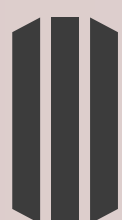


"Your guests are waiting for you in the Silverstone Lounge. That's on the first mezzanine."

"Thank you."



The view from the Silverstone Lounge over the station's docking arm and open space was as beautiful as Nick had imagined. But now he concentrated instead on the trio of people sitting in the attractive easy chairs. They all had tablets in their hands and were communicating with them intensively. Two of them were obviously trying to do something. Were they playing a game against each other?

The first to notice Nick was a woman of around forty. Nick guessed that she was either from New Jaipur or from the Indian subcontinent on Earth, judging by her complexion.

"My name is Nick Gramo, journalist from Horizon..."

"Yeah, we've heard of you," said the woman. "I am Amira Angami, Pisces Interstellar. And those two... well, I suppose they're my competitors, if you want to look at it that way. Oli from Bohemur and Carol from Tambor."

The pair of hackers raised their heads from their tablets. Oliver Forman was tall and maybe a few years younger than Amira.



He was hollering at his colleague in a deep voice that was strained through his teeth.

Carol Laut was significantly younger than her two competitors. She was the sort that Nick could imagine in a basement somewhere, breaking through enemy firewalls or building her own. She did not come over as an entirely representative sample of the firm. Her Tambor Security was the protection company that Nick suspected would be the first in line for the fleet protection contract.

"I am Nick Gramo from Horizon News," he introduced himself again, to all three of them.

"Will there be a camera?" asked Carol. "Just because I'll need to switch off my scripts since they'll start to beep. They always do when there's an active camera near me."

"I don't think we need a camera just yet," Nick reassured her, and switched on the audio-recorder via his comlink. "I can record the sound."

"Okay, I'll still need to switch them off then."

"And maybe we can just talk."

Oliver Forman laughed and nodded Nick to one of the couches.

"You look wiped out."

"A long journey."

"One of those drinks we have there will get you back on your feet."

Nick looked at the table. Along with various sorts of tea and soda, there were two bottles of different energy drinks, Dulles and StellarShock. He allowed himself to doubt their efficacy, but poured some StellarShock into a glass. This one at least tasted better.

"What was that on your tablets? Were you playing something?"

Carol sat down opposite him. "I was showing Oli a new security protocol. He was trying to break through it."

Amira smiled. "Yeah, that's how we spend our time. There isn't much else to do here. Mr. Henry isn't going to arrive until tomorrow."

"But aren't you actually competitors?"

"Well, yes, but we always are, and there's enough work in the Imperium for all of us," said Oliver, and indicated Nick's glass. "We're kind of like the competition between Dulles and StellarShock. Just pour yourself the one you like best."

"That's true," Nick admitted, "but if those two companies had to compete for who was going to supply an entire colonization fleet with an energy drink—and a new colony, at that—they would be fighting like cats in a sack. And I think that the cyber-security for this expedition will be a huge contract for your three companies."

Oliver burst out laughing. "Yeah, that's true, but I've never looked at it like that. The entire Imperium now needs us hackers. There will always be other contracts."

“Unless the war devastates us so much that civilization falls,” Amira added, grimacing. “What is it that the Emperor says, again? ‘Civilization must continue.’ Cyber-security is a bit hard to do in wooden huts in the middle of a baking desert.”

Carol raised her head from her tablet. “I would just like to travel with the colonization party. I have a ton of ideas about how to ditch perimeter protection and set up completely new security concepts for the entire expedition. The FTL receivers will always be the weak link. A ship needs to communicate, and I can’t very well stuff a network probe into Gertz space, but I have an idea for what to do instead.”

“If they let you,” said Oliver.

Carol shrugged. “I’ll invent it anyway. If not for Henry Corp., then for someone else.” She looked back at her tablet and frowned.

“Hmm...”

Nick listened to them for a while longer and noted that, of these three hackers, Amira’s feet were most firmly on the ground. She was a woman who thought in connections. Carol came over as a child excited by new toys. And Oliver... he was probably somewhere between them. He was mature, but he saw everything through the lens of his work.

“Maybe we could start with the question of how you came to do this job,” he said, by way of introduction. None of them showed any

interest in answering immediately. Nick understood. Very few people *really* know why they chose their profession. He too had no idea why he had decided to become a journalist.

Finally it was Oliver who took the plunge and answered first. “Well, I always enjoyed playing with computer systems and then some guy on New Sydney offered me a scholarship.”

“So you’re from New Sydney?”

“Yeah, not from the poorest parts, I was...”

“That’s funny,” said Carol, still staring at her tablet.

Nick swallowed the comment that it is rude to interrupt an interview like that, especially when none of them were politicians. These interjections would have to be edited out of the interview later.

“As I was saying,” Oliver continued, a little irritated now. “I lived in Kieran, one of the better developed cities and there...”

“Something’s just crossed the station’s security tiering!” gasped Carol.

This time, Nick wanted to say something to her, but then her meaning hit him. He didn’t know exactly what it meant, but her two competitors did and immediately reached for their own tablets.

“It’s penetrated right through to the life-support system!” Carol continued. “This...”

The lights in the room suddenly went out.

Amira screamed. Nick suddenly felt light, crazily light, he wanted to move, but his feet were no longer touching the ground.

"The gravity is off!"

"Absolutely everything is off! All the life-support systems!" shrieked Carol. "I'm trying to do something about it."

"Leave it to me," said Oliver, his fingers furiously dancing across his tablet. Their devices were the only source of light.

Although actually, they weren't; the stars were still glowing through the observation port, but the light was weaker than Nick had expected and it took him a while to understand why.

The lights had gone out across the station and in the ships docked at it. Absolutely everything had gone dark.

"Not even the ships outside are lit up," he said.

Carol, Oliver and Amira flew across the room, still tapping at their tablets.

"Yeah," said Amira. "The attack must have gotten through the station to all the docked ships."

The light went on again. A pale, yellowish light.

"The backup generator has kicked in," said Oliver, his fingers still pecking. "Now let's see what we can do about the grav."

"The bastard has created active protection around it. It cut me off just like that," said Carol.

"So let's try a different way."

Nick watched the drops of his StellarShock energy drink float through the air.

Oliver suddenly let out a yell of triumph. "And... got it... brace yourselves..."

Nick started to ask what he needed to brace himself for, then unexpectedly fell onto the ground.

He ended up on all fours, the energy drink raining down around him.

"Owwwww!" roared Amira. "My ankle!"

"I assume that the whole station is full of ankles and fractures now," said Oliver, continuing to tap at his tablet. "That was necessary."

Nick pulled himself together and stood up. "We have to get out of here!"

He ran to the door and pressed the button. It wasn't working. Seized by a wave of panic, he pressed it several times more.

"The fucker has blocked the whole system," said Amira. She clambered into an armchair, also still working on her tablet. "All the doors are shut."



“There must be a manual control here,” said Nick. He might not be in space much, but he knew that every electronic door must have a manual backup. He’d read the handbooks and even knew where to find it. He wrenched open a panel beside the door and found a small lever there, which he pulled on several times.

Nothing happened.

“Why doesn’t it work?!”

“The fucker has burned through the hydraulics too. A short circuit melted the door pistons,” said Oliver. “Well, isn’t that clever. There’s a small energy cell beside the door and it’s close enough to blow the door if the circuit shorts.”

By now Nick was really beginning to panic. “But there must be some sort of backup here! Some pyro system that will blast through the door.”

“On military ships and installations, yes. This is a civilian station, and we’re in a *hotel*, they’re not going to clown around with something like that here.”

Nick thought. This happened directly after Mr. Henry flew past the station. Hmm...

“Could it be a test?” he asked aloud.

Oliver and Amira looked up. Carol went on working.

“What are you talking about?” wondered Amira.

“Well, they want to test you. Which of your companies is the best for Henry Corp. Could this be part of a test?”

“If it’s a test, then Henry Corp. will get its ass sued off,” said Amira, indicating her foot. “I only got a bad ankle, but there are ten thousand people on the station and artificial gravity normally has several backups. There will be hundreds or thousands of wounded, maybe even a few dead. This really is *not* a test.”

“It’s not a test,” agreed Carol. “It’s too elaborate. Henry Corp. doesn’t have things like this. They wouldn’t need us if they did.”

“What do you mean?” asked Oliver.

“It’s some polymorph bastard. An AI, in fact. It’s spreading across the station’s entire system and adapting. It’s the most advanced thing I’ve ever seen.”

Oliver worked for a while. “You’re right. Damn it, that thing... that thing is sophisticated.”

“What do you mean?” asked Nick, interested. “Can you do anything about it?”

“That thing is *intelligent*,” Oliver reminded him. “I’m trying to fight it, but it’s adapting... Have you ever solved a Rubik’s cube?”

“You mean that... thing, yeah. I was never any good at puzzles like that.”

“Well, imagine you’re trying to solve an intelligent Rubik’s cube that’s fighting back.”

All three hackers worked on in silence. Nick looked around. His almost dreamy gaze fixed itself on the blocked door.

“So we’re simply going to wait until someone comes to rescue us?” he said.

“We can’t. It’s up to us to deal with this,” said Amira.

“But with all due respect, the station has its own security systems. There are soldiers and security guards here!”

“And they’re all trapped. Like us,” said Amira. “I’ve gone through the diagnostics on all systems. That mofo—or virus, or whatever it is - deactivated all the safety fuses in the reactor, which is now slowly overloading.”

Nick’s education might be in social sciences, but he did not like the term “overloading reactor”, not even a little.

“But there’s definitely still loads of safeguards, right? And the reactor staff will get it under control?”

Amira’s expression gave him no consolation.

“According to this, the entire reactor section is now open to space. on stations of this type, like Nelson and Adamcak, the reactors are right underneath. They jut out from the station with the control room at the top. Here the control room has lost pressure, and all

the human staff are now dead. The AI shit has deactivated the robot staff too.”

“Fuck!” exclaimed Carol. She was probably so absorbed in her work that she hadn’t realized that.

“So what can we do?”

“Give me a moment,” said Amira. Nick remembered that her employer focused on intel, or obtaining information. And also that the company’s name was Pisces. He wondered if by this they meant the sign of the zodiac, or just any fish.

“Got it!” exclaimed Amira, after a while. “There’s an emergency conduit in the corner of this room. For technicians. There are some things they don’t show to tourists. And even a polymorph bastard can’t take a hole away.”

Nick looked around. “Where, exactly?”

“It should be... over there, by that wall. Maybe a meter from the kitchen door.”

Nick went over. in the kitchen he could see a heap of scattered crockery, thrown in all directions by the loss of grav. Fortunately it was made of unbreakable material.

“Roll back the carpet!”

The carpet was fitted to the wall, but as well as his tablet, Oliver had an unusual knife with many different attachments. Together



they cut back the carpet and rolled it away to reveal a hatch.

This time, when Nick tried the manual lever, it opened.

"Awesome!" said Oliver. "So we can go."

"Go? Where, exactly?"

Carol stood up. Amira did too, carefully, with her bad ankle.

"We must get to the reactor and stabilize it."

Her tone was enormously matter-of-fact.

"But... but... I'm only a journalist."

"And we're only crypto-nerds. But unless I am mistaken, we have approximately two hours before the reactor explodes and blows up the entire station and all the docked ships. And of course, kills the at least sixty thousand people aboard. So would you rather stay here?"