

"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.

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."

"Hmmuuh?" 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 unconvincingly 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.*"

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"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 Lidrax 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.

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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...