

Bubble City: Chapter 12

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part of *Bubble City*

“Hello?” asked the woman at the reception desk. The lobby was filled with colorful baubles — lava lamps and bouncy balls, comfy sofas and computer terminals, and a minifridge stocked with a wide variety of Odwalla beverages. The whole thing was calibrated perfectly to seem somehow relaxed yet ostentatious at the same time.

“Hello?” the receptionist asked again, a little less patient this time. She was an attractive woman, Wayne thought — mid-twenties, straight brown hair, thick-rimmed glasses perched atop a prominent nose — he struggled to focus. “Uh, yes, hello there,” he finally said.

“What brings you to Google today?” she asked.

“Oh, uh, I’m here to see—I mean, I guess—I have a meeting.”

She stared a bit, then nodded. “I see. Can I ask with whom?”

“Samuel Boxtton. He’s expecting me.”

“Of course. And your name?”

“Wayne Darnus.”

“Thanks, Wayne. It’ll just be a moment while I ring him. In the mean time, can you sign in on this computer?” She pointed to a terminal on top of the desk before tapping a few keys, apparently connecting the hands-free headset she was already wearing.

The terminal asked for his name, employer, host, and signature (for the mandatory non-disclosure agreement, of course), before printing out a badge he was encouraged to affix to his chest, marking him as an interloper.

“Yes, Mr. Darnus here to see you,” the receptionist was saying. “42 Lobby. Of course.” She turned to Wayne. “He’ll just be a minute — please take a seat.”

On the coffee table were the various usual industry magazines, which Wayne thumbed through nervously before putting them back down. He scanned the walls, which were covered in various plaques and puff pieces and commendations. He begun to feel very small and felt his heart beat a little more quickly. Why did a place designed to seem so friendly actually seem to make him feel scared?

Wayne’s eyes made several more circuits around the room and through the magazines before Samuel suddenly arrived, bright and cheerful as anything. “Wayne! Good to see you!” he exclaimed.

Wayne jumped up, extending an arm. But Samuel went in for a full embrace — not something Wayne was used to; usually the situation was reversed.

“Look,” Samuel said, “right this way.” Samuel led him out of the lobby and into the courtyard. They went past the endless swimming pool and the volleyball court, the dinosaur skeleton and model rocketship — all glinting in the sun. As they went further, the buildings became more bland and boxy, across parking lots and service ways and sidestreets, parts of the sprawling Google campus normal visitors rarely saw.

They entered another building through a backdoor, Samuel swiping his keycard to get in. After that came a maze of twisty little passageways, with little in the way of signage to help distinguish between them. They came to a series of metal doors labeled “AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY” which this time required a palm-print. Finally, they reached a conference room labeled $10^2 - e^i$.

“Take a seat,” Samuel offered.

Wayne did, grabbing a seat and the end of a long conference table. Samuel grabbed one around the corner from him, a large projector filling the wall at his back.

“So, Wayne, I understand you have some concerns,” he offered. “Can we talk about them?”

“Concerns?” Wayne said nervously. “Oh, no — I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Really? Nothing’s been bothering you? Here’s your chance to have it out with the big guys — we here at Google are all ears!”

“No, really, I think Google’s been doing a great job.”

“Look, Wayne,” Samuel said, sliding a mouse and keyboard in front of him. “With a couple of taps here, I can get you any Google employee you want. Is there really nothing at all you have to say to them?” Samuel was looking Wayne straight in the eye.

“Uh, hmm, well, it’s a very generous offer you have there, but, uh — I really just can’t think of anything right now. Uh, heh, if only you’d given me time to prepare! A-heh-heh. I’m sure I could have thought of plenty of things!”

“I’m really sorry to hear you say that, Wayne. Because a funny thing happened this morning. I was just doing some regular user analysis on our Google Video-cast software — nothing out of the ordinary, of course — and I just happened to come across this little clip.”

Samuel tapped a few keys and there, in full-screen video, was Wayne, his head filling the whole back wall, then repeated in miniature on various screens across the room. Wayne recognized the video and his stomach began to sink:

I know I’ve been a supporter of Google in the past. But I think they’ve finally crossed the line.

I've recently received information that they are chasing and persecuting a young kid just beca—

Wayne slunk into his seat.

"Now, I hope you understand my predicament, Wayne," Samuel said. "As part of Google Evangelism, it's my job to ensure that the world thinks only the best of Google. That they see all the good things we're doing for the world. That they see all the progress we're inspiring."

"Because of Google products, billions of dollars have been added to the global economy, people are sharing and communicating more than ever before, kids in Africa now get a chance to read every book in the libraries of Harvard." Samuel looked wistful. "It's really some amazing stuff. And I'm proud just to be a part of it."

"Which is why I can't let you jeopardize all that," he said, turning serious. "Especially not by repeating some crazy story I told you over drinks. No, there's just too much at stake."

"Look, I'm a good person. Here at Google we're all good people. *Don't be evil* is our motto, for goodness' sake. But doing what's good isn't the same as doing what's easy. Sometimes making the right decisions requires doing things that are really very hard. An this is one of those situations."

"We all love you here at Google, Wayne. And we've always been eager to support you — surely you know that more than anyone. But I think we've reached a point in our relationship where it might be best to keep you a little closer." Samuel smiled.

"Closer?" Wayne said, finally. "What do you mean?"

Samuel reached underneath the desk for something. "Why don't you wait right here a minute and we'll show you. Just a sec!" Then he got up and walked down the hall and thru the large metal doors, leaving Wayne and his visitors' badge behind him.

Trent felt the wind riffling through his hair, the top down on his BMW 328i. He was heading north, past the San Francisco traffic, across the beauty of the Golden Gate Bridge, through the gorgeous hills and valleys of Marin, to the spacious beauty of Napa.

The life of a technology executive was stressful, which is why these work-related getaways were so important. It seemed like every month there was some kind of executive retreat up here — a place where the Important Men of Business could get away from it all, loosen their ties, and swap stories in the golden California sun.

They were roughin' it.

He parked his car on the gravel, before heading to the courtyard where a suited caterer was pouring drinks. "Whiskey sour," he ordered, before looking for somewhere to mingle.

"Hey, Trent! It's so good to see you." A man he didn't quite recognize grabbed him by the shoulder. "Thank you *so* much for coming — it's a real treat to have you."

"Of course, of course!" Trent replied. "How could I resist another chance to visit a beautiful place like this?" He gestured around him.

"Well, just make yourself at home. We've got some time to chat until six and then we'll all be heading into town for dinner."

"I can't wait."

The fellow, who was apparently the host, smiled and headed off in search of other people to welcome.

"Don, from Google," someone said, extending a hand.

"Trent, from Newsflip," Trent replied.

"Ahh, Newsflip — I've heard a lot of good things about you," Don said.

"Oh, well, I'm very glad to hear that. We always look up to our friends down in the Valley."

"Actually," Don said, "I'm not going to be down there for long. I just got word that I'm going to be one of the lucky few who can transition to our upcoming San Francisco office."

"Really? Well, congratulations!"

"Thank you. You know, actually, we have an interesting meeting coming up on NNA-related issues at Google Mountain View. You really should attend."

"Oh, fascinating. I'll definitely send a programmer or two."

"No, this is a very high-level summit. Just CEOs and above. Obviously the top people from our side will be there as well."

"Interesting," Trent said. He was always a sucker for networking. "I'd love to come."

"Fantastic — I'll call your assistant and be sure to get it set up. There's just one thing I should warn you about, though."

"Oh, really? What's that?"

"After you visit us at Google, you may never want to leave!"

They both laughed, although Don rather harder.

Trent scanned the courtyard for other people he should speak to, but nobody seemed particularly appealing. He decided to sneak into a group standing by the corner, laughing wildly.

“That’s a great idea,” someone was saying. “In fact, maybe we should hold all our meetings at strip clubs from now on.”

“Well, you know what I say,” another man added. “If they can’t hold their liquor, how can you expect them to hold a job?”

Trent just smiled and nodded.