and Com deserve credit. They make sure everything is nice, safe, and compatible.”

Hal joins the conversation. “Mad, you crafters act like your stuff can blow people up or something.”

The expected response from Madison isn’t heard. Instead an eerie dramatic pause precedes a reserved tone. “Has anyone told you why everyone calls Pyro, Pyro?”

Firefly interrupts. “File decrypted! Looks like a tarball package. Quick untar and it’s a bunch of files. Hmm, weird, they aren’t opening correctly. I bet they changed the type encoding to something else. Yes, they did. Images? Let’s open a few.”

Simultaneously, both Madison and Hal listen carefully pulling their attentions from everything else to focus on this one moment.

Silence.

Firefly, normally, has a fairly pale skin tone. At this moment, despite common belief, her face drains of even more color as the horrid imagery fills her display visor. She stares. As with those who are witnessing a train wreck or as child wandering in on their parents at night, she can’t turn away. The only motion she makes are her hands taking hold of the visor and slowly removing it from her head. A few blinks and she finally nods her head down to look at her visor. She dangles the device in front of her, as if holding a small dead rodent by the tail with disgust, disgrace, and horrid fighting for the rights to express themselves.

“Uh, Firefly? You there still?”

“Fly, what’s going on?”

A scream of sheer girlish disgust echoes around the area Firefly is, quickly blending in with the rest of the city noises. The byproduct is an equally jarring transmission that causes both Madison and Hal to stumble about. Firefly shudders and fits about. While none of it is relayed, both Madison and Hal bust out into manic laughter. This brings Hal to the ground as he laughs so hard and Madison rolls off his makeshift junk couch onto the alley street.

“T-T-that was- I- Some people are- Oh god.”

Trying to keep the innocence ruse up Madison asks, “What’s wrong? Is there something bad on those images?”

“Y-Y-you could say that.”

“Could you describe it to us?”

Hal gaps for breath and continues laughing for another spell outside the reception of the channel.

"I w-would r-rather not," a stirred, nervous Firefly responds.

Madison manages to collect enough resolve to calmly ask, "Is illegal, dirty, or wrong?"

Firefly meekly replies, "All of them."

Madison puts on his most concerned voice, "Well, do you think it's important enough to keep a copy of?"

A shudder rattles Firefly's voice, "I h-h-hope not."

"Well, go ahead and delete all of them then. "

Firefly picks her visor back up and slowly places it on her head, while trying to avoid direct eye contact with the material in question. "Gladly. Some people are very sick."

A laughter choked voice comes back onto the channel. "Yah, they're sick alright. Now the question is who's sicker? The people who watch it or do it?"

Madison cringes to himself at Hal's usual lack of situational finesse and waits for the oncoming storm.

"I don't know the- HOLD UP! You- Oh. My. God. YOU KNOW WHAT'S ON THESE PICTURES!"

"Uh. Um. Ah, Shit." Hal klutzes over his own words and only ends up further implicating himself.

The once meek and shaky tone throws itself into a 180 degree spin to furiously pissed-off as Firefly unleashes a one woman verbal onslaught. "Hal, you BASTARD! How could you and-Madison!"

Madison dredges up the most innocent voice he can muster in a vain attempt to dodge responsibility, "Yes?"

"HOW COULD YOU TO SEND ME THIS SHEER, UTTER FILTH?! Of all the miserable, rotten, and unwholesome things you could do; THIS?! When we get out of here, I'm going to..."

For the next few minutes the only voice heard in the channel is an angry, indignant woman's belonging to Firefly. Neither Hal nor Madison dares to disconnect or even attempt to mute the litany of curses attacking themselves, their friends, and their respective bloodlines. They continue their work despite moments punctuated by grimaces and cringes as the scorned woman lashes out. The channel remains silent for a minute before one of the two men gains enough courage to speak.

Madison braves the silence with the most subdued and non-threatening tone, "Feel better, now?"

"Yes. I do."

"That's good. So, what are your demands?"

"My what?"

"Demands. What are they?"

"I don't get what you are talking about."

Madison explains the situation. "You see, I can't let you go off this way. If Sudo hears about this, from you, I'm up the creek without a paddle. She'll suspend me from missions for a month and ride

my ass on every nitpicking task she's got. And she's got a lot of them. And she'll especially enjoy riding my ass through ever nitpicking detail of all those tasks."

Firefly still sounds confused and asks "I'm still not understanding what you are asking. What are you trying to do?"

The other male voice jumps in. "He's trying to buy your silence, Fly."

Firefly gives a manipulative and scheming approval, "Oh! Ooo!"

"And since he's trying, I'm not on Sudo's good list right now and she doesn't really need to hear anything else bad about me and-"

"Dude, Hal. I don't think you can work bulk discounts on this kind of thing. Anyway, I started the negotiations. Go buy your own-"

"Two weeks of your cleaning duty," Hal interrupts in a determined manner.

"Oh, you claim jumping son of a bitch. Fine. Three weeks-"

Hal doesn't give Madison the chance to finish his sentence. "A month."

"What! Oh. Hell. No. I'm not going to be-"

Madison interrupts himself as his full, undivided attention focuses on an account. The deadpan seriousness that Madison speaks with jars both Hal and Firefly. "This can't be."

Firefly breaks the odd silence, "What's wrong, Madison?"

Madison continues with the deadpan seriousness turning to flat commands, "Bug out, NOW!"

"Mad, what's wrong?"

"Hal, Firefly, disconnect, forget the lists today. Get out of the city and call for pick up."

Both Hal and Firefly start to gather their things, remaining connected.

"Mad, what the hell? Give us something!"

A nervous Firefly stammers, "T-This doesn't sound good. Are we okay?"

Madison sighs as his network terminal shows even more activity than before. "I'm sorry for scaring ya'll. You two will be just fine. I found something big; real big; the kind of real big that draws far more attention than what we normally like to deal with. A number of people are trying to get into this account as we speak. The worst part is..." Madison sits up on his makeshift couch and puts his face in his hands. "... They can't have what's in here."

Both Hal and Firefly pause in a moment of shock.

"But, Ms. Sudo said we can't delete anything! We can't modify anything or we'll get noticed."

"Mad, the fuck did you find?"

"Something no one should have on the outside. I'll explain it all later. All you need to know it's hot. Hot enough that when it goes missing and they trace the connection down to this burg, they'll be enough corporate enforcers crawling around to hold the play offs with each corp having two teams

each. You guys will have plenty of time to get out. I have to stay here until I grab every bit of this, remove it, drop some decoys, and do a little tracing of my own.”

“Is there anything we can do, Mad?”

Firefly reaches out a hand to find her satchel. “I don’t think we should leave you by yourself like this.”

“I appreciate the offer, guys. But, knowing you two are out of the harm’s way will do more for me than you know. “

Hal signs off, “Okay, Mad. Shout out if you need any help.”

Hal closes the connection to the channel and promptly undoes the rigging to the network terminal he was using. After stuffing a few items in his vest pockets and a quick few flicks of the comb to fix his hair, he nonchalantly walks up the entry stairs of the old subway station. Few quick glances and he strolls out into the cityscape. He blends back into the normal pedestrian traffic moving towards the nearest city exit.

A nervous and jittery Firefly tries to offer some help. “Listen, we can help you out. I mean, I don’t know how exactly, but I pretty sure we can do something! I just- I don’t know what to do.”

“Ah, don’t worry. Just leave as we all came in. I just don’t ya’ll around when those enforcers start shaking down anyone that has anything more advanced than a toaster on them.”

“Okay. Well. Be careful. Okay?”

Madison puts on his most comforting voice. “I’ll be fine. Now, get going.”

Firefly logs out of the channel, taking her visor off and placing it in her satchel. The puzzle cube makes its way into the bag, too. She unplugs the devices in her satchel from the network terminal and places everything back to the way she found it. The satchel is thrown back over the same shoulder and she takes a few moments to scan the area. A pivot later, she jogs off towards a main street to blend in again.

Madison grumbles. He now faces the annoying and risky task ahead of him. The network terminal starts to go into overdrive as the various lights flicker, the debug output on the screen streams faster than the screen can output. “Why are you here? Why do you exist, now? Why won’t the past stay that?” Madison props his back against the brick wall of one of the breezeway buildings as he ponders and gazes up at the sky. “It’s too nice of a day.”

A few hours have come and gone. Madison is still working on the task. Momentary breaks of paranoia interrupt his cloud watching. Things on the network have gotten more and more “interesting”. He has managed to tap into every neglected network monitoring device he can manage. He’s not the only one. It seems that many interested parties are very meticulously investigating everyone that is trying to the access this account. The more troubling part is that the same interested parties are taking a FAR greater interest in the one connection that has made it through. Madison is using every trick in the book to redirect network probes, fake scan results, and

spoofer as much garbage data as he can. The initial queries by some parties turn into more aggressive attacks with the goal of closing his connection. Thankfully, there are enough network components under his control complementing those that they can't thwart to their purposes. Despite not knowing where and what Madison exactly is, the problem is that those interested parties do know what town he's in and he's independent. It won't be long until they start moving in agents and enforcers to scan and scour the area for anything they deem suspicious. Madison also expects that a few forged and illegally gotten warrants, permits of investigation, and notices for capture will hit the local authorities. Probably a sizable monetary bribe to a few officials will not only encourage the local fuzz to find him, but also give the corps the blessing to do what they like to anyone in the town for awhile. Things are just going to get more interesting.

It's not much longer before Madison finishes. The data is downloaded, the fakes are uploaded, backups are corrupted, and as much of his trail as possible is obscured. The moment of truth comes. The second Madison pulls the plug, it will be mere seconds before a flood of probes and scans hit the network terminal. Madison stands near the terminal with grip around the cable strung from inside his sleeve to the interface port of the terminal. A quick snap, the plug whips from the port, and the terminal resets. A few tense moments and the terminal reboots to a nominal screen. "HA! I'm awesome! It'll be awhile before they get anything useful out of that thing--"

The celebration and ego massaging is interrupted by a very slight, high pitched whirring noise coming from the machine. Madison eyes the terminal curiously and closely. "What the hell is that noise--"

A bright flash lights up the area around the terminal and directed towards Madison. "Sneaky bastards." He slaps his hand on his forehead and pulls it down to a palm his face. He grumbles at the late discovery. The camera in the terminal was a completely separate and hidden component that must have been added on to the terminal, but not connected logically to the terminal in any fashion. It looks like any other common device on the network and practically hidden from view. Madison will have to retire another hat, scarf, and set of goggles to avoid automated facial recognition systems. "I really liked this hat, too."

The radio traffic picks up quickly. Madison detects that all too familiar presence of corporate enforcers. Thankfully, either arrogance or disregard keeps them from running their modifications and other systems stealthily. A low profile, blending in, and waiting is all he has right now. The enforcers are quick to shake down and rough up anyone they detect and think as modded enough to be responsible. It seems some representation of every corporation is in the town right now. Madison witnesses a few fights and scuffles between corps while he waits for them to move on to the next area. Slinking through back alleys, walking down unused subways and their tunnels, and some dumpster hiding gets him out of the concentrated search area. It's still not safe, but he can afford being a little bold when walking across the street and actually use the sidewalks more than the alleys.

Madison gets stuck in the middle of a cluster of old dilapidated apartments. To his luck, a few corporate groups decide to check the streets bordering them. He's trapped for the moment, but bides his time and leans up against a wall to gazes up the blue, cloudy sky. "Not much further. Just have to wait until--"

A police radio transmission comes from a nearby source and a police cruiser drives into the area. Madison snaps his head towards the cruiser before searching for a place to hide. He quickly spots a place between two garbage bins to slump into. The cruiser stops in the middle of the space and both front doors open. A two officers step out, close the doors, and check the area out.

"Why are we looking here, ma'am?" the passenger officer asks in a very flat voice.

The driver turns to the other, "Whoever the corps are looking for isn't going to walk the streets right now. These places are good spots to hide out in."

Madison is able to peek around the garbage bins to catch a glance at the officers; a woman and a female synth. The orange and yellow markings on the synth's face were a dead giveaway. Both are wearing local police uniforms, hair tied up and hidden under their helmets, and they seem to be on the search for anyone of suspicious nature. Madison examines and senses the young woman has some significant nanomod and the synth only has the minimum. Synths typically don't need serious nanomod or biomod, since they are engineered to have a substantial edge over any human: Enhanced strength, endurance, senses, and focus. The only mods Madison ever finds in use are communications mods and control mods. Most of these are so the owner can keep track and control of the synth. Madison stares at the synth for a moment too long as she points towards his direction. Madison ducks back between the two garbage cans.

The synth narrows her golden pupil eyes towards the area with the two garbage cans, points, and quietly, but flatly mentions this discovery to her partner. "Someone is over there, ma'am."

The woman officer whispers, unbuttoning the clasp on her pistol holster and keeping a watch over the location, "Okay, follow me."

The two walk over quietly towards the towards the garbage bins Madison is hiding between. He feels them get closer. "What to do?" He checks the area around him for an escape route; nothing useful is found. He mumbles to himself, "Time for another bit of clever subterfuge." He quickly pulls a few nearby discarded beer bottles closer around him, relaxes his body, splays his legs apart, and slumps himself onto the side of a garbage bin. The ruse needs something a bit more to make the sale complete. He spots a tin of old, smelly "water". He thinks it once was water, but no time for reservations. He dumps the majority of it onto the crotch of his pants, shaking the rest over the rest of his body. The smell locked away inside the tin spreads without the layer of water pooling over to trap it. For the final touches, Madison loosely holds onto a beer bottle, ruffles up his clothes, and drops his head.

An incoherent mumble from between the garbage bins causes the two officers to hold their positions. The female synth and woman glance at each other and look again at the source of the mumbling. They carefully approach the spot and take a look around the bins. The serious expressions and body language give way to a mix of disappointment and disgust. Despite synths being notoriously deadpan, this female synth's brow raises and upper lip snarls as she covers her mouth and nose. These are the times she finds her enhanced senses to be more a deterrent than a benefit to her. The other woman tries to wave the stench away in vain and takes a step back. Both take their hands off their pistols and redo the clasps.

The woman still tries to wave the stench away. "Good God. Smells like a brewery caught fire."

"It does, indeed, have a horrific smell, ma'am." The female synth turns her head away and back in an effort to maintain her stoic composure for a little longer.

Madison belches loud, ending with a slight gargle before readjusting the crotch of his pants.

The two officers talk between each other, with the woman officer asking the looming question, "Do you want handle this?"

"I would rather not, ma'am. As I handled the last few and believe it is your turn, I think." The synth's tone remains as deadpan as the last statement.

The woman shakes her head. "Fine. My turn to handle the drunk." The woman stands in front of Madison, trying her best to maintain a "commanding presence" despite the overwhelming urge to leave the drunk in his stupor. "Sir? I'm Officer Violet of the Harrisonburg Police. Are you okay?"

Madison mumbles, "...urgh... ..you want me to put it where? Heh. Alright..."

"Sir? Wake up, sir."

"Who's there?" Madison rocks side to side with his head hanging at his shoulders.

"Officer Violet of the Harrisonburg Police."

Madison sloshes his words around, mixes up the inflection, and stumbles about his speech. "Harrisonburg?! Aww, fuck. How the hell did I get here?"

"Long night?"

Taking an exaggerated breath, Madison grumbles with enough coherence to barely make his words intelligible. "Long night something... Oh my head. Need my medicine, again." He lifts up the empty beer bottle, sways while he turns it upside down, and attempts to shake the last few drops out of it. "Looks like I'm outta my medicine."

A much tried Officer Violet crosses her arms and holds her head in her hand. "Sir, do you have an ID on you?"

The "drunk" in question fumbles around his pockets and checks his pant pockets. "HEY! Somebody stole my wallet... AND somebody pissed on my pants!"

Officer Violet drops her gaze and promptly rolls her eyes. The synth officer musters the best look of disapproval and directs it at the "drunk". Officer Violet continues. "Sir, is there anywhere you can go? It's not a good time to be out right now. Do you know anyone in this town?"

The synth officer pulls out a handheld device and taps out a few commands on the touch screen. She points the device at the "drunk". A few moments later an inconclusive result appears on the screen. "Nothing, ma'am. No local ID, no mods, or anything of significance. No record of any kind."

Officer Violet shakes her head at and stares at the mess between the two garbage bins. "Probably just another drifter."

Madison blurts out, "Hey, I know someone here. Yah! Rusty! R-rusty..."

"Rusty who?"

"Um, Rusty. Rusty. Rusty..." Madison feigns drifting off as his attention switches for a few seconds elsewhere before returning to the situation at hand. "...Rusty Shackelford."

Officer Violet's stare turns to disbelief. "Rusty Shackelford? You must be drunk-"

The synth interrupts to show the handheld device to Officer Violet. Both look at each before rereading the readout on the device together. Neither can actually believe any result returned and have to confirm with each other the results.

Officer Violet asks with the uncertainly creeping into her tone, "What's your name, sir?"

Madison continues the charade. "Um... Dale. Dale Gribble, officer."

The two officers again try to maintain disbelief, but Officer Violet shrugs it off. Stranger things happen. The synth doesn't seem completely convinced and keeps on running search after search on the device to only come up with consistent results.

Officer Violet sighs and looks at the slumped mess of a man before her. "Would you like to go home, sir?"

"That'd be nice, officer."

Officer Violet pats the shoulder of her fellow female synth officer. "Okay, pick him up."

The synth, deep in her futile searches on the device, startles at the pat on her shoulder. "What, ma'am?"

Officer Violet grins smugly. "I talked to him; you can help him up."

A grimace, a glance, and a muted sigh are all the synth can manage before accepting her task. She puts up the device and walks over to Madison. She stops in front of Madison and makes sure her gloves are on well. With swift and unstrained motion, she pulls up Madison promptly by his collar.

The sudden increase in altitude gives Madison little time to comment. "Whoa! Easy now! Damn! Somebody has been eating their Wheaties."

Officer Violet chuckles to herself, as her less-than-amused partner directs the stumbling "drunk" to the back of the squad cruiser. The synth shows no qualms about exerting her strength to keep Madison going in the exact direction she wants him to. Her slightly smaller, but athletic build greatly contrasts the larger and bulkier Madison.

"Boy, you sure are strong. What kind of workout you do? Hmm. Must be them Pilates or something to keep them ass and legs in such nice shape." Madison makes an overt gawk at the synth's backside to punctuate his statement.

The synth pauses, a momentary look of embarrassment is shortly interrupted by the less-than-careful tossing of Madison in the back of the car. She almost immediately shuts the door of the cruiser's backseat with little margin given to make sure her passenger was in the car completely beforehand.

With a humored smile, Officer Violet makes an attempt to lighten the situation. "Come on, Marigold. Even from a drunk, that's nice compliment."

Marigold regains her composure and turns to Officer Violet while going around to the passenger side of the cruiser. "Compliments of that nature, I can do without, ma'am."

Officer Violet crosses her arms on top of the roof the squad car. "Come on. You liked it. I saw it. No need to be ashamed."

Marigold promptly gets in the car and closes the door without another word. This particular conversation is over.

"Fine. I'll drop it." Officer Violet gets into the car and the group drives off.

“Okay. Season 1 or Season 2?”

Madison tilts his head side to side in the back seat of the squad car, trying to make a decision. “Don’t make me choose.”

Officer Violet checks both directions of traffic before making a left turn at the intersection. After the turn she resumes the debate. “You have to have a favorite between the two seasons. Everyone does!”

Madison pleads his case, holding both hands up like platforms of a scale. “Season one had innovation and that fresh new show feel, but season two had a great dynamics and was nice enough to try to end the series properly. It’s not fair to choose between them.”

“Well, fair enough I guess. “ Officer Violet casually points a finger back at Madison. “And season three never happened.”

Madison nods. “INDEED! May that abomination never see the light of day ever again.”

“What is the point of this discussion, ma’am.” The annoyed female synth, Marigold, breaks from her tasks on the cruiser’s onboard computer.

“She speaks!”

Officer Violet snickers, “Yes. She can talk. Not much of a conversationalist.”

“I’m not much for pointless conversations, ma’am.”

Madison tilts his head to the side and rotates over to face Marigold. “So, did they put the stick up your ass for you or did you do it to yourself?”

Silence is the only response from Marigold.

“Come on, Marigold. Don’t be that way,” scolds Officer Violet.

Silence again from the synth.

Madison turns his head to face the rear view mirror and gestures his head towards Marigold. “She doesn’t laugh much does she?”

Officer Violet glances up in the rearview mirror to look at her passenger. “No. I’ve tried everything to do so. It’s just the way synths are. Poor guys. Engineered for all business and no fun.”

Marigold dryly retorts, “There isn’t a problem with that, ma’am.”

Madison scratches his head a few times and notices the surroundings outside the cruiser. He stops for brief moment and eyes Marigold. “Tried everything?” He clears his throat and takes a deep breath in. “Two guys walk into a bar; the third one ducks. A butcher backed up into his grinder and got a little behind in his work. I wondered why the baseball was getting bigger; then it hit me. Did you hear about the guy whose whole left side was cut off; he’s all right now. There was a sign on the lawn at the drug rehab center that said “Keep off the Grass”. I used to have a fear of hurdles; then I got over it...”

A constant rapid fire barrage of puns, double entendre, and other one-liners filled the space of the inside the cruiser. Officer Violet opens her mouth to say something when she catches the impossible out of the corner of her eye. Marigold tries to maintain the typical stoic and deadpan demeanor she

has kept up so far, but momentary breaches of expression make their way to the surface. A pause in thought there, a twitch there, and a convulsion that almost became a laugh. Marigold blinks blankly and is genuinely puzzled at the mannerisms she just displayed. Officer Violet balances between driving the police cruiser and watching Marigold. And a very content “drunk” grins underneath his scarf with a sense of accomplishment about him. “Tried everything?”

Between Madison’s faux drunken discussions, questions, and odd compliments the rest of the car ride is entertaining to Officer Violet, but more so annoying to Marigold. Everything seems to be going well, until the vehicle stops at a traffic light a mere few blocks away from Madison’s “destination”.

Marigold notices a new message icon on the cruiser’s computer screen. “Ma’am, the head office has gotten hold of a picture of the person the corporate agents are looking for.”

Madison startles from cloud watching and looks to the front of the vehicle. “What?”

Officer Violet pulls over to the side of the street, puts the car into park, and twists her head over to the screen of the cruiser’s computer that Marigold is operating. “Really? Bring it up. I wonder who they’re running the witch hunt for.”

The two officers scrutinize the image on the computer’s screen, while Madison sits up in the back and also looks at the screen through the gap between the front seats. The picture appears. Officer Violet and Marigold eye each other.

Officer Violet’s eyes widen as her mind is made aware of the situation at hand. “Um, Marigold, is that?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Marigold replies almost instantly and even hints to her surprise as well.

Madison finally breaks the ruse, drops the whole drunken act, and speaks with a normal, clear voice neither officer has heard before. “I am SO not photogenic.”

An awkward silence is in the car. Neither officer makes a move. They truly don’t know what to do in this particular situation. Each glances over to see if the other has clue how to handle this. Madison slinks over to the passenger’s side door and opens it effortlessly. “Well, I can see I’ve overstayed my welcome. I’d like to thank you lovely ladies for the ride, but I must be off.”

Officer Violet reflexively grabs hold of her seatbelt buckle. “GET HIM, MARIGOLD!”

Marigold slams her weight against the door while pulling the handle. Rebounding back in the seat, she realizes her door is strangely locked. “Ma’am?!”

Officer Violet tries her door in vain. Both officers spin around in their seats, reach over, and try the back doors without any luck.

“How the hell did he get out?”

“I don’t know, ma’am!”

A tap on the passenger’s side window shows Madison pointing at the car. “The operating system has a really nasty glitch that allows administrative access if you know the right exploit. You’ll be here for about 15 minutes. Don’t worry; I put some games on the computer for ya’ll.”

The imprisoned in the vehicle stare dumbfounded as Madison almost skips away. A hearty manic laugh is mutely heard in squad car. Officer Violet grabs hold of the wheel, reaches for the gear shift, and switches it back into drive. The pedal slams against the floorboard with muffled thump as

both officers prepare for the pursuit. The car doesn't move. "He- The car- OH YOU HAVE TO BE KIDDING ME!" screams Officer Violet, as she slams her fists on the steering wheel.

Marigold starts tapping commands and reaching for various reset and power switches. A few moments she turns to her partner, "I can't get the vehicle back under control! Everything is locked out, ma'am!"

"Dammit! The windows are bullet proof and I know for a fact the doors are too tough to break loose without tools. There's got to be a way out."

Officer Violet looks at the windshield and grows a smirk. "That's right! They only glue windshields in place. Marigold!" She rotates back in her seat, bracing herself, and plants both feet against the windshield. Marigold takes heed and follows suit.

"Between you and me, I think we can knock this thing loose. Ready?"

"On three, ma'am."

Madison hums a happy tune as he strolls down the street. Only a kilometer or so and he'll be far outside the city; free to call it a day. It has been an exciting one and certainly one that he'll catch hell from Sudo about. These happy thoughts are jumbled by a strange thump coming from the vehicle he left the officers in. "Another thump? Yet another thump? Something is not right!" He turns around to see the windshield of the car launch off the frame of the vehicle and slide to a halt in the middle of the intersection. Madison cocks his head to the side and perks a brow. "Clever girls."

The two officers crawl out of the vehicle to stand on the hood of the car. In mere moments, they both spot Madison.

"Oh, shit," is all Madison utters before tearing off running down an alley.

Officer Violet launches herself into a sprint from the hood of the police cruiser. "Marigold, you radio for help; I'm going after him!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Marigold scans the skyline in the vicinity. After a few moments, she pulls out her hand held computer. She turns her head quizzically as the display on the computer shows a small cartoon version of Madison waving his finger at her. The same character waves goodbye and the device powers down. She tries to turn it back on a few times, but can only get similar displays before it powers back down, again. She puts the handheld computer away and groans, scratching the short orange and yellow hair on her head. A man walking along the sidewalk pauses to take notice of the synth standing on the hood of a police cruiser which, despite this city, isn't a common thing. Marigold turns her gaze to the man. "Where is the nearest network terminal, sir?" The man lifts his hand to point to a direction, nonplussed at the whole scene. Marigold hops down from the hood of the cruiser and starts walking that direction. "Thank you, sir." The man shrugs to himself and continues on with his day.

Garbage filled Back alleys, ill-kept breezeways, and grungy gaps between buildings are all Madison has seen in the past few minutes. He keeps running at a remarkable pace, zigzagging and diving down every odd passage and route. Officer Violet is close, very close. She not only keeps up with him, but is actually gaining ground. Each straight away they run together brings an odd banter between both of them as they shout at each other.

“You’re only making it harder on yourself by running!”

“Cliché!”

“Stop or I’ll shoot!”

“Another cliché! And you couldn’t hit me anyway!”

“Wanna bet!”

The plan currently isn’t working; she is going to catch him unless he tries something else. Of course, Madison’s plans are interrupted by the last thing he really wants. A familiar voice rattles over the radio, “MADISON! What is going on?”

“Can’t talk now, Sudo! Little busy!”

The stern and aggravated voice continues. “Busy? I’ve got both Hal and Firefly telling me you told them to ditch you. Firefly is almost sick she’s so nervous. You better explain yourself right-“

“I’M BEING CHASED BY THE FUZZ! Is THAT explanation enough for you?!” shouts Madison while flailing his arms in the air.

“Damn right you are!” Officer Violet shouts in reply.

Madison glances back annoyed. “I’m not talking to you!”

The once stern and aggravated voice now shows a bit more concern over the current events. “Okay, Madison!”

“Yes?”

“There should be a subway station around that area. The tunnels lead outside the city, if you can get there-“

“Good plan, one problem. I’m getting chased by the ONE OFFICER THAT TOOK THE GODDAMN SPEED ENHANCEMENT PACKAGE OVER THE ARMOR PACKAGE WHEN SHE SIGNED ON! The hell is wrong with you?! This town is a hellhole of corporate battlegrounds and you decide to run faster than be able to take a bullet?!” Madison shifts focus on the officer behind him and waits for an explanation.

Ever so responsive to her chase’s conversation Officer Violet yells back, “You don’t get shot when you move this fast!”

Oddly, Madison can’t find folly in that statement. “Fair enough!”

Officer Violet is less than few meters to closing in on Madison. A devious grin grows on her face as the distance grows shorter between them. Madison takes a sharp right down an alley, just as the grin disappears abruptly from Officer Violet’s face.

Madison rounds another corner leaving the alley behind him and slows down to a stop. He's not being chased anymore. "Sudo?"

"Yes?"

Madison starts to walk back towards the alleyway with his hands on his sides, breathing a bit heavily. "I think I lost the officer."

"That's great! Get back to base, now!" Sudo responds, relieved.

He continues tracing back his steps and cautiously walks back towards the last spot he remembers seeing the officer. "But, I shouldn't have lost her. She should have caught me. Something is not right here."

"Who cares Madison? Get out of there!"

He is about to round the last corner and sighs, "Nope. This doesn't make sense. I'm going to check this out. I'll talk to you later."

"WHAT?! Do not close this channel-" is all Sudo gets through to Madison before the channel closes.

Officer Violet is flat on the ground, looking up to the blue, clouded sky, as she struggles to breathe. Apart from breathing, she's having a harder time trying to figure what exactly is happening to her. "Can't breathe... can't... breathe..." is all she can muster between the brief gasps.

"Hmm."

She twists her head to the other side to see the same man she was running down now staring at her. More specifically, he's staring at her chest. Which coupled with the inability to breathe, this makes her situation in life VERY uncomfortable at this point. She barely manages to stare back with a very indignant look. "What. Are. You. Staring. At?" she shoves out between the gasps.

Madison continues looking at her chest. "Your lungs. Something isn't working right."

Officer Violet looks confused and throws her head back. "I. Know."

Madison shakes his head and cocks side to side. "Damn. Looks like those corp coders didn't care to test this update before releasing it. I guess you gotta make that deadline and worry about the body count later."

Officer Violet lifts her head up to face Madison for clarification. "What?"

"The manufacturer automatically updated your lung nanomod. Unfortunately, they didn't do enough QA on this release."

She cringes and squirms on the dirty pavement of the breezeway. She kicks dirt and slams her fist on the ground out of frustration. She coughs and feels liquid come out of her mouth. She touches her lips and brings her fingers in view. "Blood?"

Madison rears his head back at this and moves to action. "Okay, no time to explain. Hold on." He unceremoniously grabs each side of Officer Violet's ribcage as she shoots him a mean look. "Hold on, I mean it."

Officer Violet's body arches as it seems every muscle tenses. This completely unnerves her as she reaches and claws out to strangle Madison. "What. Are. You. Doing?!"

"Saving your life; you're welcome."

Officer Violet convulses again. She then completely relaxes every muscle and lays limp on the ground.

"I just reset your Nano Enhancement System. Or N.E.S. as the old schoolers like to say."

She remains still, but her bright green eyes focus right on Madison. The snarl and display of teeth make sure the intentions are well known.

"Don't worry this is only temporary. Gotta catch the system when it's trying to boot up. There we go. Add a little code here; a little code there. Let the rest of the startup continue," Madison explains as he maintains his focus elsewhere inside his head. Officer Violet regains some ability to move, which she uses to try to assault Madison. But the attacks are without any power as she doesn't have the strength at the moment.

"Out with old crap, in with something that'll work right. And, you should be able to breathe now."

She gasps for breath and rapidly breathes again. After restoring some much need oxygen to her body, she starts to regain some calm. She opens her mouth to say something but is interrupted by Madison.

"Hold that thought."

And as unceremoniously as Madison grabbed her to begin with, another involuntary spasm causes her body arch. She drops flat on the ground again and with a gasp Officer Violet is released from Madison's hold. She lies on the ground breathing normally, but feeling like she landed flat on the ground from a 3rd story fall. The next minute is spent with her slowly gaining control and gathering someone strength.

"So, was it good for you?"

The same man that grabbed her is still staring at her chest. She grits her teeth, balls up her fist, and-

With an upheld palm of the hand, Madison halts her mid motion. "Wait a second. Making sure everything is working. Okay, go ahead." He drops the hand back down.

A loud thump echoes out as Madison's head pivots to one shoulder and Officer Violet extends her fist past it pulling the rest of body along with it. She retracts her hand and start to shake it off in pain. "OWW! What are you made of? I've punched softer Brick walls!"

Madison rubs the side of his face and moves his jaw around under his scarf. "A bunch of harder stuff."

A few seconds pass. An odd calm and silence is held between the two in the dirty alley way. Officer Violet finally asks, "What just happened to me?"

"Short or long version?"

"Short."

“I saved your life.”

She narrows her eyes at Madison. “A little longer than that.”

Madison sits down around her, being sure to keep a little distance. With a deep breath taken he recounts. “I reset your nano enhancement system in order to allow me to introduce code into the system, which allowed me to directly access the firmware operating your lung nanomod. This, then, allowed me to dump that garbage and put something in there that works a whole lot better. Preferably, something won’t do crazy stuff, like try to break down your lung tissue. Then, I reset the system again. Sorry, about that part. I have to do it or everything won’t load up correctly.”

The woman sits up and brushes off the bits of debris in her short brown hair. She ponders in thought about all that just happened. Her head rocks back and forth. She pantomimes her thoughts out. After a few minutes of this, she turns towards Madison. “You. Hacked. Me?”

Madison nods to the concise answer. “That about sums it up.”

She seems a bit lost in finding an understanding. “That means- You did stuff. To my-“

“Yes, I messed with your internal workings.”

She’s speechless. She crosses her arms and tenses up and cautiously inquires, “You hacked me?”

Madison moves his head around to get a better look at Officer Violet’s face. “Yes? Something tells me you’re not processing this well-“

Officer Violet tenses up more and grows defensive, relating it in body language. “How could you do that? I’m a person not a-“

Madison holds his hand in front of her. “Listen, before you go down that train of thought, understand this. I only did this to save your life. And more importantly, I just installed the working version of the firmware from the manufacturer that just doesn’t have the auto-update turned on.”

“That means?”

“Your parts and pieces are legal. Nothing of illegal nature remains.”

“You still hacked me. You violated me.”

Madison groans, and puts his head back before glaring at Officer Violet. “I’m sorry, for preventing your untimely death of choking on your own blood and nanite disassembled lung tissue.”

She keeps her head still and averts her eyes to the side before looking back at Madison. “Okay. The alternatives weren’t good.” Madison tilts his head and continues to glare. She sighs. “And, maybe, I’m being over dramatic.”

He nods his head. “Thank you.”

She rubs her shoulder. “So what happens now?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. What’s your name?”

She stops herself and then speaks, “Chana.”

Madison reaches out his hand. “Please to make your acquaintance, I’m Madison.”

Chana shakes Madison's hand. "Good to meet you to- Wait. You're not THE Madison."

"I'm a THE now? Crap, I need to lay low for awhile. If they're starting to use the *the* context for me," mutters Madison, scratching the side of his face.

Chana eyes open up more at this realization and points at Madison. "Oh, wow! I heard of you. I've read about you."

Madison chuckles. "Oh, flattery will get you everywhere."

"You've pissed off about every corporation in the nation."

Madison stops chuckling and responds flatly, "I aim to please."

The two sit there on the dirty pavement between the old abandoned buildings. Chana tosses her head to get some hair out of the face and turns to Madison. "So, what do we do now?"

Madison shrugs and leans back, his arms back to bipod. "You could always chase me some more and we play cops and robbers again."

Chana snorts, "Nah. I think nearly dying once in a day is enough fun for me. Also, it'd be a bit rude to try take in the guy who saved my life."

Madison tilts forward and holds his fists close to his face in childish anticipation of her answer. "So? That means?"

Chana smirks as she picks herself back up. "I'll give you a head start and if I feel like it, I'll start chasing you down."

"Sounds like a plan," Madison says while he gets back up. He stands at attention and bows. "I wish you a good day, my lady." He turns and starts running off into the alley. Chana brushes herself off and notices that all radio traffic starts to come back. She thinks for a moment and realizes that there was an odd "silence" while she was chasing Madison. She's been completely out of touch from all the police frequencies for the duration of the chase. "Huh, he must have jammed the signals. Sneaky."

The airwaves are full of frantic transmissions. Officers are down across the city. Some issue with a nanomod update from the main office system. And every officer is required to check in immediately. Chana walks towards the street nearby. She is floored at scope of the situation and can only listen to all the frantic chatter across the different channels. She was lucky. She was very lucky to have chased probably the one person in the entire city that was capable of saving her as far out as she is.

"Ma'am?!" A familiar voice echoes from the mouth of alley facing the street.

Chana looks up to see Marigold frantically searching around. She waves towards her partner. "Marigold!"

Marigold stops to turn to see her partner and rushes over. "Are you okay, ma'am?"

Chana places her hand on Marigold's shoulder. "Yes. Just fine. And, yes. He did get away from me."

Marigold pauses for a moment to remember. "Oh. Truthfully, I was more concerned about your well being. He was just some corporate target, nothing to concern ourselves with, ma'am."

Chana points up to sky and taps the side of her head. "I overheard the chaos. How many officers are down?"

"I don't exactly know. We need to get back to the main office as soon as possible, ma'am."

Chana stretches a bit. "So, Marigold. How good are you at putting windshields BACK on cars."

Marigold cocks her head to the side. "I don't know. Until today, I didn't know how well I could take a windshield off a car. Much less, put it back on, ma'am."

Chana pats her partner on the back and walks along aide her. "Since I'm not going to get any pity for not having my lungs turned to a fine pulp, we should probably figure out how to put the windshield back on then."

Marigold nods with a faint smile. "I believe that would be a wise decision, ma'am."

Madison is back at the same uncovered boulder on the field. Lying on his back and staring at the sky, he sighs and does what he must do. "Sudo?"

A voice responds; the tone sits between pissed and concerned. "Madison? Is that you?!"

"Yes. And before you say anything; I got away, I'm okay, I gave everyone in the town the slip, and I'm coming back to base in a bit."

A very stern voice echoes on the radio, "I'm sending someone out there right now to pick you up--"

"Nah. I'm going to walk back. It's too nice of a day. The clouds are out and the trees bloom this time of the year turn to some many lovely shades. It's something to behold."

"Walk?! That will take--"

The channel closes off and Madison takes a breath in. "Long enough for you to figure out how to pull the shovel handle out of your ass."

He flings his arms forward to throw himself to sitting position. A sigh and cracking of the neck, he scoots himself off the boulder and starts walking. He takes hold of his hat and pulls it off his head. "I'll have to retire you for now." He places the hat inside his trench coat and pulls out a black sock cap. He pulls the cap over his long, stark white hair. He undoes his scarf and replaces it with a green one from his trench coat, keeping his head down and low. He takes the goggles off and puts them away. "Nothing obscures my view today." Bright blue eyes seem to faintly glow as he walks down the road pausing occasionally to get a better look at a flower, some discarded trash, or staring at the clouds.