

On His Majesty's Helpdesk: The Life  
and Times of Casmus Rosande, Systems  
Analyst

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I keep a mental list of things I don't like to see in my office. It is a list that tends to grow by one or two entries a day, and since I've been working for Lidrax Consolidated as an IT drone for the past seven years, it is a very, very long list. Very near the top of that list, right below "default passwords on production systems" and directly above "firearms in the workplace" is Therus Tancarne, Planetary Vice President of "Sales," and that day I was about to be grievously disappointed on multiple counts.

I could tell the day wasn't going to go well when I pulled into the parking structure in my dilapidated Licortus Magna and found a car that was not mine parked in my parking spot, which is mine.

Now, *technically*, if you want to be picky, it isn't actually *mine*, in the sense of "reserved by corporate for the regional head of IT Casmus Rosande," but here at the Stolvedran branch offices, we have a certain respect between fellow ~~victims of the corporate state~~ workers, reinforced, naturally, by a number of assurances: that one's network shares wouldn't find themselves spontaneously emptied, that the backup drives wouldn't undergo mysterious failures affecting only a single user's data, that erotic internal communiqués to the VP of "Sales" wouldn't materialize unbidden in the mailboxes. That sort of thing. So there are particular parking spaces that, if you're a good little office drone, you avoid. If your colleagues like you, they generally tip you off right away. If they don't, you learn the hard way.

The owner of that black van was going to find out the hard way, I determined.

"Code Three," I commented as I wandered into the bowels of the server room, noting that the prox reader controlling the door locks seemed to be lighting up a slightly different shade of green than it did yesterday; this required prompt investigation. Jainia Teriane, Systems & Networks, looked up.

"Again? This is the second time —" She paused to extricate herself from the tangle of wires inside the server she's dissecting — hardware isn't my forte, but judging from the state of the wire coating, it looked like one of the fans we ordered from the nice folks at Capax Industries crapped out badly — and looked up at me. "— second Code Three this morning. Ianesco had his space stol—" Her eyes widened. "Aw, *fuuuuck*."

More than one Code Three in a day isn't something that usually happens unless there's a mass hiring or the boys upstairs have decided to come pull an inspection. The former hasn't happened, because there hasn't been the concomitant mass firing or creation of a new department. The second really shouldn't have happened, because Jainia hasn't gotten a heads-up from her informant at Central.

"I'm going to wring CL's neck." She brandished a wire stripper, shaking it for emphasis. "I'm going to build an altar to the skull god out of

his flesh.”

“Steady on,” I said, ever the cautious one. “It could be a coincidence. Do you really think CL would—”

My youthful naïvete was interrupted by Item 17. “Hello, boys!” The unmistakable voice came from C&C, just outside the thankfully locked server room.

Jainia bared her teeth in what you could classify as a smile, if you were offered a sufficiently large consulting fee to do so. “Oh sweet Josiah and the seven harlots, what the hell is he doing—”

I diplomatically gripped her wrist and forced the wire-stripper out of view. “I’ll get rid of him.”

“Eurgh. You better.” She ducked back into the server’s innards.

I slipped out of the server room, being careful to keep the door narrowly enough open that I could shut it behind me before Tancarne could grab it and hold it open, “to be polite.”

Tancarne grinned at me. “Casmus, old boy.” I was 34. “What’s the sitrep?”

I gritted my teeth at the milslang. Tancarne had not served once; in fact, I have it on good authority his number came up during the Ilina Skirmishes, and he bribed Lord Vensarian to forget it happened. It was classless enough on its own — when mine came up, I dutifully presented myself at the Manor (granted, I was dressed like a wiring monkey, did sort of imitate a Cape Sundehart accent which *may* have confused the Guard into thinking that I was some technician sent to repair some faulty wiring — it can’t have hurt that I claimed exactly that — and may have accidentally wandered into an empty office and pressed a particular combination of keys on the terminal that may have logged me into the Service records and permanently erased my number from the database) and went straight off to war with my countrymen like a good patriot should, by which of course I mean I spent the duration of the Skirmishes sipping Shandar Straights on the deck of a cruise ship off the coast of the Adamant Isles. Naturally, I returned to work a week after we sued for peace, and brought along all the war stories I had concocted with a number of other patriotic servicemen who also happened to be assigned aboard the *Diamond Sun*, keeping a watchful eye out for Society infiltrators in the luxury cruise market.

I folded my arms. “I just got in.”

Tancarne hesitated. “Er, yes?”

This is the *thing* about Tancarne. He does not understand how information works. He seems utterly unable to comprehend that knowing a thing requires learning it first. He simply cannot figure out that giving him a health report on the networks would require actually looking at an

NETCONF readout, or that we only do inventories every other moon so a sitrep would take longer to actually change than he could expect to continue working for Lidraxe, or... *gah*.

"I *don't know yet*," I clarified. This was a mistake. Uncertainty only ever makes executives afraid.

Tancarne frowned slightly. His eyes twitch when he frowns. It's disconcerting. "Is something going on? Is someone hacking the system?"

"Is—" That amount of fractal idiocy packed into a single sentence is normally enough to make my brain shut down in a rage-coma, but I'd just had a nice big cup of coffee and managed to deflect the VP's weapons-grade stupidity. "No," I said, every fiber of my being screaming in betrayal. *How do you expect me to know the answer to that when I've just gotten in? Why do you jump to that conclusion? Do you know how many servers we have? Do you understand that "being hacked" doesn't send up a great big red flashing warning screen all over the office? Why is the VP of Sales BOTHERING ME ABOUT HACKING WHY DOES EVERY TEN-A-PENNY EXECUTIVE THINK THEMSELVES QUALIFIED TO COMMENT ON MY JOB AAAAAAARRRGH.* I knew I couldn't be honest, because it'd just fuel his delusions further, and every second I spent with him in my office was killing a brain cell. "We're not being hacked. I'm just saying I don't know whether anything important is going on, because I haven't gotten any reports yet."

The VP shook his head. "Casmus, check if we're being hacked, right away. This is serious."

Oh, dear.

No, this wasn't just Tancarne creatively misunderstanding me. He had found a communiqué from MAILER-DAEMON in his mailbox, probably about a mistyped external address or that his mailbox was filling up, and concluded daemons were invading the ISX lines.

"Is there a reason you're bothering me about this instead of logging a support request with the Helpdesk?"

Tancarne glanced furtively around. He lowered his voice. "Are there any audio security recorder things on in here?"

*What have we here?* Of course there are no security mics in C&C — I'm not a *complete* idiot — but there was a very good microphone on my cellular, which I immediately turned on. I haven't gotten an executive declared legally insane in years. "No, nothing of the sort," I replied, drawing closer, all conspiratorial. I narrowed my eyes. "What's going on, Therus?"

Tancarne licked his lips. "What do you know about... *Lambda EDE*?"

It was very hard for me to suppress my laughter. Lambda Enterprise Development Environment is the delightful little IDE IntelliDyne

Informatics ships with their horrible little Lambda compiler, which we have to contend with to get anything to run on their logic controllers. It happens to have an interface that looks almost exactly like the cartoony UIs “hackers” tend to use on syndicated vidshows when they’re “overriding the security firewall lockout on the mainframe” to “unlock the file directories and decrypt the security system.”

I jerked my head to the side, theatrically looking around to make sure nobody was nearby. Then I grabbed Tancarne by the arm, and ushered him behind a bookshelf of hardware manuals. “How do I know I can trust you?” I hissed.

“I — look, I came right to you. Haven’t told anyone else. I know you don’t get involved in office politics, so —”

(Only in the way that the Emperor doesn’t get involved in commoner feuds, but —)

I bit my lip. “Oh, this goes way beyond office politics. *They*’re behind this.”

“They?” Tancarne’s eyes widen. “Who—?”

“You’ve got to watch out,” I said. “It’s little things, at first. Pens on your desk aren’t facing the same way you left them. Your password suddenly stops working, and you have to get it reset. Sticky notes wind up on the floor. And then you start getting comms from weird names, like ‘mailer daemon.’ It’s how you can tell they’re getting into your office, your files; it’s how they hack the system.”

“Who’s *they*?” hissed Tancarne. He was scared now.

Fearfully, I leaned in close to whisper in his ear. “The *Syndicate*.”

“Who’s — who’s the Syndicate?”

I gave him a long look. “We’d better talk in the server room. My colleague — she can fill you in better than I can. Plus it’s more secure in there.” I hesitate. “‘Course, when you’re dealing with the Syndicate...” I shook my head. “Nothing’s completely secure.”

I swiped my wallet past the prox reader to the server room, reached for the door, then hesitated. I knelt down and peered closely at the reader. “I could have sworn...” I muttered. “...no. It’s probably nothing.” Tancarne took a sharp breath.

“Are you sure? Is something...?”

I got back to my feet. “No, nothing.” I turned and grinned unconvincedly at Ianesco, who’d just popped in with a spool of ISX cables over one shoulder. Tancarne fearfully looked over at the engineer. I grabbed his arm.

“No. Come on,” I hissed, grinning brightly at Ianesco.

Jainia looked up as the door slammed behind us. Her head tilted

slightly. “What in all fucks is he— you said you’d get rid of—”

I put up a hand. “No, no, no. It’s okay.” I wagged my eyebrows. “He’s clean.”

It took only the space of a second for Jainia to grasp the situation. Gaslighting an exec isn’t common enough that we have a code for it, but we’ve done it enough that it’s not a total surprise.

She shoved the wires out of her face and backed away from the server. “This is about —”

“Lambda,” I replied, nodding gravely.

“You’re sure we can trust him?”

I folded my arms, and gave Tancarne my best piercing look. “We can trust him,” I said slowly.

“How much have you told him?”

I walked over to the KVM terminal that hooks into the servers, flipped the switch to a dev server, and fired up a chat client. Ianesco would need a bit more prompting. “About the Syndicate,” I told Jainia. “About the signs — pens wrong way round, sticky notes...” We both know common office paranoia well enough that I didn’t need to spell it out. “I figured you could give him a better overview. Seeing as you’ve had run-ins with them and all.” I pull up a chat screen to Ianesco’s private cellular. -- GLing the VP. Go turn some pens around on his desk and knock some stickies on the floor; wait until he shows up then act menacing.

--coool ;D i get to be eeevil. who am i?

--‘The Syndicate’

--wicked awesome. what do they do?

--J and me figuring it out now. Let you know.

--alrighty

Jainia leaned against the server. “Yeah. That I have.”

“Run-ins?” Tancarne quivered. “What do you mean?”

Jania flicked her sleeve back. “See this?” she said grimly, pointing to the handcuff scars on her wrist from that last junket — all I remember is a couple drunk bets on a hoverball match and a mix-up with the room keys, and I will maintain that to my grave. “Summer of ’077, tech conference on Bardassa. We didn’t know how far their reach was back then, so I thought I’d be safe.” She looked down, and shook her head. “I’m lucky I got away with just a few knife wounds,” she muttered.

“God’s balls!” Tancarne backed up a step. “This... this is serious, isn’t it?”

“Deadly,” I said quietly, putting a hand on Jainia’s shoulder.

"You two..." He waved finger at us. "You've been fighting 'em or something? Right?"

Jainia and I looked at each other. I shook my head.

"Fight them?" she said, incredulously.

"Best we can do is watch out for them. Keep an eye on them. Make sure the company's not in any danger."

"The company...?" The VP looked as though he was about to have a heart attack. If only it were that easy! "Are we... is there some kind of threat?"

"You might say that," I muttered.

"They've got people everywhere," Jainia replied. "They control the IT industry."

"Remember the Thunderbolt fiasco, couple of years back?" I asked. It was the sales debacle that had come so tantalizing close to ending the VP's career.

"That was them?" squeaked Tancarne, smelling redemption.

Jainia and I nodded in unison. "Oh yes," I said.

"I think that was when they decided to come after us, put us down hard. Up until then, I don't think they thought we were a big enough player in the IT market."

"Do you have any evidence?" burbled the VP. "Anything that could bring them down? I've got the Baron on speed-dial, I can—"

"You can't tell the Baron!" Jainia blurted. She shook her head. "You can't tell any of them. They've got people on the IT teams of every Count and Baron from here to Vanismorium, as far as we can tell."

"We tried going to Lord Lavan," I added. "The *late* Lord Lavan, I should say."

"Oh my god! They... they *killed* a peer?"

"Course not," I said. "It was a heart attack, don't you know."

"Mm-hmm," said Jainia. "Totally a heart attack."

"This... this is..." Tancarne backed up against the door.

"Big?" I suggested, stepping forward.

"Huge?" suggested Jainia, stepping forward as well.

"Enormous!" exclaimed Tancarne. "Don't you get it? This is a conspiracy that can kill *peers* with impunity! People have to be told! The news—"

"We've gone to the news," I interrupted. "Anonymously, of course. Gave them everything we had. You know what they did?"

"Nothing," snarled Jainia. "And the reporter we talked to? Wouldn't return our calls."

"A few days later, my firewall picked up a byte-scan on the IP address we contacted the media from. Fortunately, I managed to backend an RCP packet through the sub-aux nanoarray and demultiplex the buffers just in the nick of time to encrypt the system and lock out the query, but if it had gone through—" I paused. I knew if I finished that sentence Jainia would murder me with an insulation tester. There was no way she would let me get away with spewing that sort of crap, even if it was for a noble cause.

"—we'd probably both be dead," she finished in hushed tones.

"And then three weeks later, *he* shows up in the office," I added. "Ianesco Forcude. Or so he claims."

"Oh my god. He's an inside agent. There's one of them in the company!" squeaked the VP.

"Steady on," I murmured. "It could just be a coincidence."

"Probably not a great idea to jump to conclusions," Jainia concurred.

--You showed up here three weeks after J and me sent a report to the media, exposing the Syndicate's evilosity; you're probably here to kill us or something.

--swееееет. ive always wanted to kill someone

--Fictionally!

--aw man

--Syndicate totally controls all IT everywhere. But they're all sinister and crap.

--so theyre basically intellidyne but with guns, got it

--Ha!

--Also, J got those knife scars on her wrist from a Synd agent who tried to knife her on a junket.

--thats cute, you two are still trying to pretend we dont all know what happened ;)

--SHUT UP IAN

"Although," I muttered.

"Yes?" squeaked Tancarne.

I looked at Jainia. "This morning, when I was parking my car—"

The left corner of her lips rose slightly, as she tried to repress an evil grin.

"—there were a couple of black vans that I've never seen before. Windowless, even."

Tancarne blanched. "Heavens! You don't mean— are they—"

I nodded. "I think our luck may be running out."



Tancarne pulled himself up to his full height, all 5'4" of it. "Right, then!" he exclaimed. "We'll just have to — to get rid of them!"

"There's no way!" I exclaimed. "Neither of us can get rid of them! They're probably posing as — I don't know, inspectors from corporate or something!"

"Maybe *you* can't get rid of them," retorted Tancarne triumphantly, "but *I* am the Planetary Vice President of Sales. I'll track them down and have them ordered off the property!"

"Brilliant!" said Jainia. "They'd have to break their cover if they stayed, and they won't dare do that!"

"Don't you worry," said Tancarne, puffing up his chest in pride. "I'll get rid of the bastards."

"Now *that* is what I call 'workplace synergy,'" I remarked as Tancarne strode purposefully from the room.

Jainia stared off into the distance. "Are you plotting what I'm plotting?"

"Starting a witch hunt in the company to get rid of everybody we don't like?"

"Mmm. Read my mind." She grinned.

—

"I need to talk to you," Jainia muttered. "Privately."

I followed her into the server room. "What's —" I stopped.

The lights clicked off. Behind me, I heard the door lock.

"I had some sound-proofing installed while you were gone," she remarked conversationally.

"That's — that's nice. That's a great idea," I replied uneasily. "Very useful."

"So, did you enjoy your vacation?"

"Vacation? I would hardly call being pressed into service by the Baron as a vac—"

"Oh, no," she interrupted. "Not that one. The one you spent in the Adamant Isles, when we all thought you were risking your life on the front lines. On a luxury cruise ship. *Without me.*"

"Er—"

Cold metal pressed against my wrist, and I heard the click of a handcuff ratcheting shut.

"We're going to have a nice, long discussion about workplace loyalty," said Jainia. Her face was briefly illuminated by the bright blue arc of a stun gun.

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My next clear memory was waking up in a hospital. As I cautiously opened my eyes, I heard a sudden bustle of activity, someone shouting “He’s awake!”

A white blob slowly resolved into the doctor who was sitting next to my bed. He patted my shoulder as I tried and failed to sit up. “Steady now. You’ve been out for a while.”

“Hmмуuh?” I collapsed backwards. Everything hurt.

“You’re at Stockard Pavillion,” said the doctor. “I’m Dr. Marten Gravmornis; I’m a trauma specialist. You were pretty banged up when your friend here brought you in.”

“Hmrrhf?” I turned my head with great effort. Jainia was sitting across from Dr. Gravmornis, a look of angelic innocence and concern unconvincing affixed to her features.

“Oh, you were,” she said, nodding emphatically. “You touched a live wire, and I had to knock your hand off it. All I had was a crowbar. Took me a few dozen tries, too. I always did have problems with hand-eye coordination. Then you stumbled into that junction box...” She shook her head. “It was terrible!”

Mindful of the fact that I had divulged a number of passwords to systems Jainia shouldn’t have even known existed, I nodded affirmation. “Mmh. Terrible accident,” I muttered.

“Well, you should take better safety precautions in the future,” said the doctor. “You’ve got dozens of second-degree electrical burns.” He stood up. “We’ve got you on IV painkillers right now. Hit the call button if your pain gets any worse. I’ll have a nurse check in on you every half hour or so, all right?”

“Mright.”

The doctor nodded, and left. Jainia smiled after him, and then leaned over me. “There,” she said quietly. “I think that makes up for one vacation. We’re even now.”

“Y’call this *even*?”

She leaned closer. “Yep!” Taking my chin in one hand, she brushed her lips against mine. “We’ll see how long you we can keep the peace.”

“You’re a complete psycho,” I muttered, rolling over and trying to hide in my pillow.

She smiled brightly. “That’s never been proven.” She slapped me on the shoulder, which apparently hadn’t escaped the attentions of her stun gun: I whimpered. “See you next week.”

“nd if I’m not discharged by then?”

“Discharge! Hee. You’re funny.” She giggled. “It’s funny how easy medical records are to get into from on site.”

“Right, then.”

“You’d think they’d have better security.”

“Point made.”

“I mean, you could probably have a patient committed and put on electroshock therapy if you felt like it.”

*“I get it already.”*

—

“Oh hey, you can walk on your own again!” Jainia beamed.

“I remembered what you said about putting patients on electroconvulsive therapy,” I remarked, settling gingerly into my chair.

“Hell of a motivator, right?”

“Not what I meant.” I leaned back, putting my feet up on my desk as I do when I’m feeling self-satisfied. “You know the VP was hospitalized after that terrible fall he had?”

Jainia grinned. *“Ooooh.”*

“So I snagged that nice doctor’s ID and made some changes to the VP’s records.”

“How long do you think until they figure it out?”

“Long enough. I noted in his file that he ‘suffered from severe delusions that he was the Vice President of Sales at Lidraxe Consolidated’ — which technically is not untrue, as he never seems to do anything related to sales around here — ‘and a serious case of Oppositional Defiant Disorder,’ also technically true in that he never obeyed his natural superiors, which is to say us.”

Jainia giggled. “D’you think we could smuggle Ianesco in, just to hang around and look menacing?”

Clever! Maybe we could convince the VP we had been right all along... “You may have something there,” I said.

—

Vice President of “Sales” Therus Tancarne stumbled into my office late one Cleon’s Day evening, just as I was about to pack up and head for home. His hair was half-combed, his fingers jittery, his voice lacking its typical bombast.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” I said.

Tancarne looked at me for a moment, then grabbed my collar with both hands. *“It’s all true!”* he hissed. “I was wrong! So wrong! They had me l-locked up in that awful Torbindra Plaza madhouse! Zapping me with... zappy things, trying to torture me into thinking I wasn’t who I was! Tried to make me forget things, *but I wouldn’t!* I got out finally,

they figured out who I was, said someone switched the medical records! I think we both know *who* switched my medical records!”

“The Syndicate,” I growled.

“*The Syndicate!*” shrieked Tancarne. “I saw *him* there, that ‘Macceni’ bastard, or whatever the hell his real name is. He was *staring* at me when they put me in the machine! Every time, with his *fucking* little clipboard! Well, no more. I’m gonna bring the fight to them, d’you hear me? I’m gonna squish ’em all like little, tiny bugs under my feet, and then I’m gonna jump up and down on their bodies and laugh and laugh!” He waved a finger, backing away. “M-mark my words, Casmus: I’m gonna make them pay!”

He turned around and fled the office.

I tapped the stop button on my phone, and saved the recording of Tancarne’s little psychotic break to a secure network share, where it would surface as soon as Tancarne stopped being useful. Until then...