

Processed

“667, your collection is in fifteen minutes.”

I open my eyes.

The darkness dissolves when I sit up, and my apartment is flooded with artificial light. Suite, tie, shoes have all been laid out; Coffee steams in a fiberglass cup. The job has its perks: high salary, fashionable apartment, astronomical insurance – all these outweigh the little discomforts that come with the work.

I move around my apartment, getting ready. “Time check!” I yell, trying to tie my shoelace and down the coffee simultaneously.

“Seven minutes left to collection, 667.”

I set the apartment to clean itself and exit.

I stride down the empty corridor, the blank whiteness of the walls interrupted only by tiny digital numbers that tell me I’m going in the right direction. *666. 665. 664.*

At 650 a lift opens in the wall. I step in. The doors seal with a sucking noise and the lift plunges down in silence.

To prepare myself for the job ahead, I do mental exercises. I pick a word, silent, and twist it around in my head. *Silent. Listen. Enlist.*

The doors pop open to reveal Harker waiting in the lobby for me.

As usual, Harker is in nondescript black. Her Mitrailleuse 600 is prominent at her hip, but I also know for a fact that she has two mini-reloaders inside her jacket, a laser-cutter in her boot and a stunner-clip under her collar – and just because I haven’t seen the rest of her arsenal doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.

Privacy International only employs dangerous security personnel, and Harker is a dangerous woman. Even her sunglasses are probably explosive.

“Good morning, sir,” she says without preamble, and marches off towards the capsule bay. We board Harker’s capsule, one of the newer, sleeker models, and zip off down one of the exit tunnels.

I try to ignore the silence as she drives. Harker’s an attractive woman, but she’s about as communicative as my wake-up call system. Instead, I pass time with more mental exercise as we speed through the express tunnels. *Stripe. Sprite. Ripest.*

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The trip lasts less than ten minutes. Harker parks the capsule in a shaft and I disembark onto the aluminum platform unfolding to meet our feet. Behind a series of double doors, we encounter the receptionist.

“Good morning, sir. You are the Processor from Privacy International?”

I place my palm against hers a confirmation. The receptionist’s eyes flush green, and she directs us tonelessly, *“The lift to your right, sir. Miss Moore will see you in her office.”*

Harker and I take the indicated lift up. The lift doors open into a huge office. Miss Moore must be the woman in the red suit. *“Processor 667?”*

Harker takes up position by the lift. She might be a potted plant for all the world. I move towards Miss Moore, ‘At your service, ma’am.’

She indicates the chair, and I sit. “Before we begin, I’d like to hear more about this...Processing that you do. The information I’ve received wasn’t very clear – but then, information is so precious these days, isn’t it?”

I laugh with her. The customer is always right.

“Well,” I began, “what I’m going to do is read the data you want transferred to Privacy International for safekeeping. Of course, it’s not just reading; my brain is going to convert your data into another form – a code, which will be stored in my mind.”

She frowns, steeping her fingers. “But that’s just line memory work.”

I hasten to correct her. “No, this code is encrypted. Even I can’t read it after I’ve Processed it. It’s drawn out of me at the Centre through Special Retrieval. That’s what makes this method of transfer so safe; any hacker worth his salt can crack a computer code, but nobody can crack the human brain.”

Miss Moore is clearly fascinated. “But how do you do this converting? Do you learn it?”

“No, I had my brain surgically reprogrammed to Process. Its still cutting-edge technology, that’s why we only Process really confidential data, like yours. The average corporation still uses that terribly unreliable medium of the Internet.”

“I see.” She stands. “I just wanted to make sure that my company’s information will be safe with you.”

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“I assure you, ma’am – we only live to uphold your privacy.”

Miss Moore laughs. “I like you. You’re funny. Maybe we’ll have you back for another job.” Business-like again, she opens a touchscreen in the wall. Data fills up the screen like bubbles in a carbonated drink. “Very well. Begin your Processing.”

I shut her out. I shut the room, Harker, everything out. I touch my temples and focus on one point – the information before me.

The room darkens. I’m rushing down a tunnel lined with glowing green symbols at unbelievable speed – no, it’s not a tunnel, it’s a vortex of blinding light, and I plunge right into the brilliant heart of –

I’m lying on the carpet. Two faces hover above me. Miss Moore looks anxious. Harker, who’s seen it all before, wiped my brow methodically and hauls me to my feet.

“That was quite unexpected,” says the former, smiling unsteadily. “Is it Processed?”

I concentrate. The feeling’s present – the mental equivalent of having eaten a huge banquet. “Yes. Good day to you, Miss Moore.”

We return to the capsule. Before we walked briskly; now we are almost running. Now I am the carrier of information; now I am closer to death.

Back in the capsule, I shut my eyes as Harker guides us through rush hour. I never look forward to Retrieval at the Centre, they always manage to make it hurt.

I must have dozed off, because when I wake, we’re in a completely different section of the capsule network. “Harker,” I begin, puzzled, “where are–“

Abruptly, Harker swings off from the main tunnel and we hurtle down a series of increasingly narrow chutes until we jolt to a stop in a deserted hangar.

Suddenly, my side of the capsule is yanked open; hands seize me. “Harker!” I scream before I hit cold cement. Then I’m hauled across the floor and lifted into a bizarre chair-like contraption.

Metal bands close painfully around my ankles, my wrists, Blearily I see Harker approaching. “Help!” I implore her, “Harker, help me , please...”

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Harker's arm shoots out; it slams a metal clasp around my neck, which hurts almost as much as the betrayal. "Shut up," she snaps.

Someone slaps me till my vision clears. I'm surrounded by scruffy-looking shadows, but the two leaders are clearly Harker and the bald man with teeth that could drive a dentist to suicide. "Hey there, 667," drawls Bad Teeth. "Welcome to Hacker International."

I ignore him and address my erstwhile bodyguard, hacker-Harker. "There's a chip in my head that'll lead them right here. If you leave me now you might still be able to get away."

She returns my gaze coolly. "That information in your brain is worth millions on the black market. So we'll make this simple. Your info for your life."

I laugh nervously. You heard me in the office. I can't retrieve Processed information."

Harker sinks her fist abruptly into my stomach. "That's what you think. We're going to have to find out for ourselves, aren't we?"

To my horror, Bas Teeth produces a CiruBlade and sets it whirring close to my face. "We sure ain't neurosurgeons, but we can do more than one type of hacking."

"Look, I, telling you it doesn't work that way!" I babble as the blade hums closer. "This is useless, you'll lose all the information by killing me – Harker, *tell* him—"

Lights, a sudden cacophony of sirens – a stentorian, magnified voice: "DROP YOUR WEAPONS!" The hackers scatter; Bas Teeth drops his CiruBlade and swiftly unbinds me. As I am dragged away, I see Harker spin with precision, calmly unloading clip after clip from her Mitrailleur into the wave of oncoming police teams.

The hackers are rushing me towards a trapdoor, Harker covering our retreat. Desperate, I claw at them as they try to shove me in. Over the gunfire comes the voice again: "SHOOT THE PROCESSOR. DO NOT LET THEM TAKE THE INFORMATION."

"What!?" I scream. "What do you mean, shoot the —"

The shots ring out. My skull bursts into points of flaming agony, and all goes dark.

" at least we were able to retrieve the information."

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“Pity we couldn’t return the Processor to working order, though.”

“It was either him or the information, and we all know which one is worth more. We can always reprogram another.”

Stasis. Floating in the tunnel of light. Voice wash over me like waves over sand.

“I’ll send him down to the lab so they can do a few last probes, and then we’ll have to incinerate him. Can’t have those hackers getting their hands on this body.”

Movement. Can’t see where I’m going no direction no feeling no world no nothing but the words-

Spot. Tops. Opts. Stop. Stop. Stop.