

# USER ERROR



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Thomas woke early in the day. Rising, he dressed himself in the uniform of his profession, and after shaving with his worn razor he ate a breakfast of seecracker. He left his home, really nothing more than a two-room shack, and began to walk towards the transport depot. He passed through streets, small and winding among the shanties and hastily constructed lean-tos. The old, high flood walls were stained brown by the years and now were practically impossible to see among the mass of ragged tents and sheet-metal hovels. The road was dirt, beaten solid by thousands of feet. It was dirty brown and every footfall created a small cloud. There was an hour before the morning rush so the usual choking dry mist of dirt that got into clothing and through open windows was not a worry. Thomas would have to sweep his home when he returned, but that meant nothing to him. It was a daily chore, a ritual to mark his return to the little two-room shack he called home. The shanties soon gave way to the stalls, which anywhere else would be an over glorified flea market. Hunched merchants, browned by years of beating sun, kept mostly silent, as the rush to buy before stocks were exhausted was yet an hour away. As Thomas continued his walk an old crone, hair grey-white and skin wrinkled and brown with cancer, cried out to him.

“Tommy boy, care for any seecrackers for the road? A special price for you, young man.”

“Thanks, grandma, but not today. My check is late again.” The woman was no relation of Thomas, but she was the merchant he most frequented and they often exchanged pleasantries. He had bought seecrackers from her for years now, and while he couldn’t expect a discount she did occasionally let him sample new stock.

“Come now, Tommy, just yesterday the Man persuaded me to buy a new flavor. I’ve heard this kelp is from forests even farther out than usual.”

Thomas fished out a crumpled one and handed it to the woman, and in exchange she handed him a cracker, red and brittle. Thomas nibbled at the cracker. It tasted vaguely sweet with a fishy, oily aftertaste.

“How is it?” the old woman asked Thomas.

“Kind of bland. Not a great aftertaste either.” Thomas wasn’t eager to finish the rest of the cracker, but he had paid for it. He ate the rest of it, said farewell to the crone, and resumed his walk. Down the road from there he saw a young boy, maybe no older than six or seven, hand outstretched. Thomas had nothing for him. There were always orphans, and if you stopped for all beggars you would get nowhere very fast. Besides, the boy probably had an accomplice somewhere who would pick-pocket anyone who stopped long enough to allow it. The rest of the trip was without incident and Thomas found himself at the entrance to the depot.

It was a colossal building, like the hangars of old. Through it ran the decrepit rail lines, traveling on their raised platforms. There was a large entrance through which people streamed. They filed into lines corresponding to where they wished to go. They would enter the line and pay the boothman, or depending on their destination, show him their papers and then pay him. Security was strict following a recent attempt to rob the booths. That had evolved into a full blow riot when the booths were all shut down. Official word was the riot had been suppressed with no major injury to any party, although what Thomas had heard was that the riot had been forcibly stopped with gas and pellet guns. There had been deaths. No one knew exactly what the gas was. Officially it was tear gas, but chances were that only the company that made it knew exactly what was in it. As long as it was cheap the government would buy it.

Thomas walked to a line on the far right, noticeably shorter than the ones around it. It was the company line. In front of Thomas was a woman he didn't know, dressed in severe grays. If he had to guess, he thought she was probably an abacus jockey, one of the many who balanced company books. The line moved a step forwards and a man took a place behind Thomas. Thomas didn't know the man either, but that wasn't surprising, the company employed a lot of people. The man behind Thomas coughed loudly and messily. Thomas kept his eyes forwards.

"You hear they say it's gonna shower?" Thomas was startled. He had been absorbed in his own thoughts. He turned to face the man behind him.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said, you hear they say it's gonna shower?" Thomas hadn't paid much attention to the man behind him, but now he noticed his uniform. He was a maintenance man. His voice was deep, and his face etched by deep lines. He has a stubby crooked nose, probably broken a couple of times. His eyes were a bland brown and he was balding.

"Yeah, but they've been saying that for as long as I can remember." The man's uniform was shabby, covered in oil and grime.

"Well, this time it's for sure, they say. It's about time, you ask me. I haven't had a bath in ages. What with the Man raising the price of water and all. My wife says we gotta drink something, don't we? Hell, I'm fine how it is, but if that shower's cold, hallelujah, I say." The man spoke fast. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with him but Thomas just didn't like the look of him. He looked base and plain, a little fat, and while he didn't talk slang like most that didn't mean he wasn't simple. The woman in front of Thomas turned around.

"With the dust everywhere we deserve a shower. Praise him above, y'know, if that dust don't get all over for a time." The woman was older than Thomas had thought, maybe in her

forties or fifties. Her grey shapeless uniform reminded Thomas of the teacher he had once had when they schooled children. She had been a witch and Thomas remembered nothing but her tyrannies. Maybe this was why Thomas instinctively was repulsed by the woman. Luckily for him, the line had moved while words were exchanged so the woman had to submit her papers before she could say anything else. The woman got her papers back and Thomas stepped forwards.

“Papers.” The boothman was in fact a woman, in her early twenties by the looks of it. She had some of her youthful beauty, but years of stamping endless forms had killed her mind long ago. Thomas thought that she was probably one of the Centennials. The Centennial Project was a failed government program to help employ young people, who often spent years looking for jobs. The Project had failed because there were simply no jobs to be had, so to save face the government had created as many menial jobs as they could. Jobs a machine could do better and faster. The project had won some politician the presidency, if Thomas could recall. Thomas was lucky. He had inherited his position from his father, as his father had inherited it from Thomas’s grandfather. The woman looked at Thomas’s papers and then pressed a small green button on the control panel in front her. Thomas heard a buzzing around him.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, standard procedure now to scan servants. Someone blew up one of the rail tracks a while ago in company uniform.” Terrorism wasn’t much of a problem usually, but there were always revolutionaries and dissenters. The plain fact was that there wasn’t actually very much to destroy. Nothing valuable at least.

“Is that why the Direct East line is out?” Thomas had seen the booth empty and a “LINE CLOSED” sign hanging from a hook on the side of the booth.

“Yeah. They say it’ll get fixed by next week, but they said that about Central West and its been closed for seven months. At least you can still get to Direct East, but it’s a longer trip since you have to take three different rails.”

“Central West, that was a disaster.”

“Yep, here are your papers. Have a good day.” Thomas walked to the benches in front of his rail’s stop. He took a seat and waited. The benches were shaded by a grey concrete overhang, supported by several pillars, tall and rectangular, of the same grey concrete as the overhang. A few posters were hung to the pillars. Some were advertising various new food products, mostly seecrackers. One talked about the simple joys of a grass-fed patty. Thomas wasn’t sure what a grass-fed patty was, except that the poster looked decades old. There were also the generic propaganda style ones, showing a flag fluttering in the breeze with such

inspiring slogans as: “Stay strong for your country” and “Everything is going to be fine”. The latter didn’t reassure Thomas very much. It was a new poster and he had to wonder, what was the problem? If he turned on a radio, if he had one, if he could afford one, he might hear what the problem was.

That was the problem. Thomas never had much of an idea of how the world was doing. All he could do was keep his eyes on the path ahead of him. While Thomas had been deep in thought a familiar figure took a seat next to him.

“Hey there, we were in line together?” It was the man from earlier. In the few minutes since Thomas had seen him not much had changed. “Mind if I sit here?”

“Uh, sure, go ahead.” The man sat down heavily and gave a sigh.

“Boy, I’m sure tired. Me and my wife’s youngest is sick and I was up all night. My wife says it’s only fair since she dealt with it all day, but now I’m damn tired. And now I gotta go work.”

“You’re in maintenance, aren’t you?” asked Thomas.

“Yessir, that I am. I work plumbing most the time. You wouldn’t believe what people get into those pipes. Heck, I don’t even hold with the way they do it, flushin all that good drinking water down them pipes. What’s your stick, man?”

“I’m security.”

“Where you security for? Lemme guess, Middle Rows?”

“Close, but no,” Thomas smiled. If there was one thing he liked, it was his job, “Upper rows. Regular beat.” Upper Rows raised the maintenance man’s eyebrows up into his forehead.

“That must be real cozy, the Upper Rows. Say, what’s your name stranger, mine’s Morris.”

“I’m Thomas,” said Thomas, “And the Upper Rows aren’t all that good. It’s look, not touch.”

“I know how you feel,” said Morris, “They have, we look.” Morris coughed, and then almost bent double violently coughing into his pants.

“If that brat got me sick,” Morris said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, “I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Any further conversation was broken by the screeching sounds of the approaching rail. Passengers stood up and walked to where the rail would come to a stop. Thomas stood and looked back at Morris.

“It was nice meeting ya, Thomas, maybe I’ll see you in the tunnels up there sometime. Now if you don’t mind, I’m gonna join some of the boys from my department.” With that he waved a goodbye to Thomas and walked into the growing crowd. Thomas watched him go until

he was lost to sight, and then he walked to the rail as its doors creaked open. Thomas found himself a window seat near the front of the rail. A woman in grey, old and haggard, sat next to Thomas. As the rail lurched to a start Thomas watched out the window. Grey landscapes passed by, with the occasional brown. Thomas wondered if it had all been green once. He had seen pictures of lush rolling forests when he was a child, but he had yet to see those fabled greens.

The ride was an hour long. A looming hill came up before the rail. The rail entered a long dark tunnel, lit by dull orange lights. The rail wasn't at its destination but it came grinding to a stop. This was no surprise to Thomas or any of the other passengers. The air started to buzz with electricity, and a faint blue light passed through the rail. As the light passed over Thomas his hair stood on end, and he felt goosebumps along his spine. The light passed by him again and through to the front of the train. The train began to move once more. The lights outside of the car flashed past, orange and grimy. After perhaps five minutes of traveling through the tunnel the train emerged once more. The people on the train got to their feet and moved to the doors. Thomas got up and joined them. As the doors opened, white light flooded the car.

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Hobart sat in his grey seat, uncomfortably shifting from side to side. He wasn't the only one in the waiting room. There was an old woman, and two younger men. The woman was haggard and looked like old women everywhere, a little grandmotherly and just a little more tired. The young men were in the pale grey jumpsuits of sewer maintenance. Bart was sitting across the room from them and he could tell they stunk to high heaven. He wondered why they were in the room. The old lady was probably getting the can. It was a real shame, old ladies like that were usually working to support a family. But the rules were the rules, even if nobody liked them. The old had to push over and make room for the young. On the posters they always made it look like the "venerable" got to sit back and relax now that they were relieved of their duties. In reality they either starved, with or without grace, or went off somewhere to die. Alone in the hills. Bart had always thought it was a nasty way to depart, but the old knew the realities, and sometimes the realities didn't have room for them. The men probably screwed something up really bad. Maybe they'd get the boot. Maybe not. Boss Gallagher was a lenient man on good days. But good days didn't come around often. Bart sighed. He had been working around the clock. At this time of year the sewage systems were always at 150% capacity. He had barely any time to himself, and he had started to sleep at the department since he was always on call.

A buzzer rang and a light above the door to Gallagher's office flashed green. A voice from

the intercom intoned:

“Mr. Hobart, Mr. Gallagher will see you now.” Hobart sighed again. He stood and walked to the door. The others clearly did not begrudge him his task. Hobart sighed once more and grabbed the door handle. It was cold and metallic. He turned the handle and stepped into the room

“Please, sit down, Hobart.” Gallagher was behind his grey metal desk. There were a couple of file cases, but otherwise the room was bare. Bart had heard from office rumor that Gallagher had monitors connected to the hallway cameras and watched them for entertainment. Bart sat in the only other chair in the room, made of grey plastic. It wasn't very comfortable, and the back was curved so that Bart had to hunch forward. Whoever made this chair didn't make it for comfort.

“The reason I called you in here, is, well, rather unique. A once in a lifetime event for you, and a once a week event for me.” Gallagher sounded bored. Bart began to sweat. How often were people fired? The old lady out there was definitely getting the can, so that made Bart's chances all the better. Bart felt a little guilty about thinking that, but he would rather give up the lady than his job. Gallagher looked at the paper on his desk and looked back up to Hobart.

“Hobart.” Gallagher was just drawing it out. Bart wondered if he enjoyed this, this torture. “You are promoted.” Hobart was incredulous. Was it a sick joke?

“Sir?”

“You're promoted, Hobart. A vacancy came up and, as one of the few qualified individuals, you were chosen. You are going to be working in Data Management. I'm sure you can find your way there.” Gallagher depressed his direct line button to his secretary. “Tell the next one to come in, Janis.”

The conversation was over. Hobart left the room. He felt like he should be happy, but usually when a position opened up it was immediately assigned to some unemployed shmuck until they got fired and the cycle would continue. So it was a little strange. Hobart didn't feel like he had really been promoted. He had been moved more sideways than up. Data Management sounded cushy though. A little time off and a comparatively relaxing job was what Hobart wanted. As he left the waiting room he saw the old lady get up and head into the office. Shame, he thought. The hall outside the office was grey, stretching off left and right. Hobart was in the administrative offices for the sector. There were colored lines on the walls, faded and cracked with age, acting as a guide to the various other areas. Data management was somewhere on the floor below this one, Bart knew. He started to walk left, passing by a couple of grey-clad couriers, carrying messages back and forth. The message tubes had been out for over a year

and a half now, and the whole courier profession had sprung up around that fact. “When they get the tubes fixed, those boys are going to be in trouble,” thought Bart, sighing. He reached the end of the wall and opened the small blue metal door to the left of the big doors of the freight elevator. Bart had never seen the elevator operate in his lifetime, and when he had once asked about it, he was told that it was deemed to not be cost-effective.

Bart walked down the flights of stairs, turning a bend in the stairwell. While the hall on the administrative floor may have been fairly empty, the stairwell bustled with activity, as men and women in all different color uniforms went up and down. There were even a couple of small stands, the owners of which were allowed to hawk their goods, provided they gave management a small cut of the profits. The regulations said that all food and drink on site were supposed to be provided by management for security reasons, but it was a lot cheaper to just let small vendors do it for them. Bart would have gotten a snack, his paunch showing his affinity for them, but the anxiety that the promotion had created made food the last thing on his mind. Bart pushed open the door to the Data floor.

There were light blue-clad figures moving purposefully all through the hallway. Bart tapped one of them, a young woman with blond hair, on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, miss, but which of these doors leads to the floor administrator’s office?”

“Fourth door on the left,” and the woman left, walking quickly to wherever she needed to be. Well, huh, thought Hobart, things sure seem to be busy down here. He walked to the described door, and peeked his head through. There was no anteroom like in Gallager's office, just a metal desk and some shelves. Bart stepped in and closed the door behind him. There was a man sitting behind the desk, with blond hair going grey. He wore a severe and thin moustache, and had an air of authority to him. He wore a uniform the same light blue as the ones worn by the people Bart had seen outside. The only difference was that the man behind the desk’s uniform had a brown stripe running vertically along the left side, and a name tag reading “ADM.”

“Uhhhh, sir, I’ve been sent here, uhh, promoted in fact, to here.” Bart felt a little nervous. When he entered the room the man hadn’t given him the slightest notice, absorbed in whatever work he was doing. It felt like an hour, but the man finished penciling something in and looked up.

“Oh, you must be the man Gallager sent.” His voice was high pitched, but seemed to have an air of snobbery to it.

“Yes, sir, I’m Hobart.”

“Tell me, Hobart, where were you employed before you came here?”

“Maintenance, sir, sewage to be precise.”

“I can smell it on you from here. You're going to want to get a Data Management uniform immediately, we can't have you working around delicate machinery in that.”

“What exactly will I be doing, sir?”

“You're in the ducts below the server room, shifting the ice. Now get going.” That didn't sound like the relaxing work Hobart had expected. Wasn't he supposed to be sitting behind a desk by now?

Hobart started to walk to the door, but then turned before opening it. “Where can I get a uniform? Sir.”

“Last door on the end.”

Hobart went through the door and into the bustle of the hallway. Dodging his way through the crowd, Hobart made his way to the door. It was a plain grey. Grey was really a theme down in these hallways, Hobart thought. Any bits of color were flaking off the walls at this point. Hobart opened the door and walked in. There was a small desk in the center of the room, and surrounding it blank grey boxes stretched to the ceiling. The boxes were overflowing with papers, and piles of computer sheets were littering any bits of the floor not occupied by the boxes. Behind the small desk was an even smaller woman. She was in the light blue uniform everyone else on the floor wore. She was sorting a stack of papers into two piles.

“What're the piles?” Hobart was curious.

“One of them goes into the piles on the floor, never to be read again, and the other goes into the boxes to never be read again.”

“They don't burn it or anything?”

“If they did, the paper would actually have some use, and they wouldn't be happy about that.”

“Who's they?”

“They are the people who pay for you and I to be employed, the ever charitable, the all gracious. It makes them feel better if records are kept somewhere. Somebody once explained it to me. It had to do with accountability, or who gets blamed. Chances are if anything ever actually happened they couldn't tell shore from lake.”

Hobart wrinkled his forehead in thought. “Hmm, you learn something everyday. I need to get a uniform.”

“The closet behind me,” said the woman. Hobart hadn't paid too much attention to the woman's voice until then, but he finally noticed how young it sounded.

“Uhh, where?”

“Oh, yeah.” The woman got up from her desk and walked to one of the stacks of boxes. She started to shift the tower from where it was standing. Hobart walked over and helped her move the boxes.

“So, what kind of records are kept here?”

“You know, you’re probably the first person to have actually cared enough to ask.”

“Well, just curious.” Hobart blushed.

“The records are about all sorts of things. Who was on duty when and where, for example, and also anything the machines were asked to do.” By then the boxes had been moved out of the way.

“There’s plenty of uniforms in there, just find one your size.” the woman said. Hobart suited himself up in one of the blue jumpsuits, pulling it easily over his old uniform.

“Thanks for your help. Say, I never got your name?”

“Cheryl.” The woman smiled. “It’s nice to get a new face in here every once in a while. If you ever have some spare time, or need help, stop in. Chances are I’ll be here, sorting more papers.”

“Well, then, have a good day, Cheryl.”

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Hobart found himself down in front of a door, made of steel, with a wheel in the middle of it. Next to the door, in the small grey concrete room he had made his way to, after a few questions as to where he was going, was a desk. There sure were a lot of desks, Hobart reflected. The man behind the desk looked up.

“Ah, you’re our new man. We’ve been short for a while now, so no time for small talk. Take a sack and a map, drop the ice off at the points marked.” The man gestured to a stack of brown bags. Hobart picked one up. It was incredibly heavy, and there was a small and a big pocket. In the small pocket there was a plastic map that looked like a machine diagram. The man behind the desk rose and walked over to the metal door. He turned the wheel and the door opened with a screech. Immediately, cool air blasted into the room. Inside was what looked like a maze. The floor was a good three feet down from the door, and the two were connected by concrete steps. This was because the floor had a foot of water, with small chunks of ice floating in it. The concrete inside formed walls, in a grid like pattern. Stepping inside, Hobart noticed a rack with several high pairs of rubber boots. It looked like there was space for another dozen.

“Grab a pair. At the end of the hour you’ll hear a ding and you can come to the door for a break. The door has to remain shut for cooling reasons, but if you knock I’ll hear you.” Hobart

took the closest pair of boots and put them on. They fit, albeit uncomfortably over his grey utilitarian work boots. He stepped down into the water. Even through his boots he could feel the chill. It was cold. He walked to the right, looking at the map. Behind him the door swung shut. Looking down the grids, Hobart noticed that they went on for a long way. The room, or whatever it was, was clearly immense. Hobart looked up. Above him he noticed that the roof was a grating, and as he watched he saw a man walk across it, boots clanking on the metal. The concrete grid went up until it met the grating to form a floor. Hobart could hear the hum and whirring of machinery above him. Looking down again, Hobart wondered what exactly he was supposed to be doing. Looking, again, down the long concrete rows, Hobart saw someone moving. Hobart strode down the rows towards the figure. As he walked he noticed that the walls were marked with numbers, and at periodic intervals there was a metal hatch in the wall. Hobart was soon within speaking distance of the figure, who turned out to be a man.

“Hello.” As Hobart spoke, the man turned his gaze up, and to his left.

“Hello. Are you the new guy?” The man’s voice sounded foreign to Hobart, with an unrecognizable accent.

“Yeah. You wouldn’t mind telling me what exactly this place is? I’m Hobart, by the way.” Hobart proffered his hand. The man took it and shook it.

“I’m Martine, and I’m the manager for this shift. You mind if I call you Bart?”

“No problems with that. So what is it that we do with this,” Hobart shifted the bag to his other shoulder, “this stuff?”

“It’s ice, and not the kind from the drinking water. You put it into the vents, which are behind the slots in the wall, which run under the machines above us, so that they don’t overheat. The water melts and spills out onto the floor, so yeah, the boots.”

“What are the vents made of?”

“Oh, odd question. It’s some sort of plastic, I think. It does a good job of insulating, but without the ice it might overheat or melt.”

“What do the machines do?”

“Not entirely sure. One of the guys that’s a higher level manager once told me it had to do with running the air through the houses of the upper levels.”

“Running the air through?”

“Keeping them cool, keeping them warm, whatever they want, I guess.”

“So, I just put the ice in?”

“Yeah. It’s a simple job but they need people constantly refilling them. It’s make-work until there’s a higher up position available for most people.”

“What about you, you’re a manager for us hopefuls down here.”

“Me? I’m at the end of my promotion ladder. And besides it was this or go push papers, and frankly it’s nicer down here, when you’re at my rank I can just enjoy the cool air. You’d better get to work. Just refer to your map and you should find where you need to put the ice.”

“I have to ask, Martine, why is this place called Data Management if that’s not really what goes on here?”

“This place used to be just about data, but as the departments were consolidated we had to take on more and more jobs. The machines above us are only a small number of the total ones in the department.” That explained where Hobart’s desk job had gone.

“So, what’s the work day like?”

“This time of year it’s real busy. We’re getting near winter so the AC goes up and down, up and down. Taxes the machines, so expect a little overtime.”

“Thanks, Martine, I’d best be off.” Hobart made his trudging way through the icy water. Damn, it was cold. Hobart looked at his pack, all fifty pounds of it, and wondered. Maybe he would get that time off. But first he had to get Cheryl’s help.

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Thomas was moving a crate. Quite a few crates, actually. He had been getting ready to go on patrol, to show that the authorities were keeping a watchful eye for danger, when he had been volunteered. He now found himself in a sweltering warehouse, moving boxes of cargo from point a to b. And stacking them nicely. That had been specified. Thomas had his regulation coat, badge, and vest off and was working in his sweat-stained tank-top, and his dark brown pants. He had only been working for an hour and already he was dripping with perspiration. Rather abruptly, the large grey doors secluded in one corner of the warehouse slammed open. Thomas looked up. He couldn’t see who had just come in, but he could hear them. It was probably the chief.

“So I told him..... matter will be..... not a problem..... best man on job..... no, no problems.” It sounded like the chief. Thomas sighed and put on his vest and jacket, and tucked the somewhat grubby badge into his jacket pocket. Hopefully the chief didn’t ask about it. His uniform and equipment, badge included, had to be perfect. Couldn’t go on the job looking anything less than ship-shape. Thomas resisted the urge to spit. Looking good for his betters, who didn’t even bother to give him a second glance. Around a stack of pallets and suspicious green crates, labeled “Soylent”, came the chief, a morbidly obese man attired in a uniform, far, far too small. Beside him was a man whom Thomas didn’t recognize. The unrecognized man

wore a blue uniform, and had a pair of black glasses on his face. He seemed to be squinting. The security men were the only ones with a multiple piece uniform, all the other departments used multi-colored jumpsuits.

“Thomas,” huffed the chief. Thomas had to bite back the urge to respond snarkily. Thomas didn’t like the chief. He was uptight about the rules but waived them for himself. How he got fat on his salary, Thomas could only wonder, but he always assumed the chief was up to something crooked. Thomas had even heard that the chief had to get his clothes specially made, as the standard issue ones were far too small. The chief’s actual name was something along the lines of Mort. If Thomas remembered correctly.

“Thomas, this man here is from the, uh...” The chief looked to the man.

“I’m from Data Management.” The man extended his hand to Thomas. His voice was nasal, but not annoyingly so. Thomas took his hand and shook it.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Thomas.” Thomas turned to the chief. “If I can ask, chief, why are you here?”

“Why doesn’t he tell you.” The chief gestured at the man.

“There’s been an accident in our department.”

“Aren’t there any other officers to handle this, chief?” It seemed like a fitting question, given that Thomas had been picked at random from all the officers lounging at the station to go to the warehouse. Why couldn’t another officer have been asked to handle this?

“No, everyone’s been called up to patrol a party, keep things civil. You aren’t up there because you’re in here.” And you aren’t there because you couldn’t get there if you wanted to, thought Thomas. The chief was lucky he could squeeze into one of the cars.

“Alright, sir, can I get more details?” It was the blue uniformed man’s turn to speak.

“There was a, uh, well, we assume a user error, in the cooling of the machines that are used to regulate air conditioning for some the upper levels. We’re lucky this happened during a party, so most people aren’t home to notice.” Thomas noticed that the man fidgeted. He was uncomfortable.

“We just need you to make a routine check, Thomas, for forms sake, of course,” said the chief.

“No problem, sir. What should I do about these boxes?”

“Just leave them, someone else will take care of them. Let’s go to the car.”

Thomas drove, dropping the chief back off at the station, and then following the man in blue’s instructions, he made his way to one of the many complexes of grey concrete, squat and undecorated. There were windows, dirty and set high, near the roofs of the buildings. Thomas

parked the car in front of the building. There was no need to go far to find somewhere to park the car, all of the workers within reached the building via the underground trams that radiated out from the rail station Thomas had arrived at. They walked through the door, following a hallway until they reached a stairwell.

“No elevator?”

“No elevator,” said the blue uniformed man, “It’s thirteen flights down.” As Thomas and the as yet unnamed man went lower and lower, each beginning to breathe a little heavily, the stairwells became more and more populated. As they reached the twelfth sub-basement the stairs were positively teeming, with individuals in all colors of uniforms going to and fro, some idly, and others with purpose. The stairs were grey, like everything, although there were faded posters on the walls. Looking closer, Thomas noticed they were propaganda, like that which he had seen earlier. He didn’t waste much time looking at them after that. The man in blue turned.

“We’re here. I’m Oakley by the way. I don’t think I caught yours.”

“I’m Thomas. Let’s go.” They went through the door into an equally busy hallway, although Thomas noticed that all the people he saw were in the same uniform as Oakley, although a few had vertical or horizontal stripes. Oakley led Thomas down the corridor, pushing through the throng. Oakley led Thomas to one of the several doors against the left wall and gestured for him to enter.

“Are you coming?”

“No, I was just sent as a courier.” Oakley turned and disappeared into the crowd. I guess they do things here the security way, thought Thomas. You there, we have a job for you, the chief would say, and off you were, stacking boxes. Thomas pushed open the door, revealing a rather plain room with a desk and some shelves. Behind the desk was a man with greyish-blond hair and a moustache. His uniform had a vertical brown stripe and he had a name tag reading “ADM”. Thomas didn’t bother to wait for the man to look up from his work.

“I’ve been sent by the chief.” The man looked up, his scowl quickly turning to a rather forced looking smile. Hobart disliked him even before he opened his mouth.

“Oh. Yeah, sure.” Thomas wasn’t sure if the man was doubting him or if he always sounded like that. “I’m the Administrator of Data Management Clarke. One of them at least. I’m guessing you’re here about the accident?”

“Yes, I’ve been told it has something to do with the air conditioning systems.” Clarke looked past Thomas as he talked. When Thomas glanced behind him all he saw was the closed door.

“Have a seat.” Clarke gestured to a seat and Thomas sat in it. It wasn’t particularly

comfortable, and it looked like it had been pulled out of storage for just this occasion. Thomas noticed, with some satisfaction, that the chair was a light green. It was a pleasant color and he rarely ever saw it. It made him think of his childhood when things were better. Growing up, things seemed to be staying the same, but only in hindsight could Thomas tell that they had been changing. Things had gotten worse, and then worse still. Some people thought that the only way to go was up, but Thomas wasn't sure. Clarke's voice snapped Thomas back to the present. Clarke was leaning in towards Thomas, and speaking in a low tone of voice.

"You heard this was an accident, right?"

"Yes?" There was a question in Thomas's voice. He felt he already knew what Clarke was about to say.

"On paper this was an accident. We aren't so sure though. When you take a look you'll see." Clarke sounded uneasy, like he was sharing a secret. "You know, I shouldn't even tell you this, but I felt like you should know. Let's go take a look." Clarke stood and walked around his desk to the door.

"What do you mean?" asked Thomas.

"I'll explain when we're down there, too many people are about out here. Let's go, I'll lead the way." Following Clarke, Thomas was led down the hallway outside the door to a small set of stairs. In front of the top of the stairs was a "CAUTION: AREA RESTRICTED" sign. Clarke moved the sign aside and walked down the stairs. Thomas followed. At the bottom was a small concrete room with a desk in one corner and a pile of satchels in the other. There was no one behind the desk, and the room smelled odd.

As they walked down the stairs Thomas asked:

"Where are the ice workers right now? You had to have sent them somewhere."

"Can't do anything with the broken machines. We sent them home, for today at least," said Clarke.

"The smell is the water, if you're wondering. It's pure, at least compared to the drinking stuff." Clarke opened a door set into the wall by twisting a metal wheel. It creaked open. The first thing Thomas noticed was the cold. It was usually fairly warm, and Thomas felt himself shiver a little. It was an odd feeling, one he hadn't felt in a while. There were steps down from the door, with the bottom one submerged in water, which looked freezing. Clarke stepped in, looked left and right, then found something Thomas couldn't see behind the door. It was a pair of rubber boots. He handed them back to Thomas and then started pulling on another pair.

"So we can get through the water." Clarke put his boots on and stepped down into the water. Thomas followed. As soon as the boots entered the water, he began to feel his feet go

numb. The shoes and clothes issued to Thomas weren't designed for the cold. They were warm weather clothes, since that was what the weather had been like for years. Clarke began to wade through the water and Thomas followed him, trying not to notice the cold. Clarke led Thomas through what appeared to be a maze of concrete walls. Looking up, Thomas noticed that the ceiling was made of grates. There appeared to be dormant machinery above Thomas. Ahead, Clarke stopped before a vent in the wall.

"In here," said Clarke. Thomas looked in. Inside was what looked like a tunnel leading up. It was made of plastic, and warped and disfigured, clearly melted. A bit of the plastic had frozen into a droplet. Thomas reached out and broke it off. He held it up and looked at it. It was still a little warm. It smelled like burnt plastic.

"What problem did this cause exactly?" asked Thomas.

"Well, the melting goes all the way up into one of the machines, and some of the internal systems got fried. We think."

"You think?"

"Well, we can't open it up and look. The machines were designed to never require maintenance. So, uh... no one knows how to fix it."

"How are you going to get the system back up then?"

"Well, we have a new machine coming. Not new, more like a loan from a less essential department. Until we get it we'll have to run on reduced capacity."

"Meaning?"

"Some people will get air conditioning, others won't. Ice workers are out until then. We need to do some background checking."

"So. What caused this?" Thomas saw dread in Clarke's eyes. He had been waiting for this question. Clarke looked up, stopped and listened for a second, then spoke.

"An error in the cooling of the systems, probably user based. It led to overheating which melted the plastic, and then damaged the internals of the computer." Clarke stopped and listened again, and then leaned in towards Thomas.

"We cool the systems with ice, there isn't a way that the systems could have overheated or anything. You can feel how cold it is in here. There isn't even a reason to cool the systems, they do just fine on their own in this specific capacity."

"Why do you use the ice then? And why plastic?" The entire thing seemed shoddily designed to Thomas. Plastic wasn't much of a conductor in comparison to metal as far as he knew.

"When these systems were moved to our department, we were given a grant to build

appropriate facilities. I wasn't a manager then, but it looks like they spent as little as they could and then the rest of the money was, well, I don't know what happened to the money." Thomas thought he knew what had happened. It wasn't like corruption was unheard of. It was common practice in security. Thomas didn't participate, not because he had ethical concerns, but because he wasn't important enough to warrant being bribed.

"Go on."

"The ice is pure, not like the drinking water. It's expensive, but we have justified reason for needing it, the reason being cooling. At the end of the day we usually have a fair amount of ice left over, so it's disposed of. People pay a lot for pure water, but we're lucky we get such a good deal." Clarke wasn't very good at being subtle, but he didn't need to be. Thomas was getting the message. A bribe was a bribe, worded either way.

"So, what if this isn't an accident?" Thomas asked.

"Uh, we'd probably be extensively audited. We'd be investigated for any possible security breaches, and some of our funding and privileges may be revoked. We might lose these systems to another department. And the funding. And the ice."

"So it's not something we want to happen," Thomas said.

"Well, it's your job to find out if this is an accident or not, right?"

"It's definitely...an accident, but we need to check evidence first. Are there records?" Thomas said. He felt that he could stop dancing around the subject, now that he knew Clarke's opinion. Clarke's eyes brightened.

"There is, come with me. Upper Management would be excited to find out which employee messed up. They reward quality control highly. A lot of them only got promoted because they knew how to work under-budget, and make a profit. This could be my way up." Clarke led Thomas back up the stairs and down along to the end of the bustling corridor. He opened the door. Inside were boxes upon boxes, with paper spilling out, and loose papers covering the floor. In the back of the room a desk was tucked against the wall. Behind the desk was a woman. She looked up.

"What do you want, Clarke?" Clarke ignored the tone of her voice.

"I'm here with Officer Thomas. He's checking on the accident, and we need the records from that time period."

"Alrighty then. Let me look. You can help, look for a crate with yesterday's date on a label on its side." Together the three of them searched through the boxes. They spent about fifteen minutes searching until Thomas finally found it. He brought it to the woman's desk.

"What are we looking for?" asked Thomas.

“We didn’t discover the uh, accident, until this morning. We don’t refill the ice until then, and someone saw the damage on their rounds in the morning. So look for the records timestamped at 9:30 and we’ll know who was down there.” Clarke turned to the woman. “Cheryl, don’t you also have an employment record? We should probably check to see if anyone new has been hired recently.”

“You seem to have thought a lot of this out,” said Thomas.

“Yeah,” said Clarke.

“I’m missing the records for the past week,” said Cheryl.

“Look again,” said Clarke.

“There’s still nothing, Clarke.” Clarke looked distressed.

“Get the 9:30 records, we only need them.” Thomas flipped through the documents in the box. Nothing was marked 9:30.

“There’s nothing here.”

“What? You can’t be serious. If there aren’t any papers...” Clarke’s voice trailed off.

“Look, Clarke, there’s nothing here, so I have to file this as an accident, responsible person unknown. I’m sorry, but if there’s nothing further to do, I better be going.”

“What, no.. you can’t, if this.... isn’t an accident, we need to know who did it.” Clarke looked defeated.

“I’m sorry, Clarke. I can show myself out.” Thomas didn’t need the bribe. He wasn’t scrupulous, but people like Clarke rubbed him the wrong way. And besides, Thomas wasn’t enthusiastic to let whoever did it get the axe. He had to call it an accident either way, since there was no evidence.

On the surface it was cool. There was a mild breeze. Thomas looked up. There were clouds. Thomas climbed into his car, and made his way back to the station.

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Hobart stood on the edge of the railway, waiting for the train. It was cloudy, and the wind chilled the air. He shivered. He was still wearing his blue uniform and the cold cut right through him. He tapped his foot, anxiously waiting for the train to arrive. Around him, sitting on the benches and standing, were the other ice workers. They talked among themselves wondering why they had been sent home. Hobart was nervous, but he felt like things could be looking up. He had covered his tracks, his job was safe. He had Cheryl to thank for that. He had acted impulsively, mostly for time off. The station rumbled and creaked as the rail car came to a stop. Hobart got in and found a seat in the back, near a window. Hobart looked at the papers he was

clutching in his hand. He wondered why he still held on to them. The train was soon full, but no one sat near Hobart. Outside the window the landscape began to blur. Hobart watched it idly. A drop of water hit the window, and then another. Hobart dropped the papers to the ground, opened the window and looked out. From the dark clouds above him there came sheets of water. Hobart let the rain touch his face, and then leaned back in. Around him people were excitedly talking amongst themselves. Hobart took the papers, gathering them in one hand. He put his hand out the window, and after a second, he let the papers go. Things were starting to look up, thought Hobart.