



**The Things that Make Me Weak and Strange Get
Engineered Away**
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The Things that Make Me Weak and Strange Get Engineered Away

*'Cause it's gonna be the future soon,
And I won't always be this way,
When the things that make me weak and strange get engineered away*
—Jonathan Coulton, "The Future Soon"

Lawrence's cubicle was just the right place to chew on a thorny logfile problem: decorated with the votive fetishes of his monastic order, a thousand calming, clarifying mandalas and saints devoted to helping him think clearly.

From the nearby cubicles, Lawrence heard the ritualized muttering of a thousand brothers and sisters in the Order of Reflective Analytics, a surruration of harmonized, concentrated thought. On his display, he watched an instrument widget track the decibel level over time, the graph overlaid on a 3D curve of normal activity over time and space. He noted that the level was a little high, the room a little more anxious than usual.

He clicked and tapped and thought some more, massaging the logfile to see if he could make it snap into focus and make sense, but it stubbornly refused to be sensible. The data tracked the custody chain of the bitstream the Order munged for the Securitat, and somewhere in there, a file had grown by 68 bytes, blowing its checksum and becoming An Anomaly.

Order lore was filled with Anomalies, loose threads in the fabric of reality—bugs to be squashed in the data-set that was the Order's universe. Starting with the pre-Order sysadmin who'd tracked a \$0.75 billing anomaly back to foreign spy-ring that was using his systems to hack his military, these morality tales were object lessons to the Order's monks: pick at the seams and the world will unravel in useful and interesting ways.

Lawrence had reached the end of his personal picking capacity, though. It was time to talk it over with Gerta.

He stood up and walked away from his cubicle, touching his belt to let his sensor array know that he remembered it was there. It counted his steps and his heartbeats and his EEG spikes as he made his way out into the compound.

It's not like Gerta was in charge—the Order worked in autonomous little units with rotating leadership, all coordinated by some groupware that let them keep the hierarchy nice and flat, the way that they all liked it. Authority sucked.

But once you instrument every keystroke, every click, every erg of productivity, it soon becomes apparent who knows her shit and who just doesn't. Gerta knew the shit cold.

"Question," he said, walking up to her. She liked it brusque. No nonsense.

She batted her handball against the court wall three more times, making long dives for it, sweaty grey hair whipping back and forth, body arcing in graceful flows. Then she caught the ball and tossed it into the basket by his feet. "Lester, huh? All right, surprise me."

"It's this," he said, and tossed the file at her pan. She caught it with the same fluid gesture and her computer gave it to her on the handball court wall, which was the closest display for which she controlled the lockfile. She peered at the data, spinning the graph this way and that, peering intently.

She pulled up some of her own instruments and replayed the bit-stream, recalling the logfiles from many network taps from the moment at which the file grew by the anomalous 68 bytes.

"You think it's an Anomaly, don't you?" She had a fine blond moustache that was beaded with sweat, but her breathing had slowed to normal and her hands were steady and sure as she gestured at the wall.

"I was kind of hoping, yeah. Good opportunity for personal growth, your Anomalies."

"Easy to say why you'd call it an Anomaly, but look at this." She pulled the checksum of the injected bytes, then showed him her network taps, which were playing the traffic back and forth for several minutes before and after the insertion. The checksummed block moved back through the routers, one hop, two hops, three hops, then to a terminal. The authentication data for the terminal told them who owned its lockfile then: Zbigniew Krotoski, login zbigkrot. Gerta grabbed his room number.

"Now, we don't have the actual payload, of course, because that gets flushed. But we have the checksum, we have the username, and look at this, we have him typing 68 unspecified bytes in a pattern consistent with his biometrics five minutes and eight seconds prior to the injection.

So, let's go ask him what his 68 characters were and why they got added to the Securitat's data-stream."

He led the way, because he knew the corner of the campus where zbigkrot worked pretty well, having lived there for five years when he first joined the Order. Zbigkrot was probably a relatively recent inductee, if he was still in that block.

His belt gave him a reassuring buzz to let him know he was being logged as he entered the building, softer haptic feedback coming as he was logged to each floor as they went up the clean-swept wooden stairs. Once, he'd had the work-detail of re-staining those stairs, stripping the ancient wood, sanding it baby-skin smooth, applying ten coats of varnish, polishing it to a high gloss. The work had been incredible, painful and rewarding, and seeing the stairs still shining gave him a tangible sense of satisfaction.

He knocked at zbigkrot's door twice before entering. Technically, any brother or sister was allowed to enter any room on the campus, though there were norms of privacy and decorum that were far stronger than any law or rule.

The room was bare, every last trace of its occupant removed. A fine dust covered every surface, swirling in clouds as they took a few steps in. They both coughed explosively and stepped back, slamming the door.

"Skin," Gerta croaked. "Collected from the ventilation filters. DNA for every person on campus, in a nice, even, Gaussian distribution. Means we can't use biometrics to figure out who was in this room before it was cleaned out."

Lawrence tasted the dust in his mouth and swallowed his gag reflex. Technically, he knew that he was always inhaling and ingesting other peoples' dead skin-cells, but not by the mouthful.

"All right," Gerta said. "Now you've got an Anomaly. Congrats, Lawrence. Personal growth awaits you."

The campus only had one entrance to the wall that surrounded it. "Isn't that a fire-hazard?" Lawrence asked the guard who sat in the pill-box at the gate.

"Naw," the man said. He was old, with the serene air of someone who'd been in the Order for decades. His beard was combed and shining, plaited into a thick braid that hung to his belly, which had only the merest hint of a little pot. "Comes a fire, we hit the panic button, reverse

the magnets lining the walls, and the foundations destabilize at twenty sections. The whole thing'd come down in seconds. But no one's going to sneak in or out that way."

"I did *not* know that," Lawrence said.

"Public record, of course. But pretty obscure. Too tempting to a certain prankster mindset."

Lawrence shook his head. "Learn something new every day."

The guard made a gesture that caused something to depressurize in the gateway. A primed *hum* vibrated through the floorboards. "We keep the inside of the vestibule at 10 atmospheres, and it opens inward from outside. No one can force that door open without us knowing about it in a pretty dramatic way."

"But it must take forever to re-pressurize?"

"Not many people go in and out. Just data."

Lawrence patted himself down.

"You got everything?"

"Do I seem nervous to you?"

The old timer picked up his tea and sipped at it. "You'd be an idiot if you weren't. How long since you've been out?"

"Not since I came in. Sixteen years ago. I was twenty one."

"Yeah," the old timer said. "Yeah, you'd be an idiot if you weren't nervous. You follow politics?"

"Not my thing," Lawrence said. "I know it's been getting worse out there—"

The old timer barked a laugh. "Not your thing? It's probably time you got out into the wide world, son. You might ignore politics, but it won't ignore *you*."

"Is it dangerous?"

"You going armed?"

"I didn't know that was an option."

"Always an option. But not a smart one. Any weapon you don't know how to use belongs to your enemy. Just be circumspect. Listen before you talk. Watch before you act. They're good people out there, but they're in a bad, bad situation."

Lawrence shuffled his feet and shifted the straps of his bindle. "You're not making me very comfortable with all this, you know."

“Why are you going out anyway?”

“It’s an Anomaly. My first. I’ve been waiting sixteen years for this. Someone poisoned the Securitat’s data and left the campus. I’m going to go ask him why he did it.”

The old man blew the gate. The heavy door lurched open, revealing the vestibule. “Sounds like an Anomaly all right.” He turned away and Lawrence forced himself to move toward the vestibule. The man held his hand out before he reached it. “You haven’t been outside in fifteen years, it’s going to be a surprise. Just remember, we’re a noble species, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.”

Then he gave Lawrence a little shove that sent him into the vestibule. The door slammed behind him. The vestibule smelled like machine oil and rubber, gaskety smells. It was dimly lit by rows of white LEDs that marched up the walls like drunken ants. Lawrence barely had time to register this before he heard a loud *thunk* from the outer door and it swung away.

Lawrence walked down the quiet street, staring up at the same sky he’d lived under, breathing the same air he’d always breathed, but marveling at how *different* it all was. His heartbeat and respiration were up—the tips of the first two fingers on his right hand itched slightly under his feedback gloves—and his thoughts were doing that race-condition thing where every time he tried to concentrate on something he thought about how he was trying to concentrate on something and should stop thinking about how he was concentrating and just concentrate.

This was how it had been sixteen years before, when he’d gone into the Order. He’d been so *angry* all the time then. Sitting in front of his keyboard, looking at the world through the lens of the network, suffering all the fools with poor grace. He’d been a bright 14-year-old, a genius at 16, a rising star at 18, and a failure by 21. He was depressed all the time, his weight had ballooned to nearly 300 pounds, and he had been fired three times in two years.

One day he stood up from his desk at work—he’d just been hired at a company that was selling learning, trainable vision-systems for analyzing images, who liked him because he’d retained his security clearance when he’d been fired from his previous job—and walked out of the building. It had been a blowing, wet, grey day, and the streets of New York were as empty as they ever got.

Standing on Sixth Avenue, looking north from midtown, staring at the buildings the cars and the buses and the people and the tallwalkers, that's when he had his realization: *He was not meant to be in this world.*

It just didn't suit him. He could *see* its workings, see how its politics and policies were flawed, see how the system needed debugging, see what made its people work, but he couldn't touch it. Every time he reached in to adjust its settings, he got mangled by its gears. He couldn't convince his bosses that he knew what they were doing wrong. He couldn't convince his colleagues that he knew best. Nothing he did succeeded—every attempt he made to right the wrongs of the world made him miserable and made everyone else angry.

Lawrence knew about humans, so he knew about this: this was the exact profile of the people in the Order. Normally he would have taken the subway home. It was forty blocks to his place, and he didn't get around so well anymore. Plus there was the rain and the wind.

But today, he walked, huffing and limping, using his cane more and more as he got further and further uptown, his knee complaining with each step. He got to his apartment and found that the elevator was out of service—second time that month—and so he took the stairs. He arrived at his apartment so out of breath he felt like he might vomit.

He stood in the doorway, clutching the frame, looking at his sofa and table, the piles of books, the dirty dishes from that morning's breakfast in the little sink. He'd watched a series of short videos about the Order once, and he'd been struck by the little monastic cells each member occupied, so neat, so tidy, everything in its perfect place, serene and thoughtful.

So unlike his place.

He didn't bother to lock the door behind him when he left. They said New York was the burglary capital of the developed world, but he didn't know anyone who'd been burgled. If the burglars came, they were welcome to everything they could carry away and the landlord could take the rest. He was not meant to be in this world.

He walked back out into the rain and, what the hell, hailed a cab, and, hail mary, one stopped when he put his hand out. The cabbie grunted when he said he was going to Staten Island, but, what the hell, he pulled three twenties out of his wallet and slid them through the glass partition. The cabbie put the pedal down. The rain sliced through the Manhattan canyons and battered the windows and they went over the Verrazano

Bridge and he said goodbye to his life and the outside world forever, seeking a world he could be a part of.

Or at least, that's how he felt, as his heart swelled with the drama of it all. But the truth was much less glamorous. The brothers who admitted him at the gate were cheerful and a little weird, like his co-workers, and he didn't get a nice clean cell to begin with, but a bunk in a shared room and a detail helping to build more quarters. And they didn't leave his stuff for the burglars—someone from the Order went and cleaned out his place and put his stuff in a storage locker on campus, made good with his landlord and so on. By the time it was all over, it all felt a little... ordinary. But in a good way, Ordinary was good. It had been a long time since he'd felt ordinary. Order, ordinary. They went together. He needed ordinary.

The Securitat van played a cheerful engine-tone as it zipped down the street towards him. It looked like a children's drawing—a perfect little electrical box with two seats in front and a meshed-in lockup in the rear. It accelerated smoothly down the street towards him, then braked perfectly at his toes, rocking slightly on its suspension as its doors gull-winged up.

“Cool!” he said, involuntarily, stepping back to admire the smart little car. He reached for the lifelogger around his neck and aimed it at the two Securitat officers who were debarking, moving with stiff grace in their armor. As he raised the lifelogger, the officer closest to him reached out with serpentine speed and snatched it out of his hands, power-assisted fingers coming together on it with a loud, plasticky *crunk* as the device shattered into a rain of fragments. Just as quickly, the other officer had come around the vehicle and seized Lawrence's wrists, bringing them together in a painful, machine-assisted grip.

The one who had crushed his lifelogger passed his palms over Lawrence's chest, arms and legs, holding them a few millimeters away from him. Lawrence's pan went nuts, intrusion detection sensors reporting multiple hostile reads of his identifiers, millimeter-wave radar scans, HERF attacks, and assorted shenanigans. All his feedback systems went to full alert, going from itchy, back-of-the-neck liminal sensations into high intensity pinches, prods and buzzes. It was a deeply alarming sensation, like his internal organs were under attack.

He choked out an incoherent syllable, and the Securitat man who was hand-wanding him raised a warning finger, holding it so close to his

nose he went cross-eyed. He fell silent while the man continued to wand him, twitching a little to let his pan know that it was all OK.

"From the cult, then, are you?" the Securitat man said, after he'd kicked Lawrence's ankles apart and spread his hands on the side of the truck.

"That's right," Lawrence said. "From the Order." He jerked his head toward the gates, just a few tantalizing meters away. "I'm out—"

"You people are really something, you know that? You could have been *killed*. Let me tell you a few things about how the world works: when you are approached by the Securitat, you stand still with your hands stretched straight out to either side. You do *not* raise unidentified devices and point them at the officers. Not unless you're trying to commit suicide by cop. Is that what you're trying to do?"

"No," Lawrence said. "No, of course not. I was just taking a picture for—"

"And you do *not* photograph or log our security procedures. There's a war on, you know." The man's forehead bunched together. "Oh, for shit's sake. We should take you in now, you know it? Tie up a dozen people's day, just to process you through the system. You could end up in a cell for, oh, I don't know, a month. You want that?"

"Of course not," Lawrence said. "I didn't realize—"

"You didn't, but you *should have*. If you're going to come walking around here where the real people are, you have to learn how to behave like a real person in the real world."

The other man, who had been impassively holding Lawrence's wrists in a crushing grip, eased up. "Let him go?" he said.

The first officer shook his head. "If I were you, I would turn right around, walk through those gates, and never come out again. Do I make myself clear?"

Lawrence wasn't clear at all. Was the cop ordering him to go back? Or just giving him advice? Would he be arrested if he didn't go back in? It had been a long time since Lawrence had dealt with authority and the feeling wasn't a good one. His chest heaved, and sweat ran down the his back, pooling around his ass, then moving in rivulets down the backs of his legs.

"I understand," he said. Thinking: *I understand that asking questions now would not be a good idea.*

The subway was more or less as he remembered it, though the long line of people waiting to get through the turnstiles turned out to be a line to go through a security checkpoint, complete with bag-search and X-ray. But the New Yorkers were the same—no one made eye contact with anyone else, but if they did, everyone shared a kind of bitter shrug, as if to say, *Ain't it the fuckin' truth?*

But the smell was the same—oil and damp and bleach and the indefinable, human smell of a place where millions had passed for decades, where millions would pass for decades to come. He found himself standing before a subway map, looking at it, comparing it to the one in his memory to find the changes, the new stations that must have sprung up during his hiatus from reality.

But there weren't new stations. In fact, it seemed to him that there were a lot *fewer* stations—hadn't there been one at Bleecker Street, and another at Cathedral Parkway? Yes, there had been—but look now, they were gone, and... and there were stickers, white stickers over the places where the stations had been. He reached up and touched the one over Bleecker Street.

"I still can't get used to it, either," said a voice at his side. "I used to change for the F Train there every day when I was a kid." It was a woman, about the same age as Gerta, but more beaten down by the years, deeper creases in her face, a stoop in her stance. But her face was kind, her eyes soft.

"What happened to it?"

She took a half-step back from him. "Bleecker Street," she said. "You know, Bleecker Street? Like 9/11? Bleecker Street?" Like the name of the station was an incantation.

It rang a bell. It wasn't like he didn't ever read the news, but it had a way of sliding off of you when you were on campus, as though it was some historical event in a book, not something happening right there, on the other side of the wall.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've been away. Bleecker Street, yes, of course."

She gave him a squinty stare. "You must have been *very* far away."

He tried out a sheepish grin. "I'm a monk," he said. "From the Order of Reflective Analytics. I've been out of the world for sixteen years. Until today, in fact. My name is Lawrence." He stuck his hand out and she shook it like it was made of china.

“A monk,” she said. “That’s very interesting. Well, you enjoy your little vacation.” She turned on her heel and walked quickly down the platform. He watched her for a moment, then turned back to the map, counting the missing stations.

When the train ground to a halt in the tunnel between 42nd and 50th street, the entire car let out a collective groan. When the lights flickered and went out, they groaned louder. The emergency lights came on in sickly green and an incomprehensible announcement played over the loudspeakers. Evidently, it was an order to evacuate, because the press of people began to struggle through the door at the front of the car, then further and further. Lawrence let the press of bodies move him too.

Once they reached the front of the train, they stepped down onto the tracks, each passenger turning silently to help the next, again with that *Ain’t it the fuckin’ truth?* look. Lawrence turned to help the person behind him and saw that it was the woman who’d spoken to him on the platform. She smiled a little smile at him and turned with practiced ease to help the person behind her.

They walked single file on a narrow walkway beside the railings. Securitat officers were strung out at regular intervals, wearing night scopes and high, rubberized boots. They played flashlights over the walkers as they evacuated.

“Does this happen often?” Lawrence said over his shoulder. His words were absorbed by the dead subterranean air and he thought that she might not have heard him but then she sighed.

“Only every time there’s an anomaly in the head-count—when the system says there’s too many or too few people in the trains. Maybe once a week.” He could feel her staring at the back of his head. He looked back at her and saw her shaking her head. He stumbled and went down on one knee, clanging his head against the stone walls made soft by a fur of condensed train exhaust, cobwebs and dust.

She helped him to his feet. “You don’t seem like a snitch, Lawrence. But you’re a monk. Are you going to turn me in for being suspicious?”

He took a second to parse this out. “I don’t work for the Securitat,” he said. It seemed like the best way to answer.

She snorted. “That’s not what we hear. Come on, they’re going to start shouting at us if we don’t move.”

They walked the rest of the way to an emergency staircase together, and emerged out of a sidewalk grating, blinking in the remains of the autumn sunlight, a bloody color on the glass of the highrises. She looked at him and made a face. "You're filthy, Lawrence." She thumped at his sleeves and great dirty clouds rose off them. He looked down at the knees of his pants and saw that they were hung with boogers of dust.

The New Yorkers who streamed past them ducked to avoid the dirty clouds. "Where can I clean up?" he said.

"Where are you staying?"

"I was thinking I'd see about getting a room at the Y or a backpacker's hostel, somewhere to stay until I'm done."

"Done?"

"I'm on a complicated errand. Trying to locate someone who used to be in the Order."

Her face grew hard again. "No one gets out alive, huh?"

He felt himself blushing. "It's not like that. Wow, you've got strange ideas about us. I want to find this guy because he disappeared under mysterious circumstances and I want to—" How to explain Anomalies to an outsider? "It's a thing we do. Unravel mysteries. It makes us better people."

"Better people?" She snorted again. "Better than what? Don't answer. Come on, I live near here. You can wash up at my place and be on your way. You're not going to get into any backpacker's hostel looking like you just crawled out of a sewer—you're more likely to get detained for being an 'indigent of suspicious character.'"

He let her steer him a few yards uptown. "You think that I work for the Securitat but you're inviting me into your home?"

She shook her head and led him around a corner, along a long crosstown block, and then turned back uptown. "No," she said. "I think you're a confused stranger who is apt to get himself into some trouble if someone doesn't take you in hand and help you get smart, fast. It doesn't cost me anything to lend a hand, and you don't seem like the kind of guy who'd mug, rape and kill an old lady."

"The discipline," he said, "is all about keeping track of the way that the world is, and comparing it to your internal perceptions, all the time. When I entered the Order, I was really big. Fat, I mean. The discipline

made me log every bit of food I ate, and I discovered a few important things: first, I was eating about 20 times a day, just grazing on whatever happened to be around. Second, that I was consuming about 4,000 calories a day, mostly in industrial sugars like high-fructose corn syrup. Just *knowing* how I ate made a gigantic difference. I felt like I ate sensibly, always ordering a salad with lunch and dinner, but I missed the fact that I was glooping on half a cup of sweetened, high-fat dressing, and having a cookie or two every hour between lunch and dinner, and a half-pint of ice-cream before bed most nights.

“But it wasn’t just food—in the Order, we keep track of *everything*; our typing patterns, our sleeping patterns, our moods, our reading habits. I discovered that I read faster when I’ve been sleeping more, so now, when I need to really get through a lot of reading, I make sure I sleep more. Used to be I’d try to stay up all night with pots of coffee to get the reading done. Of course, the more sleep-deprived I was, the slower I read; and the slower I read the more I needed to stay up to catch up with the reading. No wonder college was such a blur.

“So that’s why I’ve stayed. It’s empiricism, it’s as old as Newton, as the Enlightenment.” He took another sip of his water, which tasted like New York tap water had always tasted (pretty good, in fact), and which he hadn’t tasted for sixteen years. The woman was called Posy, and her old leather sofa was worn but well-loved, and smelled of saddle soap. She was watching him from a kitchen chair she’d brought around to the living room of the tiny apartment, rubbing her stockinged feet over the good wool carpet that showed a few old stains hiding beneath strategically placed furnishings and knick-knacks.

He had to tell her the rest, of course. You couldn’t understand the Order unless you understood the rest. “I’m a screwup, Posy. Or at least, I was. We all were. Smart and motivated and promising, but just a wretched person to be around. Angry, bitter, all those smarts turned on biting the heads off of the people who were dumb enough to care about me or employ me. And so smart that I could talk myself into believing that it was all everyone else’s fault, the idiots. It took instrumentation, empiricism, to get me to understand the patterns of my own life, to master my life, to become the person I wanted to be.”

“Well, you seem like a perfectly nice young man now,” Posy said.

That was clearly his cue to go, and he’d changed into a fresh set of trousers, but he couldn’t go, not until he’d picked apart something she’d said earlier. “Why did you think I was a snitch?”

“I think you know that very well, Lawrence,” she said. “I can’t imagine someone who’s so into measuring and understanding the world could possibly have missed it.”

Now he knew what she was talking about. “We just do contract work for the Securitat. It’s just one of the ways the Order sustains itself.” The founders had gone into business refilling toner cartridges, which was like the 21st century equivalent of keeping bees or brewing dark, thick beer. They’d branched out into remote IT administration, then into data-mining and security, which was a natural for people with Order training. “But it’s all anonymized. We don’t snitch on people. We report on anomalous events. We do it for lots of different companies, too—not just the Securitat.”

Posy walked over to the window behind her small dining room table, rolling away a couple of handsome old chairs on castors to reach it. She looked down over the billion lights of Manhattan, stretching all the way downtown to Brooklyn. She motioned to him to come over, and he squeezed in beside her. They were on the twenty-third floor, and it had been many years since he’d stood this high and looked down. The world is different from high up.

“There,” she said, pointing at an apartment building across the way. “There, you see it? With the broken windows?” He saw it, the windows covered in cardboard. “They took them away last week. I don’t know why. You never know why. You become a person of interest and they take you away and then later, they always find a reason to keep you away.”

Lawrence’s hackles were coming up. He found stuff that didn’t belong in the data—he didn’t arrest people. “So if they always find a reason to keep you away, doesn’t that mean—”

She looked like she wanted to slap him and he took a step back. “We’re all guilty of something, Lawrence. That’s how the game is rigged. Look closely at anyone’s life and you’ll find, what, a little black-market-eering, a copyright infringement, some cash economy business with unreported income, something obscene in your Internet use, something in your bloodstream that shouldn’t be there. I bought that sofa from a *cop*, Lawrence, bought it ten years ago when he was leaving the building. He didn’t give me a receipt and didn’t collect tax, and technically that makes us offenders.” She slapped the radiator. “I overrode the governor on this ten minutes after they installed it. Everyone does it. They make it easy—you just stick a penny between two contacts and hey presto, the

city can't turn your heat down anymore. They wouldn't make it so easy if they didn't expect everyone to do it—and once everyone's done it, we're all guilty.

"The people across the street, they were Pakistani or maybe Sri Lankan or Bangladeshi. I'd see the wife at the service laundry. Nice professional lady, always lugging around a couple kids on their way to or from day-care. She—" Posy broke off and stared again. "I once saw her reach for her change and her sleeve rode up and there was a number tattooed there, there on her wrist." Posy shuddered. "When they took her and her husband and their kids, she stood at the window and pounded at it and screamed for help. You could hear her from here."

"That's terrible," Lawrence said. "But what does it have to do with the Order?"

She sat back down. "For someone who is supposed to know himself, you're not very good at connecting the dots."

Lawrence stood up. He felt an obscure need to apologize. Instead, he thanked her and put his glass in the sink. She shook his hand solemnly.

"Take care out there," she said. "Good luck finding your escapee."

Here's what Lawrence knew about Zbigniew Krotoski. He had been inducted into the Order four years earlier. He was a native-born New Yorker. He had spent his first two years in the Order trying to coax some of the elders into a variety of pointless flamewars about the ethics of working for the Securitat, and then had settled into being a very productive member. He spent his 20 percent time—the time when each monk had to pursue non-work-related projects—building aerial photography rigs out of box-kites and tiny cameras that the Monks installed on their systems to help them monitor their body mechanics and ergonomic posture.

Zbigkrot performed in the eighty-fifth percentile of the Order, which was respectable enough. Lawrence had started there and had crept up and down as low as 70 and as high as 88, depending on how he was doing in the rest of his life. Zbigkrot was active in the gardens, both the big ones where they grew their produce and a little allotment garden where he indulged in baroque cross-breeding experiments, which were in vogue among the monks then.

The Securitat stream to which he'd added 68 bytes was long gone, but it was the kind of thing that the Order handled on a routine basis: given

the timing and other characteristics, Lawrence thought it was probably a stream of purchase data from hardware and grocery stores, to be inspected for unusual patterns that might indicate someone buying bomb ingredients. Zbigkrot had worked on this kind of data thousands of times before, six times just that day. He'd added the sixty-eight bytes and then left, invoking his right to do so at the lone gate. The gatekeeper on duty remembered him carrying a little rucksack, and mentioning that he was going to see his sister in New York.

Zbigkrot once had a sister in New York—that much could be ascertained. Anja Krotoski had lived on 23rd Street in a co-op near Lexington. But that had been four years previous, when he'd joined the Order, and she wasn't there anymore. Her numbers all rang dead.

The apartment building had once been a pleasant, middle-class sort of place, with a red awning and a niche for a doorman. Now it had become more run down, the awning's edges frayed, one pane of lobby glass broken out and replaced with a sheet of cardboard. The doorman was long gone.

It seemed to Lawrence that this fate had befallen many of the City's buildings. They reminded him of the buildings he'd seen in Belgrade one time, when he'd been sent out to brief a gang of outsource programmers his boss had hired—neglected for years, indifferently patched by residents who had limited access to materials.

It was the dinner hour, and a steady trickle of people were letting themselves into Anja's old building. Lawrence watched a couple of them enter the building and noticed something wonderful and sad: as they approached the building, their faces were the hard masks of city-dwellers, not meeting anyone's eye, clipping along at a fast pace that said, "Don't screw with me." But once they passed the threshold of their building and the door closed behind them, their whole affect changed. They slumped, they smiled at one another, they leaned against the mailboxes and set down their bags and took off their hats and fluffed their hair and turned back into people.

He remembered that feeling from his life before, the sense of having two faces: the one he showed to the world and the one that he reserved for home. In the Order, he only wore one face, one that he knew in exquisite detail.

He approached the door now, and his pan started to throb ominously, letting him know that he was enduring hostile probes. The building wanted to know who he was and what business he had there, and it was

attempting to fingerprint everything about him from his pan to his gait to his face.

He took up a position by the door and dialed back the pan's response to a dull pulse. He waited for a few minutes until one of the residents came down: a middle-aged man with a dog, a little sickly-looking schnauzer with grey in its muzzle.

"Can I help you?" the man said, from the other side of the security door, not unlatching it.

"I'm looking for Anja Krotoski," he said. "I'm trying to track down her brother."

The man looked him up and down. "Please step away from the door."

He took a few steps back. "Does Ms. Krotoski still live here?"

The man considered. "I'm sorry, sir, I can't help you." He waited for Lawrence to react.

"You don't know, or you can't help me?"

"Don't wait under this awning. The police come if anyone waits under this awning for more than three minutes."

The man opened the door and walked away with his dog.

His phone rang before the next resident arrived. He cocked his head to answer it, then remembered that his lifelogger was dead and dug in his jacket for a mic. There was one at his wrist pulse-points used by the health array. He unvelcroed it and held it to his mouth.

"Hello?"

"It's Gerta, boyo. Wanted to know how your Anomaly was going."

"Not good," he said. "I'm at the sister's place and they don't want to talk to me."

"You're walking up to strangers and asking them about one of their neighbors, huh?"

He winced. "Put it that way, yeah, OK, I understand why this doesn't work. But Gerta, I feel like Rip Van Winkle here. I keep putting my foot in it. It's so different."

"People are people, Lawrence. Every bad behavior and every good one lurks within us. They were all there when you were in the world—in different proportion, with different triggers. But all there. You know

yourself very well. Can you observe the people around you with the same keen attention?"

He felt slightly put upon. "That's what I'm trying—"

"Then you'll get there eventually. What, you're in a hurry?"

Well, no. He didn't have any kind of timeline. Some people chased Anomalies for *years*. But truth be told, he wanted to get out of the City and back onto campus. "I'm thinking of coming back to Campus to sleep."

Gerta clucked. "Don't give in to the agoraphobia, Lawrence. Hang in there. You haven't even heard my news yet, and you're already ready to give up?"

"What news? And I'm not giving up, just want to sleep in my own bed—"

"The entry checkpoints, Lawrence. You cannot do this job if you're going to spend four hours a day in security queues. Anyway, the news.

"It wasn't the first time he did it. I've been running the logs back three years and I've found at least a dozen streams that he tampered with. Each time he used a different technique. This was the first time we caught him. Used some pretty subtle tripwires when he did it, so he'd know if anyone ever caught on. Must have spent his whole life living on edge, waiting for that moment, waiting to bug out. Must have been a hard life."

"What was he doing? Spying?"

"Most assuredly," Gerta said. "But for whom? For the enemy? The Securitat?"

They'd considered going to the Securitat with the information, but why bother? The Order did business with the Securitat, but tried never to interact with them on any other terms. The Securitat and the Order had an implicit understanding: so long as the Order was performing excellent data-analysis, it didn't have to fret the kind of overt scrutiny that prevailed in the real world. Undoubtedly, the Securitat kept satellite eyes, data-snoopers, wiretaps, millimeter radar and every other conceivable surveillance trained on each Campus in the world, but at the end of the day, they were just badly socialized geeks who'd left the world, and useful geeks at that. The Securitat treated the Order the way that Lawrence's old bosses treated the company sysadmins: expendable geeks who no one cared about—so long as nothing went wrong.

No, there was no sense in telling the Securitat about the 68 bytes.

“Why would the Securitat poison its own data-streams?”

“You know that when the Soviets pulled out of Finland, they found 40 kilometers of wire-tapping wire in KGB headquarters? The building was only 12 stories tall! Spying begets spying. The worst, most dangerous enemy the Securitat has is the Securitat.”

There were Securitat vans on the street around him, going past every now and again, eerily silent engines, playing their cheerful music. He stepped back into shadow, then thought better of it and stood under a pool of light.

“OK, so it was a habit. How do I find him? No one in the sister’s building will talk to me.”

“You need to put them at their ease. Tell them the truth, that often works.”

“You know how people feel about the Order out here?” He thought of Posy. “I don’t know if the truth is going to work here.”

“You’ve been in the order for sixteen years. You’re not just some fumble-tongued outcast anymore. Go talk to them.”

“But—”

“Go, Lawrence. Go. You’re a smart guy, you’ll figure it out.”

He went. Residents were coming home every few minutes now, carrying grocery bags, walking dogs, or dragging their tired feet. He almost approached a young woman, then figured that she wouldn’t want to talk to a strange man on the street at night. He picked a guy in his thirties, wearing jeans and a huge old vintage coat that looked like it had come off the eastern front.

“Scuse me,” he said. “I’m trying to find someone who used to live here.”

The guy stopped and looked Lawrence up and down. He had a handsome sweater on underneath his coat, design-y and cosmopolitan, the kind of thing that made Lawrence think of Milan or Paris. Lawrence was keenly aware of his generic Order-issued suit, a brown, rumped, ill-fitting thing, topped with a polymer coat that, while warm, hardly flattered.

“Good luck with that,” he said, then started to move past.

“Please,” Lawrence said. “I’m—I’m not used to how things are around here. There’s probably some way I could ask you this that would put you

at your ease, but I don't know what it is. I'm not good with people. But I really need to find this person, she used to live here."

The man stopped, looked at him again. He seemed to recognize something in Lawrence, or maybe it was that he was disarmed by Lawrence's honesty.

"Why would you want to do that?"

"It's a long story," he said. "Basically, though: I'm a monk from the Order of Reflective Analytics and one of our guys has disappeared. His sister used to live here—maybe she still does—and I wanted to ask her if she knew where I could find him."

"Let me guess, none of my neighbors wanted to help you."

"You're only the second guy I've asked, but yeah, pretty much."

"Out here in the real world, we don't really talk about each other to strangers. Too much like being a snitch. Lucky for you, my sister's in the Order, out in Oregon, so I know you're not all a bunch of snoops and stoolies. Who're you looking for?"

Lawrence felt a rush of gratitude for this man. "Anja Krotosky, number 11-J?"

"Oh," the man said. "Well, yeah, I can see why you'd have a hard time with the neighbors when it comes to old Anja. She was well-liked around here, before she went."

"Where'd she go? When?"

"What's your name, friend?"

"Lawrence."

"Lawrence, Anja *went*. Middle of the night kind of thing. No one heard a thing. The CCTVs stopped working that night. Nothing on the drive the next day. No footage at all."

"Like she skipped out?"

"They stopped delivering flyers to her door. There's only one power stronger than direct marketing."

"The Securitat took her?"

"That's what we figured. Nothing left in her place. Not a stick of furniture. We don't talk about it much. Not the thing that it pays to take an interest in."

"How long ago?"

“Two years ago,” he said. A few more residents pushed past them. “Listen, I approve of what you people do in there, more or less. It’s good that there’s a place for the people who don’t—you know, who don’t have a place out here. But the way you make your living. I told my sister about this, the last time she visited, and she got very angry with me. She didn’t see the difference between watching yourself and being watched.”

Lawrence nodded. “Well, that’s true enough. We don’t draw a really sharp distinction. We all get to see one another’s stats. It keeps us honest.”

“That’s fine, if you have the choice. But—” He broke off, looking self-conscious. Lawrence reminded himself that they were on a public street, the cameras on them, people passing by. Was one of them a snitch? The Securitat had talked about putting him away for a month, just for logging them. They could watch him all they wanted, but he couldn’t look at them.

“I see the point.” He sighed. He was cold and it was full autumn dark now. He still didn’t have a room for the night and he didn’t have any idea how he’d find Anja, much less zbigkrot. He began to understand why Anomalies were such a big deal.

He’d walked 18,453 steps that day, about triple what he did on campus. His heart rate had spiked several times, but not from exertion. Stress. He could feel it in his muscles now. He should really do some biofeedback, try to calm down, then run back his lifelogger and make some notes on how he’d reacted to people through the day.

But the lifelogger was gone and he barely managed 22 seconds his first time on the biofeedback. His next ten scores were much worse.

It was the hotel room. It had once been an office, and before that, it had been half a hotel-room. There were still scuff-marks on the floor from where the wheeled office chair had dug into the scratched lino. The false wall that divided the room in half was thin as paper and Lawrence could hear every snuffle from the other side. The door to Lawrence’s room had been rudely hacked in, and weak light shone through an irregular crack over the jamb.

The old New Yorker Hotel had seen better days, but it was what he could afford, and it was central, and he could hear New York outside the window—he’d gotten the half of the hotel room with the window in it. The lights twinkled just as he remembered them, and he still got a

swimmy, vertiginous feeling when he looked down from the great height.

The clerk had taken his photo and biometrics and had handed him a tracker-key that his pan was monitoring with tangible suspicion. It radiated his identity every few yards, and in the elevator. It even seemed to track which part of the minuscule room he was in. What the hell did the hotel do with all this information?

Oh, right—it shipped it off to the Securitat, who shipped it to the Order, where it was processed for suspicious anomalies. No wonder there was so much work for them on campus. Multiply the New Yorker times a hundred thousand hotels, two hundred thousand schools, a million cabs across the nation—there was no danger of the Order running out of work.

The hotel's network tried to keep him from establishing a secure connection back to the Order's network, but the Order's countermeasures were better than the half-assed ones at the hotel. It took a lot of tunneling and wrapping, but in short measure he had a strong private line back to the Campus—albeit a slow line, what with all the jiggery-pokery he had to go through.

Gerta had left him with her file on zbigkrot and his activities on the network. He had several known associates on Campus, people he ate with or playing on intramural teams with, or did a little extreme programming with. Gerta had bulk-messaged them all with an oblique query about his personal life and had forwarded the responses to Lawrence. There was a mountain of them, and he started to plow through them.

He started by compiling stats on them—length, vocabulary, number of paragraphs—and then started with the outliers. The shortest ones were polite shrugs, apologies, don't have anything to say. The long ones—whew! They sorted into two categories: general whining, mostly from noobs who were still getting accustomed to the way of the Order; and protracted complaints from old hands who'd worked with zbigkrot long enough to decide that he was incorrigible. Lawrence sorted these quickly, then took a glance at the median responses and confirmed that they appeared to be largely unhelpful generalizations of the sort that you might produce on a co-worker evaluation form—a proliferation of null adjectives like “satisfactory,” “pleasant,” “fine.”

Somewhere in this haystack—Lawrence did a quick word-count and came back with 140,000 words, about two good novels' worth of

reading—was a needle, a clue that would show him the way to unravel the Anomaly. It would take him a couple days at least to sort through it all in depth. He ducked downstairs and bought some groceries at an all-night grocery store in Penn Station and went back to his room, ready to settle in and get the work done. He could use a few days' holiday from New York, anyway.

>

About time Zee Big Noob did a runner. He never had a moment's happiness here, and I never figured out why he'd bother hanging around when he hated it all so much.

>

Ever meet the kind of guy who wanted to tell you just how much you shouldn't be enjoying the things you enjoy? The kind of guy who could explain, in detail, **exactly** why your passions were stupid? That was him.

>

"Brother Antony, why are you wasting your time collecting tin toys? They're badly made, unlovely, and represent, at best, a history of slave labor, starting with your cherished 'Made in Occupied Japan,' tanks. Christ, why not collect rape-camp macrame while you're at it?" He had choice words for all of us about our passions, but I was singled out because I liked to extreme program in my room, which I'd spent a lot of time decorating. (See pic, below, and yes, I built and sanded and mounted every one of those shelves by hand) (See magnification shot for detail on the joinery. Couldn't even drive a nail when I got here) (Not that there are any nails in there, it's all precision-fitted tongue and groove) (holy moley, lasers totally rock)

>

But he reserved his worst criticism for the Order itself. You know the litany: we're a cult, we're brainwashed, we're dupes of the Securitat. He was convinced that every instrument in the place was feeding up to the Securitat itself. He'd mutter about this constantly, whenever we got a new stream to work on—"Is this your lifelog, Brother Antony? Mine? The number of flushes per shitter in the west wing of campus?"

>

And it was no good trying to reason with him. He just didn't acknowledge the benefit of introspection. "It's no different from them," he'd say,

jerking his thumb up at the ceiling, as though there was a Securitat mic and camera hidden there. "You're just flooding yourself with useless information, trying to find the useful parts. Why not make some predictions about which part of your life you need to pay attention to, rather than spying on every process? You're a spy in your own body."

>

So why did I work with him? I'll tell you: first, he was a shit-hot programmer. I know his stats say he was way down in the 78th percentile, but he could make every line of code that *I* wrote smarter. We just don't have a way of measuring that kind of effect (yes, someone should write one; I've been noodling with a framework for it for months now).

>

Second, there was something dreadfully fun about listening him light into *other* people, *their* ridiculous passions and interests. He could be incredibly funny, and he was incisive if not insightful. It's shameful, but there you have it. I am imperfect.

>

Finally, when he wasn't being a dick, he was a good guy to have in your corner. He was our rugby team's fullback, the baseball team's shortstop, the tank on our MMOG raids. You could rely on him.

>

So I'm going to miss him, weirdly. If he's gone for good. I wouldn't put it past him to stroll back onto campus someday and say, "What, what? I just took a little French Leave. Jesus, overreact much?"

Plenty of the notes ran in this direction, but this was the most articulate. Lawrence read it through three times before adding it to the file of useful stuff. It was a small pile. Still, Gerta kept forwarding him responses. The late responders had some useful things to say:

>

He mentioned a sister. Only once. A whole bunch of us were talking about how our families were really supportive of our coming to the Order, and after it had gone round the whole circle, he just kind of looked at the sky and said, "My sister thought I was an idiot to go inside. I asked her what she thought I should do and she said, 'If I was you, kid, I'd just disappear before someone disappeared me.'" Naturally we all wanted to know what he meant by that. "I'm not very good at bullshitting, and that's a vital skill in today's world. She was better at it than me,

when she worked at it, but she was the kind of person who'd let her guard slip every now and then."

Lawrence noted that zbigkrot had used the past-tense to describe his sister. He'd have known about her being disappeared then.

He stared at the walls of his hotel room. The room next door was occupied by at least four people and he couldn't even imagine how you'd get that many people inside—he didn't know how four people could all *stand* in the room, let alone lie down and sleep. But there were definitely four voices from next door, talking in Chinese.

New York was outside the window and far below, and the sun had come up far enough that everything was bright and reflective, the cars and the buildings and the glints from sunglasses far below. He wasn't getting anywhere with the docs, the sister, the datastreams. And there was New York, just outside the window.

He dug under the bed and excavated his boots, recoiling from soft, dust-furred old socks and worse underneath the mattress.

The Securitat man pointed to Lawrence as he walked past Penn Station. Lawrence stopped and pointed at himself in a who-me? gesture. The Securitat man pointed again, then pointed to his alcove next to the entrance.

Lawrence's pan didn't like the Securitat man's incursions and tried to wipe itself.

"Sir," he said. "My pan is going nuts. May I put down my arms so I can tell it to let you in?"

The Securitat man acted as though he hadn't heard, just continued to wave his hands slowly over Lawrence's body.

"Come with me," the Securitat man said, pointing to the door on the other side of the alcove that led into a narrow corridor, into the bowels of Penn Station. The door let out onto the concourse, thronged with people shoving past each other, disgorged by train after train. Though none made eye contact with them or each other, they parted magically before them, leaving them with a clear path.

Lawrence's pan was not helping him. Every inch of his body itched as it nagged at him about the depredations it was facing from the station and the Securitat man. This put him seriously on edge and made his heart and breathing go crazy, triggering another round of warnings from his pan, which wanted him to calm down, but wouldn't help. This was a

bad failure mode, one he'd never experienced before. He'd have to file a bug report.

Some day.

The Securitat's outpost in Penn Station was as clean as a dentist's office, but with mesh-reinforced windows and locks that made three distinct clicks and a soft hiss when the door closed. The Securitat man impersonally shackled Lawrence to a plastic chair that was bolted into the floor and then went off to a check-in kiosk that he whispered into and prodded at. There was no one else in evidence, but there were huge CCTV cameras, so big that they seemed to be throwbacks to an earlier era, so paleolithic ancestor of the modern camera. These cameras were so big because they were meant to be seen, meant to let you know that you were being watched.

The Securitat man took him away again, stood him in an interview room where the cameras were once again in voluble evidence.

"Explain everything," the Securitat man said. He rolled up his mask so that Lawrence could see his face, young and hard. He'd been in diapers when Lawrence went into the Order.

And so Lawrence began to explain, but he didn't want to explain everything. Telling this man about zbigkrot tampering with Securitat data-streams would not be good; telling him about the disappearance of Anja Krotoski would be even worse. So—he lied. He was already so stressed out that there was no way the lies would register as extraordinary to the sensors that were doubtless trained on him.

He told the Securitat man that he was in the world to find an Order member who'd taken his leave, because the Order wanted to talk to him about coming back. He told the man that he'd been trying to locate zbigkrot by following up on his old contacts. He told the Securitat man that he expected to find zbigkrot within a day or two and would be going back to the Order. He implied that he was crucial to the Order and that he worked for the Securitat all the time, that he and the Securitat man were on the same fundamental mission, on the same team.

The Securitat man's face remained an impassive mask throughout. He touched an earbead from time to time, cocking his head slightly to listen. Someone else was listening to Lawrence's testimony and feeding him more material.

The Securitat man scooted his chair closer to Lawrence, leaned in close, searching his face. “We don’t have any record of this Krotoski person,” he said. “I advise you to go home and forget about him.”

The words were said without any inflection at all, and that was scariest of all—Lawrence had no doubt about what this meant. There were no records because Zbigniew Krotoski was erased.

Lawrence wondered what he was supposed to say to this armed child now. Did he lay his finger alongside of his nose and wink? Apologize for wasting his time? Everyone told him to listen before he spoke here. Should he just wait?

“Thank you for telling me so,” he said. “I appreciate the advice.” He hoped it didn’t sound sarcastic.

The Securitat man nodded. “You need to adjust the settings on your pan. It reads like it’s got something to hide. Here in the world, it has to accede to lawful read attempts without hesitation. Will you configure it?”

Lawrence nodded vigorously. While he’d recounted his story, he’d imagined spending a month in a cell while the Securitat looked into his deeds and history. Now it seemed like he might be on the streets in a matter of minutes.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” The man didn’t say it. It was a recording, played by hidden speakers, triggered by some unseen agency, and on hearing it, the Securitat man stood and opened the door, waiting for the three distinct clicks and the hiss before tugging at the handle.

They stood before the door to the guard’s niche in front of Penn Station and the man rolled up his mask again. This time he was smiling an easy smile and the hardness had melted a little from around his eyes. “You want a tip, buddy?”

“Sure.”

“Look, this is New York. We all just want to get along here. There’s a lot of bad guys out there. They got some kind of beef. They want to fuck with us. We don’t want to let them do that. You want to be safe here, you got to show New York that you’re not a bad guy. That you’re not here to fuck with us. We’re the city’s protectors, and we can spot someone who doesn’t belong here the way your body can spot a cold-germ. The way you’re walking around here, looking around, acting—I could tell you didn’t belong from a hundred yards. You want to avoid trouble, you get less strange, fast. You get me?”

"I get you," he said. "Thank you, sir." Before the Securitat man could say any more, Lawrence was on his way.

The man from Anja's building had a different sweater on, but the new one—bulky wool the color of good chocolate—was every bit as handsome as the one he'd had on before. He was wearing some kind of citrusy cologne and his hair fell around his ears in little waves that looked so natural they had to be fake. Lawrence saw him across the Starbucks and had a crazy urge to duck away and change into better clothes, just so he wouldn't look like such a fucking hayseed next to this guy. *I'm a New Yorker*, he thought, *or at least I was. I belong here.*

"Hey, Lawrence, fancy meeting you here!" He shook Lawrence's hand and gave him a wry, you-and-me-in-it-together smile. "How's the vision quest coming?"

"Huh?"

"The Anomaly—that's what you're chasing, aren't you? It's your little rite of passage. My sister had one last year. Figured out that some guy who travelled from Fort Worth to Portland, Oregon every week was actually a fictional construct invented by cargo smugglers who used his seat to plant a series of mules running heroin and cash. She was so proud afterwards that I couldn't get her to shut up about it. You had the holy fire the other night when I saw you."

Lawrence felt himself blushing. "It's not really 'holy'—all that religious stuff, it's just a metaphor. We're not really spiritual."

"Oh, the distinction between the spiritual and the material is pretty arbitrary anyway. Don't worry, I don't think you're a cultist or anything. No more than any of us, anyway. So, how's it going?"

"I think it's over," he said. "Dead end. Maybe I'll get an easier Anomaly next time."

"Sounds awful! I didn't think you were allowed to give up on Anomalies?"

Lawrence looked around to see if anyone was listening to them. "This one leads to the Securitat," he said. "In a sense, you could say that I've solved it. I think the guy I'm looking for ended up with his sister."

The man's expression froze, not moving one iota. "You must be disappointed," he said, in neutral tones. "Oh well." He leaned over the condiment bar to get a napkin and wrestled with the dispenser for a moment. It didn't cooperate, and he ended up holding fifty napkins. He made a

disgusted noise and said, "Can you help me get these back into the dispenser?"

Lawrence pushed at the dispenser and let the man feed it his excess napkins, arranging them neatly. While he did this, he contrived to hand Lawrence a card, which Lawrence cupped in his palm and then ditched into his inside jacket pocket under the pretense of reaching in to adjust his pan.

"Thanks," the man said. "Well, I guess you'll be going back to your campus now?"

"In the morning," Lawrence said. "I figured I'd see some New York first. Play tourist, catch a Broadway show."

The man laughed. "All right then—you enjoy it." He did nothing significant as he shook Lawrence's hand and left, holding his paper cup. He did nothing to indicate that he'd just brought Lawrence into some kind of illegal conspiracy.

Lawrence read the note later, on a bench in Bryant Park, holding a paper bag of roasted chestnuts and fastidiously piling the husks next to him as he peeled them away. It was a neatly cut rectangle of card sliced from a health-food cereal box. Lettered on the back of it in pencil were two short lines:

Wednesdays 8:30PM

Half Moon Café 164 2nd Ave

The address was on the Lower East Side, a neighborhood that had been scorchingly trendy the last time Lawrence had been there. More importantly: it was Wednesday.

The Half Moon Café turned out to be one of those New York places that are so incredibly hip they don't have a sign or any outward indication of their existence. Number 164 was a frosted glass door between a dry-cleaner's and a Pakistani grocery store, propped open with a squashed Mountain Dew can. Lawrence opened the door, heart pounding, and slipped inside. A long, dark corridor stretched away before him, with a single door at the end, open a crack, dim light spilling out of it. He walked quickly down the corridor, sure that there were cameras observing him.

The door at the end of the hallway had a sheet of paper on it, with HALF MOON CAFÉ laser-printed in its center. Good food smells came from behind it, and the clink of cutlery, and soft conversation. He

nudged it open and found himself in a dim, flickering room lit by candles and draped with gathered curtains that turned the walls into the proscenium of a grand and ancient stage. There were four or five small tables and a long one at the back of the room, crowded with people, with wine in ice-buckets at either end.

A very pretty girl stood at the podium before him, dressed in a conservative suit, but with her hair shaved into a half-inch brush of electric blue. She lifted an eyebrow at him as though she was sharing a joke with him and said, "Welcome to the Half Moon. Do you have a reservation?"

Lawrence had carefully shredded the bit of cardboard and dropped its tatters in six different trash cans, feeling like a real spy as he did so (and realizing at the same time that going to all these different cans was probably anomalous enough in itself to draw suspicion).

"A friend told me he'd meet me here," he said.

"What was your friend's name?"

Lawrence stuck his chin in the top of his coat to tell his pan to stop warning him that he was breathing too shallowly. "I don't know," he said. He craned his neck to look behind her at the tables. He couldn't see the man, but it was so dark in the restaurant—

"You made it, huh?" The man had yet another fantastic sweater on, this one with a tight herringbone weave and ribbing down the sleeves. He caught Lawrence sizing him up and grinned. "My weakness—the world's wool farmers would starve if it wasn't for me." He patted the greeter on the hand. "He's at our table." She gave Lawrence a knowing smile and the tiniest hint of a wink.

"Nice of you to come," he said as they threaded their way slowly through the crowded tables, past couples having murmured conversations over candlelight, intense business dinners, an old couple eating in silence with evident relish. "Especially as it's your last night in the city."

"What kind of restaurant is this?"

"Oh, it's not any kind of restaurant at all. Private kitchen. Ormund, he owns the place and cooks like a wizard. He runs this little place off the books for his friends to eat in. We come every Wednesday. That's his vegan night. You'd be amazed with what that guy can do with some greens and a sweet potato. And the cacao nib and avocado chili chocolate is something else."

The large table was crowded with men and women in their thirties, people who had the look of belonging. They dressed well in fabrics that

draped or clung like someone had thought about it, with jewelry that combined old pieces of brass with modern plastics and heavy clay beads that clicked like pool-balls. The women were beautiful or at least handsome—one woman with cheekbones like snowplows and a jawline as long as a ski-slope was possibly the most striking person he'd ever seen up close. The men were handsome or at least craggy, with three-day beards or neat, full mustaches. They were talking in twos and threes, passing around overflowing dishes of steaming greens and oranges and browns, chatting and forking by turns.

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet my guest for the evening." The man gestured at Lawrence. Lawrence hadn't told the man his name yet, but he made it seem like he was being gracious and letting Lawrence introduce himself.

"Lawrence," he said, giving a little wave. "Just in New York for one more night," he said, still waving. He stopped waving. The closest people—including the striking woman with the cheekbones—waved back, smiling. The furthest people stopped talking and tipped their forks at him or at least cocked their heads.

"Sara," the cheekbones woman said, pronouncing the first "a" long, "Sah-rah," and making it sound unpretentious. The low-key buzzing from Lawrence's pan warned him that he was still overwrought, breathing badly, heart thudding. Who were these people?

"And I'm Randy," the man said. "Sorry, I should have said that sooner."

The food was passed down to his end. It was delicious, almost as good as the food at the campus, which was saying something—there was a dedicated cadre of cooks there who made gastronomy their 20 percent projects, using elaborate computational models to create dishes that were always different and always delicious.

The big difference was the company. These people didn't have to retreat to belong, they belonged right here. Sara told him about her job managing a specialist antiquarian bookstore and there were a hundred stories about her customers and their funny ways. Randy worked at an architectural design firm and he had done some work at Sara's bookstore. Down the table there were actors and waiters and an insurance person and someone who did something in city government, and they all ate and talked and made him feel like he was a different kind of man, the kind of man who could live on the outside.

The coals of the conversation banked over port and coffees as they drifted away in twos and threes. Sara was the last to leave and she gave him a little hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Safe travels, Lawrence." Her perfume was like an orange on Christmas morning, something from his childhood. He hadn't thought of his childhood in decades.

Randy and he looked at each other over the litter on the table. The server brought a check over on a small silver tray and Randy took a quick look at it. He drew a wad of twenties in a bulldog clip out of his inside coat pocket and counted off a large stack, then handed the tray to the server, all before Lawrence could even dig in his pocket.

"Please let me contribute," he managed, just as the server disappeared.

"Not necessary," Randy said, setting the clip down on the table. There was still a rather thick wad of money there. Lawrence hadn't been much of a cash user before he went into the Order and he'd seen hardly any spent since he came back out into the world. It seemed rather antiquarian, with its elaborate engraving. But the notes were crisp, as though freshly minted. The government still pressed the notes, even if they were hardly used any longer. "I can afford it."

"It was a very fine dinner. You have interesting friends."

"Sara is lovely," he said. "She and I—well, we had a thing once. She's a remarkable person. Of course, you're a remarkable person, too, Lawrence."

Lawrence's pan reminded him again that he was getting edgy. He shushed it.

"You're smart, we know that. 88th percentile. Looks like you could go higher, judging from the work we've evaluated for you. I can't say your performance as a private eye is very good, though. If I hadn't intervened, you'd still be standing outside Anja's apartment building harassing her neighbors."

His pan was ready to call for an ambulance. Lawrence looked down and saw his hands clenched into fists. "You're Securitat," he said.

"Let me put it this way," the man said, leaning back. "I'm not one of Anja's neighbors."

"You're Securitat," Lawrence said again. "I haven't done anything wrong—"

"You came here," Randy said. "You had every reason to believe that you were taking part in something illegal. You lied to the Securitat man at Penn Station today—"

Lawrence switched his pan's feedback mechanisms off altogether. Posy, at her window, a penny stuck in the governor of her radiator, rose in his mind.

"Everyone was treating me like a criminal—from the minute I stepped out of the Order, you all treated me like a criminal. That made me act like one—everyone has to act like a criminal here. That's the hypocrisy of the world, that honest people end up acting like crooks because the world treats them like crooks."

"Maybe we treat them like crooks because they act so crooked."

"You've got it all backwards," Lawrence said. "The causal arrow runs the other direction. You treat us like criminals and the only way to get by is to act criminal. If I'd told the Securitat man in Penn Station the truth—"

"You build a wall around the Order, don't you? To keep us out, because we're barbarians? To keep you in, because you're too fragile? What does that treatment do, Lawrence?"

Lawrence slapped his hand on the table and the crystal rang, but no one in the restaurant noticed. They were all studiously ignoring them. "It's to keep *you* out! All of you, who treated us—"

Randy stood up from the table. Bulky figures stepped out of the shadows behind them. Behind their armor, the Securitat people could have been white or black, old or young. Lawrence could only treat them as Securitat. He rose slowly from his chair and put his arms out, as though surrendering. As soon as the Securitat officers relaxed by a tiny hair—treating him as someone who was surrendering—he dropped backwards over the chair behind him, knocking over a little two-seat table and whacking his head on the floor so hard it rang like a gong. He scrambled to his feet and charged pell-mell for the door, sweeping the empty tables out of the way as he ran.

He caught a glimpse of the pretty waitress standing by her podium at the front of the restaurant as he banged out the door, her eyes wide and her hands up as though to ward off a blow. He caromed off the wall of the dark corridor and ran for the glass door that led out to Second Avenue, where cars hissed by in the night.

He made it onto the sidewalk, crashed into a burly man in a Mets cap, bounced off him, and ran downtown, the people on the sidewalk leaping clear of him. He made it two whole storefronts—all the running around

on the Campus handball courts had given him a pretty good pace and wind—before someone tackled him from behind.

He scrambled and squirmed and turned around. It was the guy in the Mets hat. His breath smelled of onions and he was panting, his lips pulled back. “Watch where you’re going—” he said, and then he was lifted free, jerked to his feet.

The blood sang in Lawrence’s ears and he had just enough time to register that the big guy had been lifted by two blank, armored Securitat officers before he flipped over onto his knees and used the posture like a runner’s crouch to take off again. He got maybe ten feet before he was clobbered by a bolt of lightning that made every muscle in his body lock into rigid agony. He pitched forward face-first, not feeling anything except the terrible electric fire from the taser-bolt in his back. His pan died with a sizzle up and down every haptic point in his suit, and between that and the electricity, he flung his arms and legs out in an agonized X while his neck thrashed, grating his face over the sidewalk. Something went horribly *crunch* in his nose.

The room had the same kind of locks as the Securitat room in Penn Station. He’d awakened in the corner of the room, his face taped up and aching. There was no toilet, but there was a chair, bolted to the floor, and three prominent video cameras.

They left him there for some time, alone with his thoughts and the deepening throb from his face, his knees, the palms of his hands. His hands and knees had been sanded raw and there was grit and glass and bits of pebble embedded under the skin, which oozed blood.

His thoughts wanted to return to the predicament. They wanted to fill him with despair for his situation. They wanted to make him panic and weep with the anticipation of the cells, the confession, the life he’d had and the life he would get.

He didn’t let them. He had spent sixteen years mastering his thoughts and he would master them now. He breathed deeply, noticing the places where his body was tight and trembling, thinking each muscle into tranquillity, even his aching face, letting his jaw drop open.

Every time his thoughts went back to the predicament, he scrawled their anxious message on a streamer of mental ribbon which he allowed to slip through his mental fingers and sail away.

Sixteen years of doing this had made him an expert, and even so, it was not easy. The worries rose and streamed away as fast as his mind's hand could write them. But as always, he was finally able to master his mind, to find relaxation and calm at the bottom of the thrashing, churning vat of despair.

When Randy came in, Lawrence heard each bolt click and the hiss of air as from a great distance, and he surfaced from his calm, watching Randy cross the floor bearing his own chair.

"Innocent people don't run, Lawrence."

"That's a rather self-serving hypothesis," Lawrence said. The cool ribbons of worry slithered through his mind like satin, floating off into the ether around them. "You appear to have made up your mind, though. I wonder at you—you don't seem like an idiot. How've you managed to convince yourself that this—" he gestured around at the room "—is a good idea? I mean, this is just—"

Randy waved him silent. "The interrogation in this room flows in one direction, Lawrence. This is not a dialogue."

"Have you ever noticed that when you're uncomfortable with something, you talk louder and lean forward a little? A lot of people have that tell."

"Do you work with Securitat data streams, Lawrence?"

"I work with large amounts of data, including a lot of material from the Securitat. It's rarely in cleartext, though. Mostly I'm doing sigint—signals intelligence. I analyze the timing, frequency and length of different kinds of data to see if I can spot anomalies. That's with a lower-case 'a', by the way." He was warming up to the subject now. His face hurt when he talked, but when he thought about what to say, the hurt went away, as did the vision of the cell where he would go next. "It's the kind of thing that works best when you don't know what's in the payload of the data you're looking at. That would just distract me. It's like a magician's trick with a rabbit or a glass of water. You focus on the rabbit or on the water and what you expect of them, and are flummoxed when the magician does something unexpected. If he used pebbles, though, it might seem absolutely ordinary."

"Do you know what Zbigniew Krotoski was working on?"

"No, there's no way for me to know that. The streams are enciphered at the router with his public key, and rescrambled after he's done with them. It's all zero-knowledge."

“But you don’t have zero knowledge, do you?”

Lawrence found himself grinning, which hurt a lot, and which caused a little more blood to leak out of his nose and over his lips in a hot trickle. “Well, signals intelligence being what it is, I was able to discover that it was a Securitat stream, and that it wasn’t the first one he’d worked on, nor the first one he’d altered.”

“He altered a stream?”

Lawrence lost his smile. “I hadn’t told you that part yet, had I?”

“No.” Randy leaned forward. “But you will now.”

The blue silk ribbons slid through Lawrence’s mental fingers as he sat in his cell, which was barely lit and tiny and padded and utterly devoid of furniture. High above him, a ring of glittering red LEDs cast no visible light. They would be infrared lights, the better for the hidden cameras to see him. It was dark, so he saw nothing, but for the infrared cameras, it might as well have been broad daylight. The asymmetry was one of the things he inscribed on a blue ribbon and floated away.

The cell wasn’t perfectly soundproof. There was a gaseous hiss that reverberated through it every forty six to fifty three breaths, which he assumed was the regular opening and shutting of the heavy door that led to the cell-block deep within the Securitat building. That would be a patrol, or a regular report, or someone with a weak bladder.

There was a softer, regular grinding that he felt more than heard—a subway train, running very regular. That was the New York rumble, and it felt a little like his pan’s reassuring purring.

There was his breathing, deep and oceanic, and there was the sound in his mind’s ear, the sound of the streamers hissing away into the ether.

He’d gone out in the world and now he’d gone back into a cell. He supposed that it was meant to sweat him, to make him mad, to make him make mistakes. But he had been trained by sixteen years in the Order and this was not sweating him at all.

“Come along then.” The door opened with a cotton-soft sound from its balanced hinges, letting light into the room and giving him the squints.

“I wondered about your friends,” Lawrence said. “All those people at the restaurant.”

“Oh,” Randy said. He was a black silhouette in the doorway. “Well, you know. Honor among thieves. Rank hath its privileges.”

"They were caught," he said.

"Everyone gets caught," Randy said.

"I suppose it's easy when everybody is guilty." He thought of Posy. "You just pick a skillset, find someone with those skills, and then figure out what that person is guilty of. Recruiting made simple."

"Not so simple as all that," Randy said. "You'd be amazed at the difficulties we face."

"Zbigniew Krotoski was one of yours."

Randy's silhouette—now resolving into features, clothes (another sweater, this one with a high collar and squared-off shoulders)—made a little movement that Lawrence knew meant yes. Randy was all tells, no matter how suave and collected he seemed. He must have been really up to something when they caught him.

"Come along," Randy said again, and extended a hand to him. He allowed himself to be lifted. The scabs at his knees made crackling noises and there was the hot wet feeling of fresh blood on his calves.

"Do you withhold medical attention until I give you what you want? Is that it?"

Randy put an affectionate hand on his shoulder. "You seem to have it all figured out, don't you?"

"Not all of it. I don't know why you haven't told me what it is you want yet. That would have been simpler, I think."

"I guess you could say that we're just looking for the right way to ask you."

"The way to ask me a question that I can't say no to. Was it the sister? Is that what you had on him?"

"He was useful because he was so eager to prove that he was smarter than everyone else."

"You needed him to edit your own data-streams?"

Randy just looked at him calmly. Why would the Securitat need to change its own streams? Why couldn't they just arrest whomever they wanted on whatever pretext they wanted? Who'd be immune to—

Then he realized who'd be immune to the Securitat: the Securitat would be.

"You used him to nail other Securitat officers?"

Randy's blank look didn't change.

Lawrence realized that he would never leave this building. Even if his body left, now he would be tied to it forever. He breathed. He tried for that oceanic quality of breath, the susurrations of the blue silk ribbons inscribed with his worries. It wouldn't come.

"Come along now," Randy said, and pulled him down the corridor to the main door. It hissed as it opened and behind it was an old Securitat man, legs crossed painfully. Weak bladder, Lawrence knew.

"Here's the thing," Randy said. "The system isn't going to go away, no matter what we do. The Securitat's here forever. We've treated everyone like a criminal for too long now—everyone's really a criminal now. If we dismantled tomorrow, there'd be chaos, bombings, murder sprees. We're not going anywhere."

Randy's office was comfortable. He had some beautiful vintage circus posters—the bearded lady, the sword swallower, the hoochie-coochie girl—framed on the wall, and a cracked leather sofa that made amiable exhalations of good tobacco smell mixed with years of saddle soap when he settled into it. Randy reached onto a tall mahogany bookcase and handed him down a first-aid kit. There was a bottle of alcohol in it and a lot of gauze pads. Gingerly, Lawrence began to clean out the wounds on his legs and hands, then started in on his face. The blood ran down and dripped onto the slate tiled floor, almost invisible. Randy handed him a waste-paper bin and it slowly filled with the bloody gauze.

"Looks painful," Randy said.

"Just skinned. I have a vicious headache, though."

"That's the taser hangover. It goes away. There's some codeine tablets in the pill-case. Take it easy on them, they'll put you to sleep."

While Lawrence taped large pieces of gauze over the cleaned-out corrugations in his skin, Randy tapped idly at a screen on his desk. It felt almost as though he'd dropped in on someone's hot-desk back at the Order. Lawrence felt a sharp knife of homesickness and wondered if Gerta was OK.

"Do you really have a sister?"

"I do. In Oregon, in the Order."

"Does she work for you?"

Randy snorted. "Of course not. I wouldn't do that to her. But the people who run me, they know that they can get to me through her. So in a sense, we both work for them."

"And I work for you?"

"That's the general idea. Zbigkrot spooked when you got onto him, so he's long gone."

"Long gone as in—"

"This is one of those things where we don't say. Maybe he disappeared and got away clean, took his sister with him. Maybe he disappeared into our... operations. Not knowing is the kind of thing that keeps our other workers on their game."

"And I'm one of your workers."

"Like I said, the system isn't going anywhere. You met the gang tonight. We've all been caught at one time or another. Our little cozy club manages to make the best of things. You saw us—it's not a bad life at all. And we think that all things considered, we make the world a better place. Someone would be doing our job, might as well be us. At least we manage to weed out the real retarded sadists." He sipped a little coffee from a thermos cup on his desk. "That's where Zbigkrot came in."

"He helped you with 'retarded sadists'?"

"For the most part. Power corrupts, of course, but it attracts the corrupt, too. There's a certain kind of person who grows up wanting to be a Securitat officer."

"And me?"

"You?"

"I would do this too?"

"You catch on fast."

The outside wall of Campus was imposing. Tall, sheathed in seamless metal painted uniform grey. Nothing grew for several yards around it, as though the world was shrinking back from it.

How did Zbigkrot get off campus?

That's a question that should have occurred to him when he left the campus. He was embarrassed that it took him this long to come up with it. But it was a damned good question. Trying to force the gate—what

was it the old Brother on the gate had said? Pressurized, blowouts, the walls rigged to come down in an instant.

If Zbigkrot had left, he'd walked out, the normal way, while someone at the gate watched him go. And he'd left no record of it. Someone, working on Campus, had altered the stream of data fountaining off the front gate to remove the record of it. There was more than one forger there—it hadn't just been zbigkrot working for the Securitat.

He'd *belonged* in the Order. He'd learned how to know himself, how to see himself with the scalding, objective logic that he'd normally reserved for everyone else. The Anomaly had seemed like such a bit of fun, like he was leveling up to the next stage of his progress.

He called Greta. They'd given him a new pan, one that had a shunt that delivered a copy of all his data to the Securitat. Since he'd first booted it, it had felt strange and invasive, every buzz and warning coming with the haunted feeling, the *watched* feeling.

"You, huh?"

"It's very good to hear your voice," he said. He meant it. He wondered if she knew about the Securitat's campus snitches. He wondered if she was one. But it was good to hear her voice. His pan let him know that whatever he was doing was making him feel great. He didn't need his pan to tell him that, though.

"I worried when you didn't check in for a couple days."

"Well, about that."

"Yes?"

If he told her, she'd be in it too—if she wasn't already. If he told her, they'd figure out what they could get on her. He should just tell her nothing. Just go on inside and twist the occasional data-stream. He could be better at it than zbigkrot. No one would ever make an Anomaly out of him. Besides, so what if they did? It would be a few hours, days, months or years that he could live on Campus.

And if it wasn't him, it would be someone else.

It would be someone else.

"I just wanted to say good bye, and thanks. I suspect I'm not going to see you again."

Off in the distance now, the sound of the Securitat van's happy little song. His pan let him know that he was breathing quickly and shallowly and he slowed his breathing down until it let up on him.

“Lawrence?”

He hung up. The Securitat van was visible now, streaking toward the Campus wall.

He closed his eyes and watched the blue satin ribbons tumble, like silky water licking over a waterfall. He could get to the place that Campus took him to anywhere. That was all that mattered.

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