

## Petard: A Tale of Just Deserts

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IT'S NOT THAT I WANTED TO MAKE THE ELF CRY. I'M NOT PROUD of the fact. But he was an *elf* for chrissakes. What was he doing manning—elfing—the customer service desk at the Termite Mound? The Termite Mound was a tough assignment; given MIT's legendary residency snafus, it was a sure thing that someone like me would be along every day to ruin his day.

"Come on," I said, "Cut it out. Look, it's nothing personal."

He continued to weep, face buried dramatically in his long-fingered hands, pointed ears protruding from his fine, downy hair as it flopped over his ivory-pale forehead. Elves.

I could have backed down, gone back to my dorm, and just forgiven the unforgivably stupid censorwall there, used my personal node for research, or stuck to working in the lab. But I had paid for the full feed. I needed the full feed. I deserved the full feed. I was 18. I was a grownup, and the infantilizing, lurking censorwall offended my intellect and my emotions. I mean, seriously, *fuck that noise*.

"Would you *stop*?" I said. "Goddamnit, do your job."

The elf looked up from his wet hands and wiped his nose on his mottled raw suede sleeve. "I don't have to take this," he said. He pointed to a sign: "MIT RESIDENCY LLC OPERATES A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY TOWARD EMPLOYEE ABUSE. YOU CAN BE FINED UP TO \$2,000 AND/OR IMPRISONED FOR SIX MONTHS FOR ASSAULTING A CAMPUS RESIDENCE WORKER."

"I'm not abusing you," I said. "I'm just making my point. Forcefully."

He glared at me from behind a curtain of dandelion-fluff hair. "Abuse includes verbal abuse, raised voices, aggressive language and tone—"

I tuned him out. This was the part where I was supposed to say, "I know this isn't your fault, but—" and launch into a monologue explaining how his employer had totally hosed me by not delivering what it promised, and had further hosed him by putting him in a situation where he was the only one I could talk to about it and he couldn't do anything about it. This little pantomime was a fixture of life in the world, the shrugs-all-round nostrum that we were supposed to substitute for anything getting better ever.

Like I said, though, fuck that noise. What is the point of being smart, 18 years old, and unemployed if you aren't willing to do something about this kind of thing? Hell, the only reason I'd been let into MIT in the first place was that I was constitutionally incapable of playing out that little scene.

The elf had run down and was expecting me to do my bit. Instead, I said, "I bet you're in the Termite Mound, too, right?"

He got a kind of confused look. "That's PII," he said. "This office doesn't give out personally identifying information. It's in the privacy policy—" He tapped another sign posted by his service counter, one with much smaller type. I ignored it.

"I don't want someone else's PII. I want yours. Do you live in the residence? You must, right? Get a staff discount on your housing for working here, I bet." Elves were always cash-strapped. Surgery's not cheap, even if you're prepared to go to Cuba for it. I mean, you could get your elf-pals to try to do your ears for you, but only if you didn't care about getting a superbug or ending up with gnarly stumps sticking out of the side of your head. And forget getting a Nordic treatment without adult supervision. I mean, toot, toot, all aboard the cancer express. You had to be pretty insanely desperate to go elf without the help of a pro.

He looked stubborn. I mean, elf-stubborn, which is a kind of chibi version of stubborn that's hard to take seriously. I mean, *seriously*. "Look, of course you live in the Termite Mound. Whatever. The point is, we're all screwed by this stuff. You, me, them—" I gestured at the room full of people. They had all been allocated a queue position on entry to the waiting room and were killing time until they got their chance to come up to the Window of Eternal Disappointment in order to play out *I Know This Isn't Your Fault But...* before returning to their regularly scheduled duties as meaningless grains of sand being ground down by the unimaginably gigantic machinery of MIT Residency LLC.

"Let's do something about it, all right? Right here, right now."

He gave me a look of elven haughtiness that he'd almost certainly practiced in the mirror. I waited for him to say something. He waited for me to wilt. Neither of us budged.

“I’m not kidding. The censorwall has a precisely calibrated dose of fail. It works *just* enough that it’s worth using most of the time, and the amount of hassle and suck and fail you have to put up with when it gets in the way is still less than the pain you’d have to endure if you devoted your life to making it suck less. The *economically rational* course of action is to suck it up.

“What I propose is that we change the economics of this bullshit. If you’re the Termite Mound’s corporate masters, you get this much benefit out of the shitty censorwall, but we, the residents of the Termite Mound, pay a thousand times that in aggregate.” I mimed the concentrated interests of the craven fools who’d installed the censorwall, making my hands into a fist-wrapped-in-a-fist, then exploding them like a Hoberman sphere to show our mutual interests, expanding to dwarf the censorware like Jupiter next to Io.

“So here’s what I propose: let’s mound up all this interest, mobilize it, and aim it straight at the goons who put you in a job. You sit there all day and suffer through our abuse because all you’re allowed to do is point at your stupid sign.”

“How?” he said. I knew I had him.

KICKSTARTER? HACKER, PLEASE. GETTING STRANGERS TO COMBINE their finances so you can chase some entrepreneurial fantasy of changing the world by selling people stuff is an idea that was dead on arrival. If your little kickstarted business is successful enough to compete with the big, dumb titans, you’ll end up being bought out or forced out or sold out, turning you into something indistinguishable from the incumbent businesses you set out to destroy. The problem isn’t that the world has the wrong kind of sellers; it’s that it has the wrong kind of buyers. Powerless, diffused, atomized, puny, and insubstantial.

Turn buyers into sellers and they just end up getting sucked into the logic of fail: it’s unreasonable to squander honest profits on making people happier than they need to be in order to get them to open their wallets. But once you get all the buyers together in a mass with a unified position, the sellers don’t have any choice. Businesses will never spend a penny more than it takes to make a sale, so you have to change how many pennies it takes to complete the sale.

Back when I was 14, it took me 10 days to hack together my first *Fight the Power* site. On the last day of the fall term, Ashcroft High announced that catering was being turned over to Atos Catering. Atos had won the contract to run the caf at my middle school in my last year there, and every one of us lost five kilos by graduation. The French are supposed to be good at cooking, but the slop Atos served wasn’t even food. I’m pretty sure that after the first week they just switched to filling the steamer trays with latex replicas of gray, inedible glorp. Seeing as how no one was eating it, there was no reason to cook up a fresh batch every day.

The announcement came at the end of the last Friday before Christmas break, chiming across all our personal drops with a combined *bong* that arrived an instant before the bell rang. The collective groan was loud enough to drown out the closing bell. It didn’t stop, either, but grew in volume as we filtered into the hall and out of the building into the icy teeth of Chicago’s first big freeze of the season.

Junior high students aren’t allowed off campus at lunchtime, but high school students—even freshmen—can go where they please so long as they’re back by the third-period bell. That’s where *Fight the Power* came in.

WE THE UNDERSIGNED PLEDGE

TO BOYCOTT THE ASHCROFT HIGH CAFETERIA WHILE ATOS HAS THE CONTRACT TO SUPPLY IT

TO BUY AT LEAST FOUR LUNCHES EVERY WEEK FROM THE FOLLOWING FOOD TRUCKS [CHECK AT LEAST ONE]:

This was tricky. It’s not like there were a lot of food trucks driving out of the Loop to hit Joliet for the lunch rush. But I wrote a crawler that went through the review sites, found businesses with more than one food truck, munged the menus, and set out the intersection as an eye-pleasing infographic showing the appetizing potential of getting your chow outside of the world of the corrupt no-bid, edu-corporate complex.

By New Year’s Day, 98 percent of the student body had signed up. By January third, I had all four of the food trucks I’d listed lined up to show up on Monday morning.

Turns out, Ashcroft High and Atos had a funny kind of deal. Ashcroft High guaranteed a minimum level of revenue to Atos, and Atos guaranteed a maximum level to Ashcroft High. So, in theory, if 100 percent of the student body bought a cafeteria lunch, about 20 percent of that money would be kicked back to Ashcroft High. They later claimed that this was all earmarked to subsidize the lunches of poor kids, but no one could ever point to anything in writing where they’d committed to this, as our Freedom of Information Act requests eventually proved.

In return for the kickback, the school promised to ensure that Atos could always turn a profit. If not enough of us ate in the caf, the school would have to give Atos the money it would have made if we had. In other words, our choice to eat a good lunch wasn’t just costing the school its expected share of Atos’s profits; it had to dig money out

of its budget to make up for our commitment to culinary excellence.

They tried everything. Got the street in front of the school designated a no-food-trucks zone (we petitioned the City of Joliet to permit parking on the next street over). Shortened the lunch break (we set up a Web-based pre-order service that let us pick and prepay for our food). Banned freshmen from leaving school property (we were saved by the PTA). Suspended me for violating the school's social media policy (the ACLU wrote the school a blood-curdling nastygram and raised nearly \$30,000 in donations of \$3 or less from students around the world once word got out).

Atos wouldn't let them renegotiate the contract, either. If Ashcroft High wanted out, it would have to buy its way out. That's when I convinced the vice principal to let me work with the AP computer science class to build out a flexible, open version of *Fight the Power* that anyone could install and run for their own student bodies, providing documentation and support. That was just before spring break. By May 1, there were 87 schools whose students used *Ftp* to organize alternative food trucks for their own cafeterias.

Suddenly, this was *news*. Not just local news, either. Global. Atos had to post an earnings warning in its quarterly report. Suddenly, we had Bloomberg and Al Jazeera Business camera crews buttonholing Ashcroft High kids on their way to the lunch trucks. Whenever they grabbed me, I would give them this little canned speech about how Atos couldn't supply decent food and was taking money out of our educational budgets rather than facing the fact that the children they were supposed to be feeding hated their slop so much that they staged a mass walkout. It played well with kids in other schools and very badly with Atos's shareholders. But I'll give this to Atos: I couldn't have asked for a better Evil Empire to play Jedi against. They threatened to *sue* me—for defamation!—which made the whole thing news again. Stupidly, they sued me in Illinois, which has a great anti-SLAPP law, and was a massive technical blunder. The company's U.S. headquarters were in Clearwater, and Florida is a train wreck in every possible sense, including its SLAPP laws. If they'd sued me on their home turf, I'd have gone bankrupt before I could win.

They lost. The ACLU collected \$102,000 in fees from them. The story of the victory was above the fold on *Le Monde*'s site for a week. Turns out that French people loathe Atos even more than the rest of us, because they've had longer to sharpen their hate.

Long story slightly short: we won. Atos "voluntarily" released our school from its contract. And *Fight the Power* went *mental*. I spent that summer vacation reviewing Github comments on *Ftp* as more and more people discovered that they could make use of a platform that made fighting back simple. The big, stupid companies were whales and we were their krill, and all it took was some glue to glom us all together into boulders of indigestible matter that could choke them to death.

I dropped out of Ashcroft High in the middle of the 11th grade and did the rest of my time with home-schooling shovelware that taught me exactly what I needed to pass the GED and not one tiny thing more. I didn't give a shit. I was working full time on *Ftp*, craig-listing rides to hacker unconferences where I couchsurfed and spoke, giving my poor parental units eight kinds of horror. It would've been simpler if I'd taken donations for *Ftp* because Mom and Dad quickly came to understand that their role as banker in our little family ARG gave them the power to yank me home any time I moved out of their comfort zone. But there was a balance of terror there, because they totally knew that if I *had* accepted donations for the project, I'd have been financially independent in a heartbeat.

Plus, you know, they were proud of me. *Ftp* makes a difference. It's not a household name or anything, but more than a million people have signed up for *Ftp* campaigns since I started it, and our success rate is hovering around 25 percent. That means that I'd changed a quarter-million lives for the better (at least) before I turned 18. Mom and Dad, they loved that (which is not to say that they didn't need the occasional reminder of it). And shit, it got me a scholarship at MIT. So there's that.

NETWORK FILTERS ARE UNIVERSALLY LOATHED. DUH. NO ONE'S ever written a regular expression that can distinguish art from porn, and no one ever will. No one's ever assembled an army of prudes large enough to hand-sort the Internet into "good" and "bad" buckets. No one ever will. The Web's got about 100 billion pages on it; if you have a failure rate of one-tenth of 1 percent, you'll overblock (or underblock) (or both) 100,000,000 pages. That's several Library of Congresses' worth of pointless censorship, or all the porn ever made, times 10, missed though underfiltering. You'd be an idiot to even try.

Idiot like a fox! If you don't care about filtering out "the bad stuff" (whatever that is), censorware is a great business to be in. The point of most network filters is the "security syllogism":

SOMETHING MUST BE DONE.

I HAVE DONE SOMETHING.

SOMETHING HAS BEEN DONE.

VICTORY!

Hand-wringing parents don't want their precious offspring looking at wieners and hoo-hahs when they're supposed to be amassing student debt, so they demand that the Termite Mound fix the problem by *Doing Something*. The Termite Mound dispenses cash to some censorware creeps in a carefully titrated dose that is exactly sufficient to demonstrate *Something Has Been Doneness* to a notional wiener-enraged parent. Since all the other dorms, schools, offices, libraries, airports, bus depots, train stations, cafes, hotels, bars, and theme parks in the world are doing exactly the same thing, each one can declare itself to be in possession of *Best Practices* when there is an unwanted hoo-hah eruption, and culpability diffuses to a level that is safe for corporate governance and profitability. Mission Accomplished.

And so the whole world suffers under this pestilence. Millions of times every day—right at this moment—people are swearing at their computers: *What the fuck*. Censorware's indifference to those moments of suffering is only possible because they've never been balled up into a vast screaming meteor of rage.

"HEY, THERE. HI! LOOK, I'M HERE BECAUSE I NEED UNFILTERED Internet access to get through my degree. So do you all, right? But the Termite Mound isn't going to turn it off because that would be like saying, 'Here, kids, have a look at this porn,' which they can't afford to say, even though, seriously, who gives a shit, right?"

I had them at "porn," but now I had to keep them.

"Look at your tenancy agreement: you're paying 27 bucks a month for your network access at the Termite Mound. Twenty-seven bucks—each! I'll find us an ISP that can give all of us hot and cold running genitals and all the unsavory religious extremism, online gaming, and suicide instructions we can eat. Either I'm going to make the Termite Mound give us the Internet we deserve, or we'll cost it one of its biggest cash cows and humiliate it on the world stage.

"I don't want your money. All I want is for you to promise me that if I can get us Internet from someone who isn't a censoring sack of shit, that you'll come with me. I'm going to sign up every poor bastard in the Termite Mound, take that promise to someone who isn't afraid to work hard to earn a dollar, and punish the Termite Mound for treating us like this. And *then*, I'm going to make a loud noise about what we've done and spread the word to every other residence in Cambridge, then Boston, then across America. I'm going to spread out to airports, hotels, train stations, buses, taxis—any place where they make it their business to decide what data we're allowed to see."

I whirled around to face the elf, who leaped back, long fingers flying to his face in an elaborate mime of startlement. "Are you with me, pal?"

He nodded slightly.

"Come on," I said. "Let 'em hear you."

He raised one arm over his head, bits of rabbit fur and uncured hides dangling from his skinny wrist. I felt for him. I think we all did. Elves.

He was a convincer, though. By the time I left the room, I already had 29 signups.

ALL EVIL IN THE WORLD IS THE RESULT OF AN IMBALANCE BETWEEN the people who benefit from shenanigans and the people who get screwed by shenanigans. De-shenaniganifying the world is the answer to pollution and poverty and bad schools and the war on some drugs and a million other horrors. To solve all the world's problems, I need kick-ass raw feeds and a steady supply of doofus thugs from central casting to make idiots of. I know where I can find plenty of the latter, and I'm damn sure going to get the former. Watch me.

MY ADVISOR IS NAMED ANDRONICUS ANDRONICUS LLEWELLYN, and her parents had a sense of humor, clearly. She founded the *Networks That Change* lab three years ago after she fled Uzbekistan one step ahead of Gulnara's death squad, but they say that she still provides material aid to the army of babushkas that underwent forced sterilization under old man Karimov's brutal regime. Her husband, Arzu, lost an eye in Gezi. They're kind of a Twitter-uprising power couple.

I'm the only undergrad in the lab, and the grad students were slaving at the thought of having a bottle-washing dogsbody in residence. Someone to clean out the spam filters, lexically normalize the grant proposals, deworm the Internet of things, get the limescale out of the espresso machine, and defragment the lab's prodigious store of detritus, kipple, and moop.

Two days after telling them all where they could stick it, I got a meeting in AA's cube.

"Sit down, Lukasz," she said. My birth certificate read "Lucas," but I relished the extra consonant. I perched on a tensegrity chair that had been some grad student's laser-cutter thesis project. It creaked like a haunted attic, and its white acrylic struts were grubby as a snowbank a day after the salting trucks. AA's chair was patched with steel tape, huge black cocoony gobs of it. And it still creaked.

I waited patiently. My drop was in my overalls' marsupial pouch, and I stuffed my hands in there, curling my fingers around it and kneading it. It comforted me. AA closed the door.

"Do you know why my lab doesn't have any undergrads?" she asked. I gave it another moment to test for rhetoricalness, timed out, then gave it a shot. "You don't want to screw around with getting someone up to speed. You want to get the work done."

"Don't be stupid. Grad students need as much hand-holding as undergrads. No, it's because undergrads are full of the dramas. And the dramas are not good for getting the work done."

"Andronicus," I said, "I'm not the one you should be talking to—" I felt a flush creeping up my neck—"they—"

She fixed me with a look that froze my tongue and dried the spit in my mouth. "I spent four years in Jaslyk Prison in Uzbekistan. Three of my cellmates committed suicide. One of them bled out on me from the top bunk while I slept. I woke covered in her blood." She looked at her screen, snagged her attention on it, ignored me for a minute while she typed furiously. Turned back. "What did your lab mates do, Lukas, that you would like to talk to me about?"

"Nothing," I mumbled. I hated being dismissed like this. Of course, she could trump anything I was inclined to complain about. But it was so ... *invalidating*.

"Never forget that there is blood in the world's veins, Lukas. You've done something clever with your years on this planet. You're here to see if you can figure out how to do something important, now. We want to systematize the struggle here, figure out how to automate it, but eventually there will always be blood. You need to learn to be dispassionate about the interpersonal conflicts, to save your anger for the people who deserve it, and to channel that anger into a theory of action that leads to change. Otherwise, you will be an undergraduate who worries about being picked on."

"I know," I said. "I know. Sorry."

She held out a hand to stop me fleeing. "Lukas, there is change to be had out there. It waits for us to discover its fulcrums. That's the research project here. But the reason for the research is the change. It's to be the bag of blood in the streets or the boardroom or the prison. That's what you're learning to do here."

I didn't say anything. She turned back to her screen. Her fingers beat the keyboard. I left.

I pretended not to notice three of AA's grad students hastily switching off their infrared laser-pointers as I opened her glass door and walked back out to the lab. Everyone, including AA, knew that they'd been listening in, but the formal characteristics of our academic kabuki required us all to pretend that I'd just had a private conversation.

I pulled my laptop out of my bag and uncrumpled its bent corners. I'd only made it a week before, and I didn't have time or energy to fold up another one. It was getting pretty battered in my bag, though; the waxed cardboard shell getting more worn and creased in less time than ever before. Not even my most extreme couchsurfing voyages had been this hard on my essential equipment. The worst part was that the keyboard surface had gotten really smashed—I think I'd closed up the box with a Sharpie trapped inside it—so the camera that watched my fingers as they typed the letters printed on the cardboard sheet was having a hard time getting the registration right. I'd mashed the spot where the backspace was drawn so many times that I'd worn the ink off and had to redraw it (more Sharpie, a cardboard laptop owner's best friend).

Now the screen was starting to go. The little short-throw projector attached to the pinhead-sized computer taped inside the back of the box was misreading the geometry of the mirror it bounced the screen image off of, which keystoned and painted the image on the rice paper scrim set into the laptop's top half. The image was only off by about 10 degrees, but it was enough to screw up the touch screen registration and give me a mild headache after only a couple hours of staring at it. I'd noticed that a lot of the MIT kids carried big plastic and metal and glass laptops, which had seemed like some kind of weird retro affectation. But campus life was more of an off-road experience than I'd suspected.

I spent 15 minutes unfolding the laser-cut cardboard and smoothing out the creases, resticking everything with fiber tape from an office supply table in the middle of the lab, and then running through the registration and diagnostics built into the OS until the computer was in a usable state again. The whole time, I was hotly conscious of the grad students' sneaky gaze, the weird clacking noise of their fingers on real mechanical keyboards—seriously, who used a keyboard that was made of *pieces* anymore; was I really going to have to do that?—as they chatted about me.

Yes, about me. It's not (just) ego; I could tell. I can prove it. I was barely back up and running and answering all my social telephones when some dudeface from Chiapas sat down conspicuously next to me and said, "It's Lukas, right?" He held out his hand.

I looked at it for a moment, just to make the point, then shook. "Yeah. You're Juanca, right?" Of course he was Juanca. He'd been burned in effigy by Zetas every year for four years, and his entire family, all the way to third

cousins, were either stateside or in Guatemala or El Salvador, hiding out from narcoterrorists, who were still pissed about Juanca's anonymizer, a mix master that was the Number One, go-to source of convictable evidence against Zeta members whose cases went to trial. If it weren't for the fact that Juanca's network had also busted an assload of corrupt cops, prosecutors, judges, government ministers, regional governors, and one secretary of state, they'd have given him a ministerial posting and a medal. As it was, he was in exile. Famous. Loved. It helped that he was rakishly handsome—which I am not, for the record—and that he had a bounty on his head and had been unsuccessfully kidnapped on the T, getting away through some badass parkour that got captured in CCTV jittercam that made him look like he was moving in a series of short teleports.

"Yeah. You got the blood speech, huh?"

I nodded.

"It's a good one," he said. I didn't think so. I thought it was bullshit. I didn't say so.

We stared at each other. "Welp," he said. "Take it easy."

ONE OF THE EARLY *Ftp* CODE CONTRIBUTORS WAS NOW CTO FOR an ISP, and they'd gotten their start as a dorm co-op at Brown that had metastasized across New England. Sanjay had been pretty important to the early days of *Ftp*, helping us get the virtualization right so that it could run on pretty much any cloud without a lot of jiggery and/or pokery. Within a day of e-mailing Sanjay, I was having coffee with the vice president of business development for Miskatonic Networks, who was also Sanjay's boyfriend's girlfriend because apparently ISPs in New England are hotbeds of Lovecraft-fandom polyamory. Her name was Khadijah, and she had a Southie accent so thick it was like an amateur theater production of *Good Will Hunting*.

"The Termite Mound?" She laughed. "Shit, yeah, I know that place. It's still standing? I went to some super-sketchy parties there when I was a kid; I mean sooooooper-sketchy, like sketch-a-roony. I can't believe no one's torched the place yet."

"Not yet," I said. "And seeing as all my stuff's there right now, I'm hoping that no one does for the time being."

"Yeah, I can see that." I could *not* get over her accent. It was the most Bostonian thing I'd encountered since I got off the train. "Okay, so you want to know what we'd charge to provide service to someone at the Termite Mound?"

"Uh, no. I want to know what you'd charge per person if we could get you the whole mound—every unit in the residence. All 250 of them."

"Oh." She paused a second. "This is an *Ftp* thing, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "That's how I know Sanjay. I, uh, I started *Ftp*." I don't like to brag, but sometimes it makes sense in the context of the conversation, right?

"That was you? Wicked! So you're seriously gonna get the whole dorm to sign up with us?"

"I will if you can get me a price that I can sell to them," I said.

"Oh," she said. Then "Oh! Right. Hmm. Leave it with me. You say you can get them all signed up?"

"I think so. If the price is right. And I think that if the Termite Mound goes with you that there'll be other dorms that'll follow. Maybe a lab or two," I said. I was talking out of my ass at this point, but seriously, net-censorship in the labs at MIT? It could not stand.

"Damn," she said. "Sounds like you're majoring in *Ftp*. Don't you have classes or something?"

"No," I said. "This is basically exactly what I figured college would be like. A cross between summer camp and a Stanford obedience experiment. If all I wanted to do was cram a bunch of *knowledge* into my head, I could have stayed home and mooched it. I came here because I wanted to level up and fight something tough and even dangerous. I want to spend four years getting into the right kind of trouble. Going to classes, too, but seriously, *classes*? Whatever. Everyone knows the good conversations happen in the hallway between the formal presentations. Classes are just an excuse to have hallways."

She looked skeptical and ate banana bread.

"It's your deal," she said.

I could hear the *but* hanging in the air between us. She got more coffees and brought them back, along with toasted banana bread dripping with butter for me. She wouldn't let me pay and told me it was on Miskatonic. We were a potential big account. She didn't want to say "*but*" because she might offend me. I wanted to hear the "*but*."

"But?"

"But what?"

"It's my deal but ... ?"

"But, well, you know, you don't look after your grades, MIT'll put you out on your ass. That's how it works in college. I've seen it."

I chewed my banana bread.

"Hey," she said. "Hey. Are you okay, Lukasz?"

"I'm fine," I said.

She smiled at me. She was pretty. "But?"

I told her about my talk with AA, and about Juanca, and about how I felt like nobody was giving me my props, and she looked very sympathetic, in a way that made me feel much younger. Like toddler younger.

"MIT is all about pranks, right? I think if I could come up with something really epic, they'd—" And as I said it, I realized how dumb it was. *They laughed at me in Vienna, I'll show them!* "You know what? Forget about it. I got more important things to do than screw around with those knob-ends. Work to do, right? Get the network opened up around here, you and me, Khadijah!"

"I'll get back to you soon, okay?"

I FISHED A BEAD OUT OF MY POCKET AND WEDGED IT INTO MY EAR.

"Who is this?"

"Lukasz?" The voice was choked with tears.

"Who is this?" I said again.

"It's Bryan." I couldn't place the voice or the name.

"Bryan who?"

"From the Termite Mound's customer service desk." Then I recognized the voice. It was the elf, and he was having hysterics. Part of me wanted to say, *Oh, diddums!* and hang up. Because elves, AMR? But I'm not good at tough love.

"What's wrong?"

"They've fired me," he said. "I got called into my boss's office an hour ago, and he told me to start drawing up a list of people to kick out of the dorm. He wanted the names of people who supported you. I was supposed to go through the EULAs for the dorm and find some violations for all of them—"

"What if they didn't have any violations?"

He made a sound between a sob and a laugh. "Are you kidding? You're always in violation! Have you read the EULA for the mound? It's, like, 60 pages long."

"OK, gotcha. So you refused and you got fired?"

There was a pause. It drew out. "No," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "I gave them a bunch of names, and *then* they fired me."

Again, I was torn between the impulse to hang up on him and to hear more. Nosiness won (nosiness always wins; bets on nosiness are a sure thing). "Nicely done. Sounds like just deserts to me. What do you expect me to do about it?" But I knew. There were only two reasons to call me after something like this: to confess his sins or to get revenge. And no one would ever mistake me for a priest.

"I've got the names they pulled. Not just this time. Every time there's been any kind of trouble in the Termite Mound, MIT Residence has turfed out the troublemakers on some bogus EULA violation. They know that no one cares about student complaints, and there's always a waiting list for rooms at the Termite Mound, it's so central and all. I kept records."

"What kind of records?"

"Hard copies of e-mails. They used disappearing ink for all the dirty stuff, but I just took pictures of my screen with my drop and saved it to personal storage. It's ugly. They went after pregnant girls, kids with disabilities. Any time there was a chance they'd have to do an air-quality audit or fix a ramp, I'd have to find some reason to violate the tenant out of residence." He paused a moment. "They used some pretty bad language when they talked about these people, too."

The Termite Mound should've been called the Roach Motel: turn on the lights and you'd find a million scurrying bottom-feeders running for the baseboards.

I was going to turn on the lights.

"You've got all that, huh?"

"Tons of it," he said. "Going back three years. I knew that if it ever got out that they'd try and blame it on me. I wanted records."

"Okay," I said. "Meet me in Harvard Square, by the T entrance. How soon can you get there?"

"I'm at the Coop right now," he said. "Using a study booth."

"Perfect," I said. "Five minutes, then?"

"I'm on my way."

The Coop's study booths had big signs warning that everything you did there was recorded—sound, video, infrared, data—and filtered for illicit behavior. The signs explained that there was no human being looking at the

records unless you did something to trip the algorithm, like that made it better. If a tree falls in the forest, it sure as shit makes a sound; and if your conversation is bugged, it's bugged—whether or not a human being listens in right then or at some time in the infinite future of that data.

I beat him to the T entrance and looked around for a place to talk. It wasn't good. From where I stood, I could see dozens of cameras, the little button-sized dots discreetly placed all around the square, each with a little scannable code you could use to find out who got the footage and what its policy was. No one ever bothered to do this. Ever. EULAs were not written for human consumption: a EULA's message could always be boiled down to seven words: "ABANDON HOPE, ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE." Or, more succinctly: "YOU LOSE."

I felt bad about Bryan's job. It was his own deal, of course. He'd stayed even after he knew how evil they were. And I hadn't held a gun to his head and made him put himself in the firing line. But, of course, I had convinced him to. I had led him to. I felt bad.

Bryan turned up just as I was scouting a spot at an outdoor table by an ice cream parlor. They had a bunch of big blowing heaters that'd do pretty good white-noise masking, a good light/dark contrast between the high-noon sun and the shade of the awning that would screw up cameras' white-balance, and the heaters would wreak havoc on the infrared range of the CCTVs, or so I hoped. I grabbed Bryan, clamping down on his skinny arm through the rough weave of his forest-green cloak and dragged him to my chosen spot.

"You got it?" I said, once we were both seated and nursing hot chocolates. I got caffeinated marshmallows; he got Thai ghost-pepper-flavored, though that was mostly marketing. No way those marshmallows were over a couple thousand Scovilles.

"I encrypted it with your public key," he said, handing me a folded-up paper. I unfolded it and saw that it had been printed with a stegoed QR code, hidden in a Victorian woodcut. That kind of spycraft was pretty weak sauce—the two-dee-barcode-in-a-public-domain-image thing was a staple of shitty student click-bait thrillers—but if he'd really managed to get my public key and verify it and then encrypt the blob with it, I was impressed. That was about 10 million times more secure than the average fumbledick ever managed. The fact that he'd handed me a hard copy of the URL instead of e-mailing it to me, well, that was pretty sweet frosting. Bryan had potential.

I folded the paper away. "What should I be looking for?"

"It's all organized and tagged. You'll see." He looked nervous. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Well, for starters, I'm going to call them up and tell them I have it."

"What?" He looked like he was going to cry.

"Come on," I said. "I'm not going to tell them where I got it. The way you tell it, I'm about to get evicted, right?"

"Technically, you *are* evicted. There's a process server waiting at every entrance to the Termite Mound doing face recognition on the whole list. Soon as you go home, bam. Forty-eight hours to clear out."

"Right," I said. "I don't want to have to go look for a place to live while I'm also destroying these shitbirds *and* fixing everyone's Internet connection. Get serious. So I'm going to go and talk to Messrs. Amoral, Nonmoral, and Immoral and explain that I have a giant dump of compromising messages from them that I'm going public with, and it'll look really, really bad for them if they turf me out now."

It's time for a true confession. I am not nearly as brave as I front. All this spycraft stuff, all the bluster about beating these guys on their home turf, yeah, in part I'm into it. I like it better than riding through life like a foil chip-bag being swept down a polluted stream on a current of raw sewage during a climate-change-driven superstorm.

But the reality is that I can't really help myself. There's some kind of rot-fungus that infects the world. Things that are good when they're small and personal grow, and as they grow, their attack surface grows with them, and they get more and more colonized by the fungus, making up stupid policies, doing awful stuff to the people who rely on them and the people who work for them, one particle of fungus at a time, each one just a tiny and totally defensible atomic-sized spoor of rot that piles up and gloms onto all the other bits of rot until you're a walking, suppurating lesion.

No one ever set out to create the kind of organization that needs to post a "MIT RESIDENCY LLC OPERATES A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY TOWARD EMPLOYEE ABUSE. YOU CAN BE FINED UP TO \$2,000 AND/OR IMPRISONED FOR SIX MONTHS FOR ASSAULTING A CAMPUS RESIDENCE WORKER" sign. You start out trying to do something good, then you realize you can get a little richer by making it a little worse. Your thermostat for shittiness gets reset to the new level, so it doesn't seem like much of a change to turn it a notch further toward the rock-bottom, irredeemably shitty end of the scale.

The truth is that you can get really rich and huge by playing host organism to the rot-fungus. The rot-fungus diffuses its harms and concentrates its rewards. That means that healthy organisms that haven't succumbed to the rot-fungus are liable to being devoured by giant, well-funded vectors for it. Think of the great local business that gets devoured by an awful hedge fund in a leveraged takeover, looted, and left as a revolting husk to shamble on



until it collapses under its own weight.

I am terrified of the rot-fungus because it seems like I'm the only person who notices it most of the time. Think of all those places where the town council falls all over itself to lure some giant corporation to open a local factory. Don't they notice that everyone who works at places like that hates every single moment of every single day? Haven't they ever tried to converse with the customer-service bots run by one of those lumbering dinos?

I mean, sure, the bigs have giant budgets and they'll take politicians out for nice lunches and throw a lot of money at their campaigns, but don't these guardians of the public trust ever try to get their cars fixed under warranty? Don't they ever buy a train ticket? Don't they ever eat at a fast-food joint? Can't they smell the rot-fungus? Am I the only one? I've figured out how to fight it in my own way. Everyone else who's fighting seems to be fighting against something *else*—injustice or inequality or whatever, without understanding that the fungus's rot is what causes all of those things.

I'm convinced that no normal human being ever woke up one morning and said, "Dammit, my life doesn't have enough petty bureaucratic rules, zero-tolerance policies, censorship, and fear in it. How do I fix that?" Instead, they let this stuff pile up, one compromise at a time, building up huge sores suppurating with spore-loaded fluids that eventually burst free and beslime everything around them. It gets normal to them, one dribble at a time.

"Lukasz, you don't know what you're doing. These guys, they're—"

"What?" I said. "Are they the Mafia or something? Are they going to have me dropped off a bridge with cement overshoes?"

He shook his head, making the twigs and beads woven into the downy fluff of his hair clatter together. "No, but they're ruthless. I mean, totally ruthless. They're not normal."

The way he said it twinged something in my hindbrain, some little squiggle of fear, but I pushed it away. "Yeah, that's okay. I'm used to abnormal." I am the most abnormal person I know.

"Be careful, seriously," he said.

"Thanks, Bryan," I said. "Don't worry about me. You want me to try and get your room back, too?"

He chewed his lip. "Don't," he said. "They'll know it was me if you do that."

I resisted the urge to shout at him to grow a spine. These assholes had cost him his home and his job (okay, I'd helped), and he was going to couchsurf it until he could find the rarest of treasures: an affordable place to live in Cambridge, Massachusetts? Even if he was being tortured by his conscience for all his deplorable sellout-ism, he was still being a total wuss. But that was his deal. I mean, he was an *elf*, for chrissakes. Who knew what he was thinking?

"Suit yourself," I said, and went and made some preparations.

MESSRS. AMORAL, NONMORAL, AND IMMORAL HAD AN OFFICE over the river in Boston, in a shabby office block that only had 10 floors but whose company directory listed over 800 businesses. I knew the kind of place because they showed up whenever some hairy scam unraveled and they showed you the office-of-convenience used by the con artists who'd destroyed something that lots of people cared about and loved in order to make a small number of bad people a little richer. A kind of breeding pit for rot-fungus, in other words.

At first, I thought I was going to have to go and sleuth their real locations, but I saw that Amoral, Nonmoral, and Immoral had the entire third floor registered to them, while everyone else had crazy-ass, heavily qualified suite numbers like 401c(1)K, indicating some kind of internal routing code for the use of the army of rot-fungus-infected spores who ensured that correspondence was handled in a way that preserved the illusion that each of the multifarious, blandly named shell companies (I swear to Cthulhu that there was one called "International Holdings [Holdings], Ltd") was a real going concern and not a transparent ruse intended to allow the rot-fungus to spread with maximal diffusion of culpability for the carriers who did its bidding.

I punched #300# on the ancient touch screen intercom, its surface begrimed with a glossy coat of hardened DNA, Burger King residue, and sifted-down dust of the ages. It blatted like an angry sheep, once, twice, three times, then disconnected. I punched again. Again. On the fourth try, an exasperated, wheezing voice emerged: "What?"

"I'm here to speak to someone from MIT Residences LLC."

"Send an e-mail."

"I'm a tenant. My name is Lukasz Romero." I let that sink in. "I've got some documents I'd like to discuss with a responsible individual at MIT Residences LLC." I put a bit of heavy English on *documents*. "Please." I put even more English on *please*. I've seen the same tough-guy videos that you have, and I can do Al Pacinoid-overwound, dangerous dude as well as anyone. "Please," I said again, meaning *right now*.

There was an elongated and ominous pause, punctuated by muffled rustling and grumbling, and what may have been typing on an old-fashioned, mechanical keyboard. "Come up," a different voice said. The elevator to my left ground as the car began to lower itself.

I'D EXPECTED SOMETHING SINISTER—A PEELING DUNGEON OF A room where old men with armpit stains gnawed haunches of meat and barked obscenities at each other. Instead, I found myself in an airy, high-ceilinged place that was straight out of the publicity shots for MIT's best labs, the ones that had been set-dressed by experts who'd ensured that no actual students had come in to mess things up before the photographer could get a beautifully lit shot of the platonic perfection.

The room took up the whole floor, dotted with conversation pits with worn, comfortable sofas whose end tables sported inconspicuous charge-plates for power-hungry gadgets. The rest of the space was made up of new-looking work surfaces and sanded-down antique wooden desks that emitted the honeyed glow of a thousand coats of wax buffed by decades of continuous use. The light came from tall windows and full-spectrum spotlights that were reflected and diffused off the ceiling, which was bare concrete and mazed with cable trays and conduits. I smelled good coffee and toasting bread and saw a perfectly kept little kitchenette to my left.

There were perhaps a dozen people working in the room, standing at the work surfaces, mousing away at the antique desks, or chatting intensely in the conversation pits. It was a kind of perfect tableau of industrious tech-company life, something out of a recruiting video. The people were young and either beautiful or handsome or both. I had the intense, unexpected desire to work here, or a place like this. It had good *vibes*.

One of the young, handsome people stood up from his conversation nook and smoothed out the herringbone wool hoodie he was wearing, an artfully cut thing that managed to make him look like both a young professor and an undergraduate at the same time. It helped that he was so fresh-faced, with apple cheeks and a shock of curly brown hair.

“Lukasz, right?” He held out a hand. He was wearing a dumbwatch, a wind-up thing in a steel casing that was fogged with a century of scratches. I coveted it instantly; though I knew nothing about its particulars, I was nevertheless certain that it was expensive, beautifully engineered, and extremely rare.

The door closed behind me, and the magnet audibly reengaged. The rest of the people in the room studiously ignored us.

"I'm Sergey. Can I get you a cup of coffee? Tea? Some water?"

The coffee smelled *good*. “No, thank you,” I said. “I don’t think I’ll be here for long.”

"Of course. Come and sit."

The other participants in his meeting had already vacated the sofas and left us with a conversation pit all to ourselves. I sank into the sofa and smelled the spicy cologne of a thousand eager, well-washed people who'd sat on it before me, impregnating the upholstery with the spoor of their good perfumes.

He picked up a small red enamel teapot and poured a delicious-smelling stream of yellow-green steaming liquid into a chunky diner-style coffee cup. He sipped it. My stomach growled. “You told the receptionist you wanted to talk about some documents?”

“Yeah,” I said, pulling myself together. “I’ve got documentary evidence of this company illegally evicting tenants—students—who got pregnant, complained about substandard living conditions and maintenance issues, and, in my case, complained about the network filters at the Termite Mound.”

He cocked his head for a moment like he was listening for something in the hum and murmur of the office around him. I found myself listening, too, but try as I might, I couldn't pick out a single individual voice from the buzz, not even a lone intelligible word. It was as though they were all going "murmurmurmurmur," though I could see their lips moving and shaping what must have been words.

“Ah,” he said at last. “Well, that’s very unfortunate. Can you give me a set and I’ll escalate them up our chain to ensure that they’re properly dealt with?”

“I can give you a set,” I said. “But I’ll also be giving a set to the MIT ombudsman and the *Tech* and the local WikiLeaks Party rep. Sergey, forgive me, but you don’t seem to be taking this very seriously. The material in my possession is the sort of thing that could get you and your colleagues here sued into a smoking crater.”

“Oh, I appreciate that there’s a lot of potential liability in the situation you describe, but it wouldn’t be rational for me to freak out now, would it? I haven’t seen your documents, and if I had, I could neither authenticate them nor evaluate the risk they represent. So I’ll take a set from you and ensure that the people within our organization who have the expertise to manage this sort of thing get to them quickly.”

It's funny. I'd anticipated that he'd answer like a chatbot, vomiting up Markov-chained nothings from the lexicon of the rot-fungus: "we take this very seriously"; "we cannot comment on ongoing investigations"; "we are actioning this with a thorough inquiry and post-mortem" and other similar crapola. Instead, he was talking like a hacker on a mailing list defending the severity he'd assigned to a bug he owned.

"Sergey, that's not much of an answer."

He sipped that delicious tea some more. “Is there something in particular you wanted to hear from me? I mean, this isn’t the sort of thing that you find out about, then everything stops until you’ve figured out what to do next.”

I was off-balance. “I wanted—” I waved my hands. “I wanted an explanation. How the hell did this systematic abuse come about?”

He shrugged. He really didn’t seem very worried “Hard to say, really. Maybe it was something out of the labs.”

“What do you mean, ‘the labs’?”

He gestured vaguely at one cluster of particularly engrossed young men and women who were bent over screens and work surfaces, arranged in pairs or threesomes, collaborating with fierce intensity, reaching over to touch each other’s screens and keyboards in a way I found instantly and deeply unsettling.

“We’ve got a little R&D lab that works on some of our holdings. We’re really dedicated to disrupting the rental market. There’s so much money in it, you know, but mostly it’s run by these entitled jerks who think that they’re geniuses for having the brilliant idea of buying a building and then sitting around and charging rent on it. A real old boys’ club.” For the first time since we started talking, he really seemed to be alive and present and paying attention.

“Oh, they did some bits and pieces that gave them the superficial appearance of having a brain, but there’s a lot of difference between A/B—splitting your acquisition strategy and really deep-diving into the stuff that matters.”

At this stage, I experienced a weird dissonance. I mean, I was there because these people were doing something genuinely villainous, real rot-fungus stuff. On the other hand, well, this sounded cool. I can’t lie. I found it interesting. I mean, catnip-interesting.

“I mean, chewy questions. Like, if the median fine for a second citation for substandard plumbing is \$400, and month-on-month cost for plumbing maintenance in a given building is \$2,000 a month, and the long-term costs of failure to maintain are \$20,000 for full replumbing on an eight- to 10-year basis with a 75 percent probability of having to do the big job in year nine, what are the tenancy parameters that maximize your return over that period?”

“Tenancy parameters?”

He looked at me. I was being stupid. I don’t like that look. I suck at it. It’s an ego thing. I just find it super-hard to deal with other people thinking that I’m dumb. I would probably get more done in this world if I didn’t mind it so much. But I do. It’s an imperfect world, and I am imperfect.

“Tenancy parameters. What are the parameters of a given tenant that predict whether he or she will call the city inspectors given some variable set point of substandard plumbing, set on a scale that has been validated through a rigorous regression through the data that establishes quantifiable inflection points relating to differential and discrete maintenance issues, including leaks, plugs, pressure, hot-water temperature and volume, and so on. It’s basically just a solve-for-X question, but it’s one with a lot of details in the model that are arrived at through processes with a lot of room for error, so the model needs a lot of refinement and continuous iteration.

“And, of course, it’s all highly sensitive to external conditions. There’s a whole game-theoretical set of questions about what other large-scale renters do in response to our own actions, and there’s an information-theory dimension to this that’s, well, it’s amazing. Like, which elements of our strategy are telegraphed when we take certain actions as opposed to others, and how can those be steganographed through other apparent strategies?

“Now, most of these questions we can answer through pretty straightforward business processes, stuff that Amazon figured out 20 years ago. But there’s a real risk of getting stuck in local maxima, just you know, overoptimizing inside of one particular paradigm with some easy returns. That’s just reinventing the problem, though, making us into tomorrow’s dinosaurs.

“If we’re going to operate a culture of continuous improvement, we need to be internally disrupted to at least the same extent that we’re disrupting those fat, stupid incumbents. That’s why we have the labs. They’re our chaos monkeys. They do all kinds of stuff that keeps our own models sharp. For example, they might incorporate a separate business and use our proprietary IP to try to compete with us—without telling us about it. Or give a set of autonomous agents privileges to communicate eviction notices in a way that causes a certain number of lawsuits to be filed, just to validate our assumptions about the pain point at which an action or inaction on our side will trigger a suit from a tenant, especially for certain profiles of tenants.

“So there’s not really any way that I can explain specifically what happened to the people mentioned in your correspondence. It’s possible no one will ever be able to say with total certainty. I don’t really know why anyone would expect it to be otherwise. We’re not a deterministic state machine, after all. If all we did was respond in set routines to set inputs, it’d be trivial to innovate around us and put us out of business. Our objective is to be strategically nonlinear and anti-deterministic within a range of continuously validated actions that map and remap a chaotic terrain of profitable activities in relation to property and rental. We’re not rentiers, you understand. We don’t own assets for a living. *We do things with them.* We’re doing commercial science that advances the state of the art. We’re discovering deep truths lurking in potentia in the shape of markets and harnessing them—putting them to work.”

His eyes glittered. “Lukasz, you come in here with your handful of memos and you ask me to explain how they came about, as though this whole enterprise was a state machine that we control. We do not control the enterprise.

An enterprise is an artificial life form built up from people and systems in order to minimize transaction costs so that it can be nimble and responsive, so that it can move into niches, dominate them, fully explore them. The human species has spent millennia recombining its institutions to uncover the deep, profound mathematics of power and efficiency.

"It's a terrain with a lot of cul-de-sacs and blind alleys. There are local maxima: maybe a three-move look-ahead shows a good outcome from evicting someone who's pregnant and behind on the rent, but the six-move picture is different because someone like you comes along and makes us look like total assholes. That's fine. All that means is that we have to prune that branch of the tree, try a new direction. Hell, ideally, you'd be in there so early, and give us such a thoroughgoing kicking, that we'd be able to discover and abort the misfire before the payload had fully deployed. You'd be saving us opportunity cost. You'd be part of our chaos monkey.

"Lukasz, you come in here with your whistleblower memos. But I'm not participating in a short-term exercise. Our mission here is to quantize, systematize, harness, and perfect interactions. You want me to explain, right now, what we're going to do about your piece of information. Here's your answer, Lukasz: we will integrate it. We will create models that incorporate disprovable hypotheses about it; we will test those models; and we will refine them. We will make your documents part of our inventory of clues about the underlying nature of deep reality. Does that answer satisfy you, Lukasz?"

I stood up. Through the whole monologue, Sergey's eyes had not moved from mine, nor had his body language shifted, nor had he demonstrated one glimmer of excitement or passion. Instead, he'd been matter-of-fact, like he'd been explaining the best way to make an omelet or the optimal public transit route to a distant suburb. I was used to people geeking out about the stuff they did. I'd never experienced this before, though: it was the opposite of geeking out, or maybe a geeking out that went so deep that it went through passion and came out the other side.

It scared me. I'd encountered many different versions of hidebound authoritarianism, fought the rot-fungus in many guises, but this was not like anything I'd ever seen. It had a purity that was almost seductive.

But beautiful was not the opposite of terrible. The two could easily co-exist.

"I hear that I'm going to get evicted when I get back to the Termite Mound. You've got a process server waiting for me. That's what I hear."

Sergey shrugged. "And?"

"And? And what use is your deep truth to me if I'm out on the street?"

"What's your point?"

He was as mild and calm as a recorded airport safety announcement. There was something inhuman—transhuman?—in that dispassionate mien.

"Don't kick me out of my place."

"Ah. Excuse me a second."

He finished his tea, set the cup down, and headed over to the lab. He chatted with them, touched their screens. The murmur drowned out any words. I didn't try to disguise the fact that I was watching them. There was a long period during which they said nothing, did not touch anything, just stared at the screens with their heads so close together they were almost touching. It was a kind of pantomime of psychic communications.

He came back. "Done," he said. "Is there anything else? We're pretty busy around here."

"Thank you," I said. "No, that's about it."

"All right then," he said. "Are you going to leave me your documents?" "Yes," I said, and passed him a stack of hard copies. He looked at the paper for a moment, folded the stack carefully in the middle and put it in one of the wide side pockets of his beautifully tailored cardigan.

I found my way back down to the ground floor and was amazed to see that the sun was still up. It had felt like hours had passed while Sergey talked to me, and I could have sworn that the light had faded in those tall windows. But, checking my drop, I saw that it was only three o'clock. I had to be getting home.

There was a process server waiting ostentatiously in the walkway when I got home, but he looked at me and then down at his screen and then let me pass.

It was only once I was in my room that I realized I hadn't done anything about Bryan's eviction.

KADIJAH DIDN'T BUY THE COFFEE THIS TIME. AND I BOUGHT MY own banana bread.

"I met that Sergey dude," she said.

"Creepy, huh?"

She blew on her coffee. She drank it black. "Wicked smart, I think. And it looks like he's got your number."

Kadijah heard about the mass evictions through the *Ftp*; she'd been watching it carefully. When she messaged me, I assumed that she was outraged on all our behalf. She'd made an offer of free, uncensored connectivity for six months for everyone in the Termite Mound *and* everyone who'd been evicted. But she'd met Sergey? "He's scary,

too,” she said as an afterthought. “But scary smart.”

I’d been taking Miskatonic as an existence proof of a part of the world that the rot-fungus had not yet colonized. But afterward, I found myself turning our conversation over and over in my head. Yes, maybe she had offered all that great, free, uncensored Internet goodness because she was outraged by the dirty tricks campaign. But maybe she was doing it because she knew that *appearing* outraged would make her—and her company—seem like the kind of nice people to whom we should all give more money. Maybe they don’t give a damn about *Ftp* or fairness or eviction. Maybe it’s just an elaborate game of sound bites and kabuki gestures that are all calibrated to the precise sociopathic degree necessary to convey empathy and ethics without ever descending into either. She hadn’t bought the coffee or the banana bread.

It’s easy to slip into this kind of metacognitive reverie and hard to stop once you start. Now I found myself questioning my own motives, scouring my subconscious for evidence of ego, self-promotion, and impurity.

The thing was.

The thing was.

The thing *was* that I had not ever met someone like Sergey before. Sergey, who’d shown me something glittering and cool and vast that waited for us to realize it and bring it to perfection. Sergey, who’d both understood the collective action problem and found it to be secondary, a thing to solve on the way to solving something bigger and more important.

Sergey’s words had awoken in me a feverish curiosity, an inability to see the world as it had once been. And I hated the feeling. It was the sense that my worldview had come adrift, all my certainty calving off like an iceberg and floating away to sea. If you accepted Sergey’s idea, then the human race was just the symbiotic intestinal flora of a meta-organism that would use us up and crap us out as needed. The global networks that allowed us to organize ourselves more efficiently were so successful because they let businesses run their supply chains more efficiently, and all the socializing and entertainment and chatter were just a side effect. *Ftp* was a mild pathogen, a few stray harmful bacteria in the colon of the corporate over-organism, and if it ever got to the point where it was any kind of real threat, the antibodies would show up to tear it to parts so it could be flushed away.

In other words, *I* was the rot-fungus. Everything I did, everything I’d done, was an infection, and not even a very successful one.

CHRISTMAS BREAK ARRIVED QUICKER THAN I’D HAVE GUESSED. Bryan and his girlfriend had me over to their new place for dinner during the last week of classes. She was an elf, too, of course, and their place was all mossy rocks and driftwood and piles of leaves. The food was about what you’d expect, but it was better than the slurry I’d been gulping at my desk while I wrestled with my term assignments and crammed for exams.

The Internet access at the Termite Mound was now uncensored, but I still found myself working at the lab. There was something comforting about being around my lab mates instead of huddling alone in my dorm room.

Bryan’s girlfriend, Lana, was in mechanical engineering and she made some pretty great-looking mobiles, which dangled and spun around the tiny studio, their gyrations revealing the hidden turbulence of our exhalations. Every time I moved, I whacked one or another of them, making their payloads of mossy rocks and artful twigs clatter together. The floor was littered with their shed dander, which I took to be a deliberate act of elfy-welfy feng shui.

“So, how’s things at the Termite Mound?” Bryan asked as we wound down over a glass of floral mead, which is pretty terrible, even by the standards of elf cuisine.

It was the question that had hung over the whole evening. After all, I’d cost Bryan his home and his job and had walked away scot-free.

“Yeah,” I said. “Well, the city and the university are both investigating MIT Residences LLC, and it looks like they’re going to be paying some pretty big fines. There was a class-action lawyer hanging around out front last week, trying to track down the old tenants who’d been turfed out. So there’s going to be some more bad road ahead of them.”

“Good,” he said, with feeling. The expression of rage and bitterness that crossed his face was not elfin in the slightest. It was the face of someone who’d been screwed over and knew he had no chance of ever getting back at his attackers.

“Yeah,” I said again. The class-action guy had really been a gut punch for me. Class action was so *old school*, the thing that *Ftp* was supposed to replace with something fast, nimble, networked, and collective. Class action was all about bottom-feeding lawyers slurping up the screwed-over like krill and making a meal of their grievances. *Ftp* let the krill organize into a powerful mass in its own right, with the ability to harness and command the predatory legal kraken that had once been its master. The fact that *Ftp* had managed to get us cheap, unfiltered broadband, while this sleazoid was proposing to actually skewer the great beast, straight through the wallet? It made me feel infinitesimal.

“But you’re still there,” he said. The place seemed a *lot* smaller. Bryan seemed a *lot* less elfin.

“Yeah,” I said. “Don’t guess they figure they can afford to evict me.”

“That worked out well for you, then.”

“Bryan,” Lana said, putting her hand on his arm. “Come on. It’s not Lukasz’s fault those assholes are douchebats. He didn’t make them fire you. It’s—” She waved her hands at the mobiles, the walls, the wide world. “It’s just how it is. The system, right?”

None of us said anything for a while. We drank our mead.

“Want to go vape something?” I said. There were lots of legal highs on campus. Some of them were pretty elfy, too. I wanted to blot out the world right then, which wasn’t elfy, but we could all name our poisons.

I stumbled into the cold with them, in a haze of self-pity and self-doubt. The winter had come on quick and bitter, one of those Boston deep freezes, the combined gale-force wind, subzero temperature, and high humidity that got right into your bones. Too cold to talk, at least.

As we settled into a crowd of vapers shivering in front of a brew pub, I heard a familiar voice. I couldn’t make out the words, but the tones cut through the cold and the self-pity and brought me up short. I turned around.

“Hey, Lukasz,” Sergey said. He was in the center of a group of five other guys, all vaping from little lithium-powered pacifiers that fit over their index fingernails, giving them the look of Fu Manchu viziers.

“Sergey,” I said, getting up from our bench and moving away from Bryan and Lana, suddenly not wanting to be seen in elfin company. “How’s the hive-mind?”

He looked over to Bryan and Lana in their layered furs, then back at me. He gave me a courtesy smile. “You’d be amazed at how well it’s doing.” The rest of the group nodded. I thought I recognized some of them. He closed the distance between us. “Going home for the holidays?” he asked in a conspiratorial tone.

“Don’t know,” I said. I had some invites from my old hackerspace buddies to go on a little couch trip, but whenever I contemplated it, I felt like a fraud. I hadn’t said yes, and I hadn’t said no, but in my heart I knew I wouldn’t be going anywhere. How could I look those people in the eye, knowing what I knew? Knowing, in particular, what a fraud I turned out to be?

“Well,” Sergey said, leaning in a little closer. I could smell the vape on his breath, various long-chain molecules like a new-car smell with an undertone of obsolete tobacco. “Well,” he said again. “There’s an opening at the office. In the chaos monkey department. Looking for someone who can work independently, really knocking the system around, probing for weaknesses and vulnerabilities, pushing us out of those local optima.”

“Sergey,” I asked, the blood draining out of my face, “are you offering me a *job*?”

He smiled an easy smile. “A very good job, Lukasz. A job that pays well and lets you do what you’re best at. You get resources, paychecks, smart colleagues. You get to organize your *Ftp* campaigns, make it the best tool you can. We’ll even host it for you, totally bulletproof, expansible computation and storage. Analytics—well, you know what our analytics are like.”

I did. I wondered what algorithm had suggested that he go out for a smoke at just that minute in order to be fully assured of catching me on the way home. The Termite Mound was full of cameras and other sensors, and it knew an awful lot about my movements.

A job. Money. Friends. Challenges. Do *Ftp* all day long, walk away from AA’s lab and the fish-eyed games of the grad students. Walk away from my tiny dorm room. Become a zuckerbergian comet, launched out of university without the unnecessary drag of a diploma into stratospheric heights, become a name to conjure with. Lana and Bryan were behind me on the bench and couldn’t hear us, not at the whispers in which we spoke. But I was drug-paranoid sure that they could decipher our body language, even from behind the wall of synthetic psilocybin they had scaled.

I could have a purpose, a trajectory, a goal. Certainty.

To my horror, I didn’t turn him down. A small part of me watched distantly as I said, “I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Of course,” he said, and smiled a smile of great and genuine goodwill and serenity. I waved goodbye to Bryan and Lana and headed back to the Termite Mound. ■