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“Dad?” Nori said, raising his voice over the wind. The answer was broken up by static. “Dad! I can’t hear you. The storm’s about to hit the port, that last—” Nori cursed and disconnected the call. If he couldn’t hear his father, then his father wasn’t hearing him. He ran for the building as his interface vibrated. He tapped the earpiece. “Dad? Did you—”

Static, with fragments of a voice that wasn’t his father. He looked at the display. Trevor Pakesh.

“Trevor!” he yelled. “There’s a storm hitting us. It’s disrupting all the airwaves! Find a hard-line and contact the Maeda household! They’ll give me your message. I’ll call you back once the storm passes.” He disconnected and pulled the door open as the rain hit, the force of the impacts making the windows vibrate.

“Amazing weather isn’t it, Mister Maeda?” the hedgehog behind the shipping office counter asked, sounding awed.

Kids, Nori thought. “I need to use the hard-line.”

Without taking his eyes off the windows, where the rain came down in a sheet of water now, the hedgehog reached under the counter and bought up a communicator connected to the island’s network via the wire that hung behind it. He punched the code for the familial estate and waited.

“Hello?” a childlike voice answered.

“Taria, is that you?” Nori asked, smiling.

The child giggled. “No, silly, Taria’s playing, I’m Gill.”

“Ahh, yes, Gill, the mature one.”

She giggled.

“Is your grandfather around?”

“He’s working.”

So his office.

“Can you get him? I need to talk to him.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Nori.”

“No,” she answered, stretching the word. “Nori is working today. He’s not here.”

“I still need to speak with your grandfather, go get him for me.”

“Okay.” The receiver on her side hit something hard enough Nori winced.

“Nori,” his father said a minute later, “are you still at the port?”

“Yeah, I’m waiting for the first wave to pass, the rain’ll be more tolerable in ten to twenty minutes.”

“Damned the corporates and their screwing up the weather.”

“Dad,” Nori sighed before he could stop himself. He knew better than to even address his father’s conspiracies.

“I’m telling you, Nori. These storms are their fault, with their machines to make sure they have good weather. They don’t give one fuck how it disrupts the rest of the atmosphere, they just care about themselves. I wish the cataclysm had wiped them out.”

Sure Dad, Nori thought, and conveniently forget who took the survivors in, our ancestors in.

“Look, dad. The delivery shuttle’s not coming in. The pilot called before the storm disrupted the airwave comm. She’s taking everything back to the station and waiting until the storm passes.” His father grumbled. “There’s nothing on there a day or two delays will ruin. I sent everyone home when she called. I’m going to head there once the rain lessens. See if one of the purely mechanical taxis’ is available. I’m not trusting electronics in this storm.”

“You and everyone else,” his father said. “I can send our car to get you. Everyone’s already inside.”

Nori chuckled, imagining the run around that was happening at the estate, with all the kids wanting to run outside, even in rain hard enough to pancake them. Nori remembered his outrage at not being allowed to run in the storm as a kid.

“The estate it’s a hundred kilometer away. In this weather, it’s going to be hours before it reaches the port. It’s going to be faster for me to just walk home if I have to.”

“Not in the storm, Nori.”

“It’s just water, Dad.”

“You don’t know that. Those Corporate—”

“Bye Dad.” He hung up. The hedgehog was still looking at the window, awed. This couldn’t be his first storm. Even one this strong happened every few years. “If you want to go run in it, I’ll watch the counter. I’m not stepping out until it lessens.”

The hedgehog shook his head, breaking the spell the rain had put him in. “No, I just like watching it, listening to it. This early in it I’d end up so bruised I’d need to go to the hospital.”

“The med bed can take care of bruising.” Nori nodded to the door leading to the back.

“It’s busted again.”

“Again?” Nori typed a message on his interface and set it to send to the regulators once the airwave stabilized. Right now, nothing would go through intact. His family didn’t own the shipping office, the island regulation forbid one company owning something this vital, so it was a joint venture among six of them, with the island government overseeing it. It worked overall, but some areas, like employee care, kept falling through the cracks of cost-cutting.

The sound of the rain shifted, indicating it was lessening. Nori looked at the time. Eighteen minutes for the first wave. That meant they were looking at a storm that would last at least six hours. Yeah, this day was a bust.

A check of the taxis told him he had hours of wait before one would be available. So it was walking or trusting the electronics of a hover.

“Well, I’m going to get drenched,” Nori said. The disruption to the airwave would last for hours after the storm passed, and until then, he wasn’t trusting a hover. He pulled the hood out of his jacket and over his head. It wouldn’t do much to keep him dry, but every little thing helped.

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More than an hour of walking in the downpour had numbed Nori's mind to the point he almost didn't notice the movement through the windows of his house. He stopped on the sidewalk, watching the indistinct forms, trying to remember if he'd left someone at his place before heading into work this morning. The answer should be easy to remember. It was only this morning, but it still took him a full minute to remember that no, he never allowed people to stay when he wasn't there.

Someone was robbing him. Someone was using the cover of the storm to steal from him. Nori realized he was angry, the gall of anyone breaking into his home, but he was also worried, he could make out more than one shadow. He tapped the code for emergency services and after a second a woman answered, distorted by static.

"Emergency Services, what is your emergency?" she asked, the static lessening along with the rain.

"Someone broke into my house," Nori answered numbly.

"Can you confirm your name and address for me?"

"Nori Maeda." He gave her his address.

"And where are you, Mister Maeda?" her voice distorted.

Nori realized he was in view of anyone in his house who happened to look outside if the rain kept lessening. "I'm on the other side of the street from my house. I noticed them as I approached. Shadows moving in my living room." He hurried to reach the other side and stood under an awning, ended the downpour directly on his head.

She broke up completely before her voice returned. "...Maeda?"

"You're back. What did you say?"

"I said that I've dispatched a unit to your address. I'll stay on the connection with you until they arrive, if you need to move for some reason, just let me know."

"I'm out of the direct rain, so I should be okay. How long will it take them?"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry, they'll be there—" the burst of static was loud enough, Nori winced and reached for his earpiece. He thought he heard a voice through it, but it was gone. Maybe the storm had caused signals to mix.

"Hello?" she asked, "are you—"

The static returned, and this time he was sure there was a voice in it because it called his name.

"Mister Maeda," the woman asked as the static lessened, "are you still with me?"

"Yeah, I am. The storm's really screwing with the airwaves."

"Yes, it is. Just stay where you are, they'll—"

"Run!" the voice said through the static. "Nori, run!"

"What? Hello?"

"I'm still here," she said.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" she asked before the static exploded in his ear.

"She's not with the police! Run, they're coming for you!"

Nori looked around, "Who's talking?"

“I’m a friend, Nori. They’ve jammed your comm—” the static lessened and the voice along with it, the woman becoming clearer for a few seconds, then vanishing as the static increased. “—barely punch through. You’re in danger. You have to run, hide.”

“Look, I don’t know who—” Nori’s voice caught as he saw two large shadows approaching in the rain.

“Run!” the voice said.

And Nori ran.

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“Uncle?” Trevor asked, pacing in his lobby. “Tell me something.”

“I told him to run, but I can’t get any visuals through this rain and the disruption the storm’s causing. I don’t even know if he understood what I said.”

“Fuck. Do we have anyone there?”

A hand caught him, stopped him, and turned him. “You know we don’t,” Tucker said. “But I’ve dispatched a strike team to his last location. Once they’re on the ground, they’ll find him and do whatever is needed to make sure he’s safe.”

Trevor yanked his arm out of Tucker’s hand. His lobby, his rules, and his brother wasn’t keeping him from pacing. “Uncle, do you know who is after him? Have you been able to find Horace?”

Tucker wrapped both arms around his brother. “Calm down, Trev, Uncle’s doing everything he can, you know that.”

“I suspect they are the same group that tried to kidnap you,” Uncle answered, “but I haven’t been able to uncover who they are. The Not-Bobby is quite adept at remaining unseen.” The annoyance in Uncle’s voice made Trevor stop fighting Tucker. The last time anyone had managed to escape Uncle’s search, it had taken the intervention of an unknown agent who had turned out to be an AI.

“Do you think they’re—” Trevor swallowed.

“No, Caduceus isn’t involved. I’ve checked with it. It’s respecting our agreement and not intervening in anything I’m doing. This is all that Not-Bobby and his people doing, which is what makes this so frustrating. They shouldn’t be able to hide from me.”

“What about Horace?” Trevor asked, dreading that answer.

“I’m sorry, Trevor, I can’t find any trace of Horace Martel in the system. I’ve dissected what I could get of Tucker’s party, but the time he disappeared from the network isn’t caught, and I couldn’t find him in the footage I have afterward. I’m sorry Trevor, there’s only one conclusion I can reach.”

Tucker held him up.

“David?”

“David Medved is also not on the network, but someone at Vanguard set up a facsimile of his presence there, it could mean he was moved to a private location and Vanguard doesn’t want his contact circle to realize it, or...”

“Or he’s dead too,” Trevor whispered.

“Trev,” Tucker whispered. “Come on, you need to get out of your lobby and rest. You can’t do anything in this state. Uncle’s going to tell you when he finds anything.”

With a thought, Trevor dismissed his lobby.

Tucker crouched before him. “Trev, you with me?”

Trevor nodded numbly.

His brother took his hand and pulled him out of the chair, then guided him to the bed, where they laid there, spooning. Someone else joined them, and another, and another, and soon Trevor was help on all sides by someone from his family. He was happy for the comfort, the contact, because he felt lost, disconnected. Someone was hunting and killing his friends, and he didn't know what to do.

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Nori panted.

He couldn't be out of breath already, he exercised, he played sports. He snorted, he had plenty of sex, he was in shape. But he'd never had to push himself this hard. Anytime he stopped to catch his breath, he could hear the steps behind him, make out the shadows hunting him, and he had to run again. He'd tried calling his father, his sister, his brother, anyone in his family, but each time that same woman answered. She didn't bother playing the emergency responder part anymore, just telling him to stop running, that he was only delaying the inevitable, making things worse for himself. He'd stopped trying to contact anyone. He was cut off. On his own. He couldn't even rely on the directions his interface gave him, he'd found out when what should have been a police station turned out to be an armored vehicle with four way-too-big people standing around it.

The only reason he hadn't run headfirst into them was exhaustion, wariness, and a sense that there was too much open space for where his interface said he should be. So he'd gone around the group as carefully as he could, using the rain to cover whatever sound he made, then ran again.

Without knowing where he was, he couldn't work out where to go. He knew where a few of his friends lived, but that was in relation to his house or his office. Any other time he'd rely on his interface to get him there, or just tell the taxi. And with the storm, it seemed like it was just him and his pursuers on the road, and he was going to hit full drain soon. He could just imagine his stamina bar barely keeping up with his running.

He made out an opening between buildings and headed for it. Maybe he could find an unlocked door. Bang on one and have someone let him in. No, not that one. Couldn't endanger anyone else. Fuck, what was even this about? This couldn't be business-related. He was just a manager in his family's company. But what else was there? As far as he knew no one in his family had dealings with criminal organizations, their father wouldn't allow it, he'd turn over that relative to the police himself.

He tried one door after the other, encountering only locked ones. He had to hope his pursuers through he'd stayed on the street, otherwise, he might have boxed himself in. A door opened and almost wrenched his arm off as he kept running. With a curse, he entered and closed it behind him. He almost called up a map of the interior, but his interface would have to connect to the network for that, and if that woman intercepted all

his calls, would she be able to intercept that too?

He turned on the flashlight function and moved his arm about, illuminating a desolate place. Incomplete walls, lumber, metal beams. A building under renovation. Or, by the staleness of the air, an abandoned renovation. Nori didn't care. He was out of the rain, hidden from his pursuers. He could take a break, catch his breath. Wait out the storm.

The door crashed open and Nori turned. In his light, three large men entered. Barely keeping his panic under control, Nori looked around for an exit, locating another door, but before he reached it, someone caught the back of his jacket and yanked him off his feet. He hit the floor hard and his head rang. A nasty looking hyena looked down on him and before Nori could move pressed an injector to his neck.

With a burst of adrenaline, Nori was up and out of reach from him, only to stagger as the room spun. He hit the floor again and heard voices, but couldn't make out what they said. He was picked up and thrown over a shoulder as the light went out of the world.

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Trevor shifted the information, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He'd tried to stay in bed with his family, but after an hour's nap he'd woken up with a need to do something, anything, so he'd stepped into his lobby to do a search on his friends. Maybe he could uncover something that would help find out what had happened.

He'd begun with David because he wanted something hard to focus on, and Vanguard always offered a challenge. He'd felt Uncle watching him, but he didn't intervene or tell anyone what he was doing. He liked Uncle for that. Unless one of them did something stupid, Uncle let them do it.

He'd found the facsimile of David on the network and used it to work backward to his office, only it wasn't his office. It was the office of the man David worked for, a Louis Ruslonav, a senior corporate hard within Vanguard whose duties matched those David had claimed as his. David was his assistant. Nothing out of the ordinary by what Trevor found there. He'd need to do a much deeper dive if he wanted more details, but the deeper he went into Vanguard, the higher the odds were they'd notice his intrusion. And what he needed wasn't hidden.

David had been taking in for questioning regarding a transmission from the Orr territory he'd received. That was what Louis had logged, only there were no requests for David's arrest within the security system, and David was taken to a building that had no link to Vanguard security. He vanished under it, the facsimile appearing within minutes, cut from the network the way Trevor had been when he was at the Oasis. Except no one had come to David's rescue.

It was weeks now without any indication David was alive, so Uncle was probably right. It hurt. That his friend was dead hurt, that Trevor wouldn't be able to ask why he'd lied. Why he'd felt the need to pass himself off as someone more successful than he was. They were friends, that kind of thing wouldn't have mattered to any of them.

Then had been Horace.

Horace Martel, or whoever he really was.

His past had looked good, born in Ameritech, started a publishing firm in his thirties, accumulated clients, customers. Traveled all over the solar system promoting the one to the other. The man looked to have more miles traveled under him than everyone his Trevor's family except his father.

It had been a great past, too great. Too clean, too perfect. So perfect that Trevor hadn't found anything wrong with it; until he'd noticed one detail. One of the client Horace had represented until fifteen years ago.

Cassius Gold.

Trevor knew Cassius Gold, or rather he knew the AI behind him. Cass, Theodore's AI partner, a Beta AI, although Trevor had never really understood what that meant, only that he worked for another AI called Casanova.

Theodore had been a spy, back then, for a group of Independent no one knew about. Even now, as far as Trevor knew, only his family knew they existed, although Uncle had a copy there, negotiating with them so they would join the rest of the solar system. Trevor didn't know where they were, that had been part of the deal. No one looked for them until they were ready to announce their presence. The other part had been the release of his grandmother's boyfriend, who had turned out to be one of their agents. Sebastien had refused to leave, preferring to try to convince Beatrice how he felt for her was real.

Last he'd heard, Sebastien was back working under her supervision, but their relationship hadn't progressed. She hadn't killed him, so there was hope.

That Horace had had Cassius Gold as a client meant he worked for the Colonies.

Another spy connected to his family, although Horace shouldn't know that. Trevor Pakesh was indistinguishable from anyone else. Fully separated from Trevor Orr. But if Horace had known, was that why he'd joined the guild? Trevor had known Horace for years before he'd found out about Theodore and Cass and the Colonies, and Horace hadn't given any indication he'd known Trevor knew Cass or Theo.

But what else was Trevor supposed to think?

Now he was looking into Nori Maeda, scared of what he'd find. Was he some criminal mastermind? Maybe he was in league with the Not-Bobby, part of the guild to keep an eye on Bobby until they were ready to do whatever they had done to him.

Everything had looked good on the first pass. The independents didn't have the same level of presence on the network as the others, but they still needed one to interact with the rest of the world, and with the company Nori's worked for being spread across the solar system, he had more of a presence than many Independent.

And it wasn't the 'good' of Horace. It was the ordinary of an Independent, or even of an Orr citizen. The company belonged to his family, started some dozen generations before. Shipping, with a history of being involved with crime until three generations back, when they did a thorough clean up and have been clean since. Nori had a large family, with most members involved in running the company in some fashion.

Trevor smiled, like his own family, but on a smaller scale.

The ordinariness of it made him dig deeper. After David and Horace, he had trouble believing there was nothing more to it. It seemed like everyone in the guild had lied about who they were, so why wouldn't Nori have too?

A notification appeared. Someone was shifting next to him, back in the real world. A hand on his chest, moving lower. The others were waking up. If Trevor continued his search while the others had sex, they'd notice it, they would come knocking at his virtual door and not let him hear the end of it.

He looked at all he'd uncovered. Nothing of use in finding out what had happened, but also no point in continuing to look. Maybe he'd get answers from Nori if he was rescued. If not, he'd help Uncle locate the Not-Bobby and make him pay.

He stepped out of his lobby as someone closed their mouth over his cock. With a moan, Trevor turned his head and kissed the mouth there, reaching down to stroke the cock within reach. It might be that of who he was kissing, or not. He couldn't tell how people had moved while he was sleeping and working. Someone else nipped at his neck, and Trevor made a conscious effort to put the last few hours and days out of his mind and let the pleasure of being with his family take over.