

[Title]

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1 Tired

The new assignment was not especially interesting, as he had expected. As the new budgetary year came around, departments were flush with money to replace and upgrade their aging systems. Since most departments had no means of carrying out the upgrades on their own, his unit had been moving from one project to the next, constantly busy.

His term of service would be ending in two years. While the job was grueling and at times, frustrating, there was a unique satisfaction in completing each project, knowing that he improved peoples' lives. For him, there was pride in serving his country and his government.

The new assignment concerned the deployment of a new technology stack to the welfare agency, replacing its database and web server, both of which were so old, they had been not received updates in over a decade. Obviously, this concerned management, who were afraid of political reprisal if the data fell into the hands of nefarious actors.

Part of his job assignment included talking to agency employees, as well as doing his own research on the old systems. But he was tired, run-down by the barrage of new projects, so it would have to wait for later.

Not that there was much in the way of relaxation for him. He looked towards the clock, spotting that it was already 7. Even if he left now, he would have to pick up a pre-made meal. He leaned back in his chair and sighed, his stomach turning at the prospect of eating another *readymade* meal.

He reluctantly got up and trudged out of the building towards the bus stop. Once outside, he stretched his arms. The air was pleasant and refreshing, standing in sharp contrast to the stifling building he had just been in.

It even looks like a bunker, he thought, looking back at the concrete hunk dotted with minuscule windows. *And once I leave the enclave, the air is going to go to shit again.*

The bus pulled up with a squeal, the tires scraping along the curb. He walked in, nodded to the driver, and collapsed into a seat. The distant skyline of the business district was visible through the window.

One building was decorated with the bicolor flag of Anitonia. The black and yellow stripes ran down the side of the building. Another building had some text which he could not make out.

After he had crossed into city limits, buildings obscured his view of the skyline. The largely unregulated outer districts were the worst polluters. An acrid, chemical smell reached his nose.

Soon enough, thankfully, the bus exited the outer district. The appearance of his surroundings also began to change.

There was nary a corner or storefront not awash in the warm glow of the lamps. A camera was attached to each lamppost, such that the cameras altogether had no blind spots.

He found the change from a downtrodden, messy outer district to the sterile inner city abrupt and bizarre. However, he didn't think much of it, having grown up in the city. Still, he didn't feel safe walking in the street, even though he knew crime was rare.

The bus stopped at the supermarket, where he picked up a *readymade* meal that looked vaguely like potatoes. He walked to his apartment, and opened the door to a serene, neatly organized room. Slipping off his shoes, he threw himself onto the bed.

The television clicked on. It was the usual news – tensions with neighboring countries, rising crime and so on. He sighed, and placed his meal in the heater by his bedside. Out of boredom, he called a friend of his, whom he had met at his office.

"Hey. What's up", the friend greeted.

"Are you free right now?", he asked, hoping to meet.

"I'm busy with work – sorry", the friend dejectedly replied. "But I can still talk." The click-clack of keys could be heard from the phone. Upon hearing these keys, he found a sense of camaraderie in their workload.

"So, West, what've you been working on?", the friend asked.

"Helping out with upgrades, writing new software, the usual." He didn't bother asking West the same question – he already knew the answer he'd get. He sounded dejected, but the friend didn't push. "You've been listening to the news these past few weeks?"

"Not anymore. All they can talk about these days is war." He continued, "Not that it's not gonna happen. Even I don't know what's going on."

It scared him that even a man that was supposed to be "in the know" was in the dark. "Do you think we have any way out?"

"Not with the current government, I don't think we do." The friend was a frequent critic of the administration's decisions, and seemed to think that the government was not fully interested in peace.

"So, you have any plans for the upcoming weekend?", asked West, as he awkwardly tried to change the subject.

"I'm planning to get out to the countryside to meet a few friends. How about you?"

"Maybe gonna to head to a bar – not much, I know", West responded, thinking to himself that he needed to get out more.

"You can come along if you want." Zorian felt himself blush after offering the invitation.

"Yeah... I can – if you're fine with it." West laughed and said he'd be able to come along after 3.

"I'm getting pretty tired", the friend said.

"Yeah, me too", he replied, yawning. "See you tomorrow," he finished, ending the call.

He reluctantly spooned the last few bites of the *readymade* meal into his mouth, gagging. At least he would get an opportunity to get away from the instant meals and the repetitive lifestyle for a weekend. His heart jumped.

Suddenly feeling very tired, his mind drifted to the projects he had completed over the past few weeks. He thought of his previous project, which he had done for the investment planning department. He fondly remembered working with financial experts and learning of their mathematical modelling.

That was probably the most intriguing aspect of his job, he thought. As much he enjoyed working in public service, he wished he had stayed in school longer – perhaps forever. He fondly remembered losing himself in difficult, abstract problems, unmoored from life.

But life had presented itself. The money had run out and the government curtailed its spending, cutting aid entirely. With the costs of living rapidly rising, he had no choice but to seek employment, unable to pursue higher education.

Some days, he was overcome with a painful boredom, wishing he was somewhere else.

Yawning, he got up to make himself milk in preparation of sleep. An extended burp escaped him. *I should really stop eating those meals*, he thought to himself.

As he did every night, West pulled out a carton of milk and poured a few ounces into a glass. Microwaving it for 40 seconds, such that it was warm but not hot, he pulled out a box of cocoa powder, imported from far-away lands. Once the milk was warmed, he carefully measured 2 teaspoons of cocoa and mixed it into the milk. Finally, he aggressively mixed the milk, such that it began to foam.

The ritual of preparing the drink every night distracted him from the contents of the day. It gave him a sense of completeness, with which he was able to fall asleep easily.

Tired and satisfied, he slipped into sleep on his couch.

When he woke up, he felt groggy and exhausted, even though the sun was a quarter of the way up. He glanced over at the clock, to see, regrettably, that it was 12. An hour remained till noon. He sighed and reluctantly stepped on to the floor and paddled his way towards the bathroom.

Nevertheless, he was grateful for a break from work – to not scrounge by with a few hours of sleep. He washed himself off, then began cooking lunch. Pulling out the seafood subsection of the refrigerator, a piece of seafood caught his eyes. After washing the fish, he began to finely slice its tentacles, forming thin, circular cross-sections of flesh. On the side, he set a pot of noodles to boil. When the food had finished cooking, he scooped a dollop of his favorite tangy sauce onto the plate.

The meal, while simple, was a favorite of his, as it was easily accessible when he was tired or hungry. He rubbed the sleepiness out of his eyes.

He pulled up a news feed on his tablet. The reporter was talking about a convention occurring on a neighboring planet. There were protesters visible in the background, holding signs that demanded a solution to a rising cost of living in his home planet. West, even from his low-level position in the government, knew that officials didn't think the convention, which aimed to address rising geopolitical tensions and supply issues caused by poor resource planning, would net any significant outcome. A collage of videos of leaders being escorted to the convention followed.

The following report brought the news that economic growth had remained stagnant for the second quarter in a row. With the inaction of the governing class, the reporter explained, several movements had sprung up demanding the government nationalize corporations to reign in "greed".

He sighed. The demands to overthrow the economic system rose like clockwork when times became tenuous.

Worrying news aside, West remembered his obligation with his friend. They were going to meet in a local park. He made his way down and towards to the park. His friend called, asking about when he would be there.

When they met, it was the first time they had met in months.

"It's been a while since I've seen you, eh?", the friend began.

"It's been a busy couple of months", West replied.

"I would imagine", he replied, referencing the upgrade initiative. There was a brief silence between them.

"What've you been up to?"

"Been traveling around the capital and completing a deployment in the shipyards."

They walked around a pond, pausing to skip a rock.

"What do you think about the convention with Frescam?" West kicked a rock.

"I don't think the conference is going to achieve much. The train's left the station." He paused, a concerned look on his face. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about it."

"What's up?"

"Rumors have been circulating about an assignment change. It seems to be under tight wraps – but from what I've heard, it's a national security matter." He continued, lowering his voice, "It's going to be an offensive assignment – probably a military support role."

West, shocked that the situation was already escalating, racked his mind for what the assignment could entail.

"Anyways, I'm going to miss upgrading government systems – there's some truly gnarly stuff in there", West said.

The conversation eventually moved on to a recent spate of free-trade agreements with distant solar systems.

The friend disagreed that free-trade, especially with an economically underdeveloped partner, was a good idea. To him, free-trade disadvantaged industrial workers, creating an underemployed underclass.

"The government should obviously have a strong social net and retraining program", West retorted.

"You'd have communities uprooted and people thrown into competitive, cutthroat job markets – in which they would be at a natural disadvantage. Where do you expect all these people to find jobs?" He continued, "Remaining economically competitive is good – and this requires economic change – but people desire stability too."

"Jobs aren't a fixed resource – the economy can expand." He collected his thoughts. "But yes, it's important to balance stability and competitiveness."

They continued discussing government, economics, their jobs and more until the sun began to approach the horizon. They would have stayed and talked longer, but the rapidly darkening sky forced them to begin returning.

West had wanted to say something, something that would neatly convey a "goodbye", something that would be enough for the long gap until they met again. But there was no such thing, and they left each other with an unceremonious "see you", with a hint of longing in their voices.

When West got home, he warmed up leftovers and went to bed, feeling deflated.

2 Annabeth

There was a meeting coming up, and she wasn't looking forward to it. It had something to do with a digital upgrade, and she could not care less about it. It was just more busywork that solidified, to her, how pointless her job was.

When the meeting came around, she found an exhausted employee, who, with bags under their eyes, clearly had not slept well. Throughout the meeting, the employee asked formulaic questions – what her frustrations were, and what additional features she would like to see implemented.

Feeling like she was completing a box-ticking exercise, she gave brief, vague answers and tried to end the meeting early. She could not care less about the exercise, and told the employee as much.

"I don't give a shit about what you're doing here, or your stupid project", she blurted out. "You're not helping anyone here, and probably making it harder to get welfare."

The employee looked taken aback and somewhat confused. "I'm sorry you feel that way, but that's not what I'm trying to do."

"I'm sorry. That was out of line." The employee raised an eyebrow.

"It's that my work here doesn't have much of a purpose." She continued, "It feels meaningless -sorry, I don't know why I'm telling you this."

"It does feel that way, but I guess you've to work with what you have in government."

"I guess. I didn't catch your name, by the way", she inquired.

"I'm West Kent. Yep." They worked through the rest of questionnaire, then said a brief adieu, going on their ways.

For Annabeth, her responsibilities included reviewing several companies which had failed to fund unemployment coverage. The least favorite of her cases to handle, the process of gaining compliance was irritating, winding and time-consuming. She reluctantly began to process through the papers.

Initially a psychologist by training, Annabeth frequently lamented the nature of her job. She would have loved a hands-on, interpersonal job, but she was stuck processing paperwork, working with limited resources, and most importantly, completely isolated from the people she was supposed to help.

It wasn't always like this – she had been an active psychiatrist doing well for herself when she graduated medical school. But as quickly as her dream had built up, it

had come crumbling down with years-long bouts of depression. When she had finally sought help, years had been lost to sickness and poverty.

Thinking back to her first experience with a patient in her own practice, she let out a sigh. The memories would have come back fast and hard, if she didn't refocus. The memories of helplessness, of despair, of losing her patients were always ready to come roaring back. And they always pulled her under when they did.

They met at a local restaurant the next day to discuss specifics. Though they ostensibly met to discuss the project, the topic quickly diverged.

"Do you come here often?", she asked.

"Yeah, it's my go-to location for lunch. I would get a panini, if it's also your first time here." He mentioned the delicacy, which was popular on some distant systems. In general, West found the native food of his planet to be rather uninspired, if for the want of better native agriculture. Unfortunately, that also meant a higher cost as everything had to be imported or grown in specialized facilities.

The buzz of conversations rose as people trickled in for lunch. Annabeth asked what the project was going to look like on the technical side. West stated that some long-standing issues were to be fixed, user experience improved and the backends for various components would be modernized.

"Do you enjoy doing these overhauls?", she continued questioning.

"They're alright. I like the accomplishment of replacing outdated technology, instituting best practices, creating elegant implementations and all that." He continued, "Honestly, it's kinda like creating art."

"You sound so full of yourself", she said with a grin, and imitated him.

"It sounds ridiculous, but I would be lying if it didn't feel if it was at least part art", he replied, feeling a little embarrassed. Annabeth nodded along, and took a long sip of her drink, a berry-filled concoction. West's thoughts shifted to getting time off from work.

"Are you planning on vacationing anywhere?" he asked, with the upcoming vacation season on his mind.

"I haven't really thought about it so far", she replied, knowing that she'd likely spend it with herself, watching hollow entertainment for hours on end.

West glanced at around at the populated shop, as Annabeth took a bite out of her sandwich. He spotted a few workers from his office, and making eye contact, gave a acknowledging nod. Orders whizzed overhead, supported by a system of rails. Sunlight streamed in from the windows, the outside world somewhat obscured by an advertisement displayed on the window.

He looked back at Annabeth.

"I'd like to apologize for what I said this morning. This job can get on my nerves at times", she abruptly began to speak.

"It must be a pretty demanding job", he replied.

"It's the opposite, actually. Feels useless most days", she replied, looking a little sad.

"Oh... Well, I'd like to get started on the project, if you don't mind." She begrudgingly began to discuss some of the issues she had with welfare liabilities getting lost. But soon enough, the conversation began to shift to other things.

"The office politics are probably the worst part about it", Annabeth said. "Of course, it happens everywhere. But in government, it's so much worse."

"Huh, it's been about as bad as industry for me. But yeah, it's one of those irritations that inevitably pop up time and time again."

"It just feels so pointless, all of the arguing", she lamented. "I usually just put on a episodic when that happens".

"What are you watching these days?"

"Lost in Galeo, mostly", she replied, referring to a show about a man trying to find his way home in one of the poorest planets.

"I've been meaning to watch that. I'll look into it", he replied.

"You?"

"I haven't really had the time recently for anything", West replied, remembering a task he had promised to complete after lunch.

"Seems you're busier than me, at least", she grinned.

"Well, speaking of busy, I have to head out." He continued after a pause, "If you'd like, we can meet somewhere for drinks to talk about the project."

"Yeah, the project, of course. We can decide where later."

Returning her dishes, she waved as West exited the shop. She pulled up his organizational profile of his phone. He worked on a rotational technology services team, assigned development work for a large range of government departments.

He seemed a nice enough guy to her, someone she would perhaps keep talking to even after the work was over. Friends, she thought, a scarce quantity in her life.

But perhaps more importantly, it looked as if he was much more comfortable with his position in life. Perhaps that's why she never seemed to be able to hold on to friends – nobody wants to be friends with an insecure, miserable person. She thought, perhaps,

that she was too lost, clueless in a phase of life where everyone seemed to have it together, or at least seemed to be in the process of cleaning up their lives.

Initially excited and smiling from the conversation, she left feeling gloomy and disappointed, but also somehow nervous about the meeting. A news alert popped up on her phone. The ongoing federation mediation talks had fallen through, and protests had erupted at the convention. The news made her more anxious and she walked quickly back to her office, shivering in the sunlight.

In the winter months, daylight slipped by quickly, and it was quickly pitch-dark outside, save for the occasional streetlight lighting up as somebody walked by. The hours of clicking through tax filings came and passed, with hardly a noticeable event in them.

Sometimes, an employee would walk past her cubicle, but she hardly paid attention. There were few friends to be made, her only focus on the clock, which agonizingly ticked down minute by minute.

Sometimes, a thought reminded her that the job she was doing was important. Another voice reminded her that the efforts were futile – that her work had no meaningful effect.

Sometimes, she gazed out the window, staring at the brightly lit skyline of Anitonia. Bright videos and flashy advertising shown on the sides of the skyscrapers. A feeling arose in her. She wanted to be there.

Eventually, her nine hour shift was over. She packed her belongings and left within minutes.

The bus was waiting, headed towards her neighborhood. The “Gray Zone”, as they called it, it was a heavily industrial, disadvantaged area. It was also where she lived.

But by any standard, it was certainly not impoverished – if one knew where to look. *One day, I'll leak a thing or two*, she thought, thinking of the data smugglers. But it was more important to maintain her precarious finances.

When the bus dropped her off, she took a path snaking through alleys and crossing busy thoroughfares to her apartment. Maybe she should have exercised more caution, but the seediness did not bother her.

She didn't care what would happen – getting robbed or worse.

A man wearing a visor passed her, turning to look at her. She felt his eyes, through the visor, tracking her as she walked. She involuntarily quickened her pace. It suddenly felt as if there were thousands of eyes focused on her.

At the entrance of her apartment complex, a shabby, dented doorway, she took a quick glance around before yanking the door open. But it was not until she had taken

the elevator, tapped her phone against the door entry reader, and heard the door click behind her, that she sat down with a long sigh.

The sofa reclined with a weary hydraulic sigh. Screens rotated down from the ceiling, perfectly calibrated to her viewing angle. The show spanned all 3 screens. She flipped through the available television. There weren't many options – but then, she didn't need those options.

She thumbed around for a port on the sofa's side. Finding it, she inserted a cable from her computer. She folded in the keyboard, leaving a edge-to-edge screen. She stared at the on-screen keyboard, her fingers hovering.

"Porn it is, then", she muttered. Her fingers danced across the keyboard, depressing the keyboard with muted clicks. Reams of unclothed, implant-ridden actors appeared on screen. She began to scroll, her eyes scanning in a carefully refined method, searching for something suitable.

When she finally selected one, it was surprisingly sweet for her usual choices.

An hour later, when she got up, she gave the couch to the laundry machine.

There was still the meeting to complete, a trip to make. She glanced over at the sleeping cubicle by the window. It jutted out the side of the building, covered by glass on 5 sides, dimly illuminated by a neon glow.

She wanted to do nothing more than sleep, feeling to leave her commitments behind and get a chance to disengage, to relax.

So she climbed into the smug corner. The landlord had wanted an extra payment for the amenity, she remembered. She rolled her eyes, and tucked herself in, pushing away her anxious state of mind and fully enveloping herself into the ambience of the urban atmosphere.

She could almost feel the bite of the wind and hear the murmur of distant conversations.

3 Assignment

An alarm blared on the terminal in front of him, telling him about a low-fuel condition in one of the translational ion thrusters. He accepted the notification and dispatched a crew member to load the thruster.

A month elapsed, not another ship in sight. The days were spent retrofitting and repairing the rust-bucket he was on, urgently trying to prevent the vessel from drifting dead in space.

It wasn't all bad at first – designing and fabricating parts wasn't all bad. But the workload quickly added up, and with his minimal training, he was no match for the complexities aboard.

Then he got "promoted", given the incredibly dreary task of monitoring ship status. He suspected he was far too incompetent for the previous job. Nevertheless, he was happy to be in something he could manage.

A computer scientist by training, he spent most of his time tinkering with the ship's systems, aided only by some very brief documentation. With almost half a month to reach a soul not aboard the ship just through the internet, he had to reverse-engineer almost everything by himself.

Personnel transport ships neither had good communication systems nor good engines. He was extremely isolated, save for the reams of soldiers onboard. It was a peculiar feeling, knowing that he was so far from his friends, family, anything he cared about.

He wondered why he was on the ship.

Well, maybe he wasn't totally isolated from everyone. He remembered meeting a soldier in the breakroom. They chatted about their families and reminisced about the affairs they left open-ended back home. Meeting her was the first *real* interaction he had aboard the ship. He had a sudden craving to meet her again.

As soon as he sat back with a sigh, the same alarm went off again, warning him of a low-fuel condition.

"Damn lazy mechanics", he muttered. Something was different about the alarm, as a number caught his eyes. All of the thrusters were offline now, and all the ship had was its main engine.

It had no maneuverability, as the main engine's thrusters were only good for slight course adjustments. They would have to drop to sub-light speeds to investigate the ion thrusters – and why they seemed to have instantaneously lost all their fuel.

The ship violently jerked as spacetime relaxed around the ship, bringing the crew out of super-light speeds. Almost immediately, teams were dispatched to pull in the

thrusters and run diagnostics. The time spent floating about – with a suspicious massive failure of the propellers – had to be minimized.

But the teams didn't even get 15 minutes before the first problem arose. And the problem was big – nearly 7km in length. Only 4 of the 21 ion thrusters had been reset and re-installed when it had appeared. Without a single communication, the mystery ship launched a range of torpedoes from a port near its aft engines. He recognized the design – a Frescam light cruiser.

Around him, the crew urgently dialed in thruster inputs to avert the onslaught. However, with only 4 thrusters, there was only so much that could be done.

Around 30% of the missiles hit the ship, combusting spectacularly, with the flames obscuring viewing panels in the control center as oxygen spewed out of the gaping holes in the ship. The flames disappeared as soon as they had appeared, as doors shut around the gaping holes and locked in precious oxygen.

"Light! Light! Light!", the commander shouted, as he saw an opportunity to escape. The ship violently jerked and accelerated as it made a getaway. The distance between the two ships slowly increased as the other ship decided against giving chase.

Probably not a high-value target, he thought.

"What's the damage?", the commander asked.

A voice spoke up. "24 holes – 3 of those are the thruster bays. Probably around 170 dead and many more injured from depressurization." The commander nodded and began talking with a man next to him.

With more than a few alerts on his screen, he sat back in dazed surprise.

"Jack, that ship was...", a colleague, Arnav, trailed off.

"It was from the Frescam federation", he finished. They both knew what that meant – things had wildly escalated. With a ways to go until their destination, they were in danger of being ambushed again. And their dump of a ship most likely would not take another engagement.

He glanced at the trip clock. *1 month, 3 days*. He had quite a bit of time – and existential dread – to kill.

Groaning, he got up and told his colleague that he was going to take a brief break. He began to walk over to the break room, but his excursion was obstructed by the airlock doors, which had sealed around the gaping hole in the hull.

He took the elevator down 12 floors and walked around the damaged segments, then took the elevator up to the break room. He spotted airlock doors a short distance to the left. If the missiles had struck a few decameters to the right, the break room would have been no more.

Thankful the break room was still accessible, he walked in and began to prepare a coffee. The coffee, though not to his taste, was the only one available – as the other varieties had started to mysteriously disappear the first few weeks into the journey.

When he went to find a seat, he spotted the soldier he met last week – *or was it 2 weeks ago*, he thought to himself. It was lamentable fact that life aboard the ship was a numbing blur, though tinged with segments of immense fear.

He waved to her, hoping that she would recognize him. Luckily, she did and waved him over.

"I guess we meet again", she said.

"Didn't think you'd be here after what just happened", he replied inquisitively.

"We moved most of the injured to medical care, but beyond that, there isn't really much to do save for sitting and waiting to get blown up", she lamented, taking into account the inactive and broken defensive systems. "So I guess they just let us go."

"We aren't going to make it out of here, are we?", asked Jack, with a resigned expression.

"I wouldn't say it's an absolute", she replied, trying to maintain some optimism. "But the odds definitely aren't great."

"Anyways, how've you been keeping boredom away. I'm dying for suggestions." He changed the topic – he didn't like talking about the plausible end of his life.

"I've actually learned to embrace it – there's this technique called meditation. It's like focusing on the process of thinking itself."

He must have looked skeptical, since she then told him, that while it may sound boring, "it was actually a pretty peaceful way to pass the time."

"If you want to try it out, we have a session at 19:00 on the third floor every day."

"I'll see if I can make it." He told her that he'd see her later, threw out his cup and began making his way back to the command center. The hallway had ceiling-to-floor glass on one side, through which he could see a panorama of stars.

He knew what he was watching was running backwards in time, but it wasn't obvious at a glance. The stars seemed to be barely moving at all, a dimly illuminated backdrop against the lights of the hallway.

Soldiers and civilians passed him by, each preoccupied with some business. Some were moving materials as they were needed, while others were interacting with handheld devices, messaging others or reading the news – which was weeks out of date. Still others had augmented vision, and did the above through devices integrated directly into their minds.

A large cart passed him – glancing at it, he noticed it was a cooler carrying a lab sample. It made a rhythmic click-clack as it passed over the equally spaced gaps between floor panels. The sound faded into the distance as the autonomous cart sped to its destination.

He took a turn into a narrow, dimly-lit access hallway. There was only space for two abreast, leading to him awkwardly squeezing past another person, who seemed to be in a hurry to get to the main hallway.

Large runs of piping occupied the upper quarter of the hallway, such that they hung only a few inches above his head. He saw some of them were water, while others carried compressed air.

Hallways like this crisscrossed the ship, providing access to densely packed rooms. Working with a limited amount of space, the designers had crammed as much as they could into the layout.

The lighting was dim and only turned on when he walked past, illuminating room entrances one by one. Some rooms were research labs, while others served as storage and offices for various ship crew. The labs handled everything from novel diseases to the genetic engineering of food sources. While this particular floor handled biology, other floors tackled other domains.

Eventually, the hallway opened onto another, larger hallway. Though it was sparsely populated, it would not remain that way, as the restaurants lining the walkway would open soon, drawing in hundreds.

For now, workers mopped the floor and wiped down the tables in preparation for the influx of customers. He glanced in their direction, and making eye contact, nodded slightly. A second level of shops ran overhead, accessible by a thin suspended walkway.

Suddenly, a terrible stench entered his nose. Someone was lying ahead in a puddle of unidentified liquid. He drew closer, holding his breath as the scent became overwhelming.

It looked like the contents of the man's stomach were laying beside him. The man was visibly in a stupor, probably drunk. Jack turned the man so that he wouldn't choke on his own vomit.

In the off hours, it wasn't uncommon to see the drunken swimming in their own mess on the walkway. It would be cleaned up fairly quickly, but just as soon, the next person would have a seat and cleanse out their digestive tract.

It was a fairly funny, though stomach-turning, sight.

The command center entrance was within sight. When he walked in, he saw that a camera feed from a probe was being monitored. It was orbiting a (relatively) nearby inhabited planet, apparently looking for some damage.

With the high-powered optics onboard, the camera feed zoomed into a densely populated patch. A suspension bridge seemed to have some damage – part of it had fallen into the river, while cables dangled loose.

Sitting down, he turned to the right and asked what they were looking at. He was told that all signs were pointing to a terrorist attack. The planet belonged to Frescam.

He didn't quite understand what was going on, but neither did anyone aboard the vessel – they were at least a few weeks out from receiving relevant information. After a while ruminating with his head in his hands, a ping on his monitor brought him out of the daydream. The ion thrusters had gone offline again. Relaying this information through his headset, he was immediately told that they would keep traveling – ignoring the warnings.

In their current position, any risk would be too great to take – there was a very high chance that changing their trajectory would initiate a chain of events ending with the destruction of everybody on board.

Jack had nothing to do except hope that the attackers wouldn't find the numerous vulnerabilities in the ship's systems – some of which he had even found – and which the vendors had refused to fix. He thought back to the time he found a buffer overflow in a library called by some of the most critical software.

It was compiled by a code synthesis program called "GCC", version 4.8. He remembered that when he had looked it up, he was floored that it was nearly 2.5 centuries old.

The response from the developers was "that's what the hardware supports", so that's what they used. And then the developers refused to fix the bug because it was "unlikely" it would be a problem.

All he could do is turn on W^X¹ protections and hope for the best.

The day stumbled by and he was soon dismissed from the command center. He found himself staring down the main walkway. Not entirely at ease, his eyes darted between shopfronts impatiently. His appetite seemed to be missing, his mind preoccupied by a general sense of concern and foreboding.

Though it was nearing 7, there were few people about. The abnormality added to his discomfort.

Continuing to walk, he eventually found himself wandering around the 3rd floor aimlessly, hoping his anxious mood would subside. Thinking that he would be able to

1 "Write xor Execute" is a directive that forbids writing to executable memory (what the program runs), and thus prevents running maliciously provided code

walk off his thoughts, he tried to tire himself, walking at an aggressive pace through the narrow access-ways.

"Oh, hey! I didn't expect you to come", the soldier he had met in the break room said suddenly. He snapped his head around in surprise, not expecting to be spoken to, shaken out of the warm embrace of his own thoughts.

"Uh... yeah, I guess I was interested", he replied, with a hint of hesitance in his voice, not entirely wanting to go to the meeting. They looked at each other curiously. He scratched his head and entered the meditation room after a brief silence.

When he entered, he noticed that the majority were donning military uniforms. They waved to the soldier from the break room as she walked in.

Feeling out of place, he looked over at the friend he'd brought for an explanation.

"Don't worry – they won't bite." Though not the answer to the question he'd wanted to ask, he nodded, feeling slightly more comfortable.

Without much introduction, partakers took a seat on the floor and closed their eyes. He followed suit, trying to concentrate on a particular object, but had trouble holding attention.

He suddenly felt hands on his shoulders and head. Worried, he turned around and defensively brought his hands up. The soldier simply grabbed his hands.

"You were about to fall over, so I caught you."

"Uh, heh", he muttered, a little embarrassed.

"Not very coordinated, are you?" She laughed a little, then closed her eyes again.

Though unable to meditate, the session had calmed him to the point where he fell asleep shortly after reaching his own quarters.

4 [The Soldier]

After the meditation session had come to a close, she reluctantly stepped out and began wondering what was to be done for dinner. Looking around for the man that had accompanied her, she noticed that he had already left. *A shame*, she thought – as she had hoped to get dinner together.

She reluctantly turned to some of the soldiers – from her company – that were also at the meeting. There was nothing wrong with them *per se*, but she'd wanted a change of pace – something more exciting than a routine dinner with the same group.

"I'm craving Maevian", someone suggested.

"But I had that yesterday", another soldier countered. "I loved the place we went to last time, though."

"How do you live with such little variety?", came the reply.

"Anyways, I don't think I've seen that guy around here before." He looked around. "Looks like he left."

"[The Soldier] was getting all touchy with him...?" said another. The group looked at her intently and she instinctively rolled her eyes.

"He's just someone I met in the break room. I've only met him once before today", she replied incredulously.

"That's how it all begins."

She simply glared at him and aggressively motioned for the group to move. They followed – ending up at the same place they'd eaten last week – and the week before that – and as long as she could remember.

The cafeteria had quickened; people flooded in from their offices. The din of conversation gently increased as the group ate.

Most were researchers or soldiers, in transit to conferences, government research centers and reassignments. The typical population, in her experience, tended to consist mostly of people about on business or professional travel, but it seemed that with the chill in geopolitical relations, people had become more wary to travel. Now, the bulk of the inhabitants consisted of government employees being shuffled around – probably for the growing defense research initiative.

Bits of conversation came to her attention – a group of biologists talked of the genetic components of a newly discovered species' behavior, a few casual travellers recounted their stories to one another and others broke out in fits of laughter to jokes she could not hear.

The group meandered into a conversation about their training, for which there had been a few rumors.

"I think we're getting weapons training soon."

"Why?"

"We got a package of full autos when we started and they're kind of special, from what I", someone explained. "I'm pretty sure they're our new service weapons – hence the training."

"That definitely makes a lot of sense. But I still don't understand why we're getting new ones only a