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Lost Helix

By

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Chapter 1: The Piranha and the Goldfish

"What do you get when you cross a piranha with a goldfish?"

Coreman refused to even acknowledge the absurd question as he stood properly positioned to board the elevator. His trainee, however, stood to his left, blocking any riders who may need to exit. The doors opened to an empty car but that didn't excuse Hochstein's inefficiency.

As Coreman boarded ahead of him, Hochstein followed, answering his own question. "A piranha, because he's gonna eat that goldfish." The doors closed. "This guy," continued Hochstein, "he's a goldfish."

Coreman continued ignoring him and tapped the icon for residential level nine. The elevator shot them out of the corporate center and into the tube connecting it to the rest of Black Mountain Mining Commercial Space Station IV. While Hochstein gazed out over what he'd described to Coreman as "the magnificent spill of impressionism that is the Milky Way," Coreman kept his eyes on the ascending numbers above the door, as was appropriate for an orderly elevator ride. Despite Hochstein's assertions, the universe was not *art*. It was a chaotic pool of raw materials in need of purpose.

Behind the elevator's clear tube, forty stories of craggy asteroid connected the red, disk-shaped corporate center to the giant, white box that was the rest of BMS IV. This station had grown out of one of

the earliest mining settlements in Stone River, one started on that asteroid. Dormant drill holes now peppered its face, its valuable minerals long ago extracted and turned into useful objects. Those minerals and that asteroid now had purpose.

Hochstein huffed at Coreman's silence. "He lived with that woman for almost three years. Bringing him into our division is a bad idea."

"He turned her in."

Hochstein loosened his blue and gold tie. "He doesn't know that he turned her in."

"All the better. It shows that Fletcher wasn't working with Brennan."

The elevator zoomed into the central shaft of the massive metal box that was made of thousands of smaller metal boxes and filled with tens of thousands of people. As the elevator came to a stop, Coreman moved to the right side of the door, the optimal position for an efficient exit. He spared a moment for a stern glance at Hochstein. "We have attended to Brennan and Director Bradley has approved Fletcher—end of conversation."

The doors opened and the Agents stepped out into a stark white corridor with a white metal floor. Two kids rushed by shooting each other with toy versions of the gun hidden under Coreman's black jacket. One kid fired three shots at Coreman's head, two more than necessary. Coreman fired back with his finger, a half smile stretched over one leathery cheek. That kid was certainly no goldfish. Stone River needed more like him because, out here on the farthest edge of human exploration, people like that kid, people like Coreman, they *were* civilization.

Coreman marched out ahead while Hochstein merely meandered. Reaching residential unit SJ-923b, Coreman turned sharply and stabbed a stiff finger at the approaching Hochstein. "You're here to learn. You can answer any technical question but that's all." As Hochstein finally joined him at the door, Coreman waved his hand over the buzzer. Someone inside stirred. "Tech, that's all." Coreman tightened his tie and put on his Public Relations smile.

Derik had called Norma's work. He'd called Security. It felt like he'd called everyone that he and Norma had ever met. Now Derik paced through puddles of toys scattered around the metal floor of his white apartment, not sure who to call next. Derik's brain had become locked in a loop, as had his body. He traveled the length of his apartment in an elliptical orbit around his little boy, DJ, and the brushed metal table that divided the living room from the kitchenette. Derik paced until he stubbed his toe on a model of an egg-shaped mining vessel. Foot in hand, he dropped onto the blue couch.

On the metal table before him, a small box projected a hologram of the news into the air. The anchor shrank away while the image of a damaged mining vessel took its place. Derik's eyes grew wider and wider. There'd been another accident. His heart raced. Then the door rang.

In boxers and a worn-out t-shirt, Derik stumbled through the toys and opened his apartment door to find two men in company approved business suits. That couldn't be good. Derik gripped the doorframe as if bracing for a tsunami and asked, "Are you here about Norma?"

"I am Agent Coreman and this is Agent Hochstein," he said with a shallow smile. "Are you Derik Fletcher?"

Derik leaned at the tall slender Agent. "Is she okay? Was she on that rig? Her name is Norma Brennan."

Agent Hochstein looked away but Agent Coreman maintained unwavering eye contact as he asked, "Rig?"

Derik stepped aside so they could see the image hovering over the holovision in his living room. The projected hologram showed a McKenna owned mining rig, not unlike the toy that had attacked his toe. A rupture ran down one side of the large, white egg as it clung to its asteroid by one smoking leg. In the background, an anchorman described the scene, "a software error turned tragic with as many as twenty dead." Derik put the holovision on mute.

"Norma hasn't come home and no one knows anything. Did Food Services have anyone out there?" Derik picked at an imaginary itch on the back of his hand. "Her name is Norma Brennan. Was Norma Brennan on that rig?"

Hochstein started to reach for Derik's shoulder but pulled his hand back. "Our food services wouldn't be on a McKenna rig."

Derik raked his fingers over his scalp. The Agent was right. It was a stupid question. Derik needed to get his head together.

Agent Coreman craned his face into view. "We're here on behalf of Black Mountain, Mr. Fletcher. We're here about that unauthorized access you detected in your files. Can we come in, please?"

Derik went back in and dropped onto his couch. As they followed, Derik silently clung to the couch's gold piping, his eyes stretched wide with worry. Where could Norma be? People vanished out here all the time. There were so many seedy sections of this space station where the unemployed did whatever it took to survive and plenty of airlocks where someone could jettison anything or anyone. Three floors up, a whole residential level was under renovation. Multi-use spacecraft outfitted with mandibles had been plucking off three-thousand square foot apartment modules all month. They were visible from every window in the station. The remaining modules had to be full of people with no jobs and no possibility of getting jobs—or of even getting off the station.

But that wasn't the only way people went missing; some simply left. But Norma wouldn't just leave Derik Jr.; their son was the center of her universe. And she didn't have that kind of money anyway. Did she? At least Derik knew that Norma wouldn't take the stowaway's route out of Stone River, hopping from ship to ship to illegally cross the void. Norma wouldn't even know how to do that. Would she? Derik wasn't sure. The more he thought about it, the less sure he was about everything.

Derik placed a finger on the St. Barbara medal around his neck. The ancient talisman was supposed to protect workers with dangerous jobs. Norma had brought a whole box of them with her when she came out to Stone River. She'd given one to every miner that she'd met until she gave her last one to

Derik, the one that she'd meant to keep for herself. That was when they started talking, then dating, and soon they were living together but now...

Agent Coreman beamed another smile at him. "That's some boy you got there."

Derik's mind suddenly snapped back onto the couch. The two Agents sat across from him on metal kitchen chairs.

"I said, that's some boy you got there." Coreman continued to smile. "His name is Derik Junior, yes? That *Junior* shows that you're committed to your son, that you are a man of commitment. I like that."

"Yeah, thanks. DJ's big for seventeen months, huh?" Derik's spine reflexively straightened as he glanced at Derik Jr. banging away on an overturned bucket with two toy shuttles. "With those arms, DJ's gonna grow up to be a ZeroBall player for sure."

Hochstein shrugged. "Looks like DJ wants to be a musician."

Agent Coreman leaned into Derik's field of view. "About that that unauthorized access you detected in your files, the company is very grateful for your diligence. You never know what the pirates out here are going to do next."

Derik brought his full focus back to Agent Coreman. "That was a pirate breach?"

"Yes, and if not for you, that McKenna rig could have been a Black Mountain rig and we at Black Mountain recognize and appreciate that." Coreman gestured toward the lingering image on Derik's holovision. "That is why we have a new job for you, a promotion to a special division. We can't tell you everything about it—you would have to wait until your formal security paperwork was processed and so forth—but I can tell you that it is in information security—a special branch of information security."

Derik squinted at Coreman. "Like counter-espionage, keeping other companies out of our servers or something?"

"Or something," chuckled Hochstein under his breath, but not far enough.

Coreman quickly spoke over him. "There is paperwork first. Assistant Agent Hochstein can tell you about the types of software and languages you will be working with. But first let me tell you that this is an employment opportunity unlike any other in Stone River."

That's when Agent Coreman went in for the hard sell. Derik soon stopped listening and his mind drifted back to Norma. Where was she? How could he find her? Then it hit him; maybe he could find her! Information Security was a haphazard situation for Black Mountain. Some things were locked down tight, like the shuttle manifests, but other things were almost wide open, things like the security cameras.

"I'll take it."

Agent Coreman stopped talking and blinked.

"I'll take the job," repeated Derik as he stood and inched toward the door. "Just email me the whatever and stuff. I can't wait to learn more but DJ needs to be fed and changed and I'm sure Norma is gonna show up any minute so if you don't mind..." Derik opened the door.

After some handshakes and backslaps, the Agents were finally gone.

Derik immediately sat down and switched his holovision over to the apartment's built-in computers. Within minutes, he had total control of the residential level security cameras. Digging through the footage, Derik found the start of Norma's trail. She'd left the apartment shortly after he had that morning, leaving DJ with Mrs. Schumer next-door, right where Derik found him nine hours later. Norma was wearing her Food Services uniform and had no bags with her.

Derik tracked Norma from camera to camera, following her ten decks down into the Waste Management sections, some of which were being refitted. Norma entered a meeting-room module that had been disconnected from the network. Dead modules like that one were cannibalized by maintenance crews before being plucked from the structure for recycling. From what Derik could see on the footage, this one still had all of its wall plates and electronics in place.

That's where Derik lost Norma. She went in but never came out. While DJ slept beside him on the couch, Derik spent the rest of the night fast forwarding through file after file, pressing on long after his eyes had burned black rings around their sockets. But no camera on the station ever saw Norma again.

When morning came, Derik left DJ with Mrs. Schumer and headed for the meeting-room itself. He wove through the dank and sometimes dark corridors ripe with garbage, past the management offices

and the waste processing modules, until he found it. Staring through the door's tiny porthole, Derik saw nothing but blackness and stars. All three thousand square meters of module was gone.

Norma was gone. He didn't know where and he didn't know why. All Derik knew was that, even if Norma was still alive somewhere, she wasn't coming back; none of the hundreds of people who went missing from Stone River each year ever came back.

Derik fell against the door and sank to the floor. His guts sank farther, sucked into a black hole with the rest of his life. Pressing his back against the door into nowhere, Derik gazed down the dingy white corridor vanishing into gloom. What could've happened to her? How would he explain it to DJ? How would he take care of DJ alone? The impossibility of it all enveloped him, releasing a shuddering sigh through his body.

Hearing his own sickly sound, Derik forced himself to his feet. That was enough of that. Derik took a long slow breath. Norma was gone and there was nothing he could do to change it. Crying about it wasn't helping anyone, certainly not DJ. DJ needed a dad, not a blubbering lump. Though he wasn't sure how, Derik decided that he would take care of DJ alone. He just would.

Derik wiped his face and stared out that empty window once more. From now on, no matter what, his entire focus in life would be looking out for DJ. Derik would teach his son how to survive out here and then someday, somehow, he would find a way to get his son out of Stone River and back to the real civilization. He just would.

##

Sixteen years later...

DJ's dad was away again, upgrading someone's software, auditing someone's systems, or doing whatever emergency fix Agent Coreman needed him to do this time. DJ really didn't know and really didn't care. It all meant the same to him, frozen meals for one for the fifth night in a row. The vitamin enriched, mostly synthetic meals were why DJ had grown to a healthy six feet tall but the flavor-vacant,

pseudo-food was why DJ had also grown into a bit of a beanpole, not nearly meaty enough for something like ZeroBall.

Tonight it had been reduced-fat roast beef with brown sauce, or so said the label. Whatever it was, it wasn't sitting so well. DJ tried to ignore it and focus on his music but he could feel it dragging down his rhythm as his fingers worked the sixty, dark blue buttons and twelve, red slides on his black Rigozy Data Strummer stringless guitar. DJ's wasn't a real Rigozy; it was only a student-grade knockoff but it had a distortion bar and a hard drive big enough to download almost any sound profile. Tonight's profile was heavy metal guitar and the song was one of DJ's originals, White Walls. It was just DJ and his friend, Paul, playing together in the Unclaimed Youths Ward's Recreation Room Eight. Paul was doing his best on drums but DJ's guitar was carrying both the melody and the rhythm.

As the last notes reverberated around the white room the lights blinked, indicating that their time in was running out. Paul stuffed his sticks in the cargo pocket of his blue and gold coveralls and started collapsing his drum kit into its octagonal carrying-case. "I keep telling you, you should quit playing with a hack like me and find some guys to form a real band," said Paul. "You're good enough; you could play your way out of this place."

DJ almost laughed. A lot of blackness separated the mineral-rich Stone River Asteroid Belt from the rest of civilization—as did a very expensive, one-way ticket. Some miners saved their whole lives for that ticket and still couldn't afford it. "There's no money in it," mumbled DJ. "This is just a hobby."

"That's your dad talking."

DJ scowled. "Screw you, dude. Like, how am I going to make money on my music from out here?"

Paul folded his arms at DJ. "You know how. You just gotta get over your stage fright."

DJ looked away. "It's just a hobby, dude."

The timer on Recreation Room Eight ran out and the door slid into the wall. The next group of kids stood in the white hallway, impatiently gripping their instruments. All four wore coveralls and grow-shoes, just like Paul's. And all four glared at DJ while ignoring Paul. This section of BMS IV was

reserved for kids wearing grow-shoes; the grey-blue blobs grew with your feet, lasted forever, and got you beat up at school. They were what the company gave to kids in the system, kids stranded out here without parents. DJ wasn't really allowed to be in this section but he was with Paul and rules tended to bend around Paul, the high school ZeroBall hero. Paul's fellow system kids glared at DJ all the same.

DJ slung his stringless guitar over his back and slunk out of the room. He carefully crept past them and stood in the recessed doorway of the Virtual Reality Game Room, where they used to play *Four Corner Brawl* before the room "broke" and got shutdown. In the I-suck-at-this mode, *Brawl* painted a target for the player on the virtual opponent's chin. And you didn't click a button to throw the punch; you threw the punch—you only hit air but you actually threw *the right cross* with your own fist, bonus points for good form.

DJ rarely got the bonus and never tried to replicate it in real life—but it seemed that Paul kept trying to provide him with opportunities to do so. While DJ cowered against the locked VR Room door, Paul continued to close his drum kit slower and slower. The harder they glared, the slower he went. Why did Paul always have to push his luck—and DJ's?

Barry, the leader of this band of the Unclaimed, stepped forward. With his black bangs clinging to his wrinkled forehead, he pointed at the blinking number over the door. "Time, jack-knob!"

"Indeed it is." With his kit already collapsed, Paul folded his arms and stood there. "I guess I'm eating into your time the way you're eating into my happy-joy-joy mood by being jerks to my friend. I feel you owe my guest an apology."

All four of the waiting kids groaned in unison. Barry threw his hands up. "Screw this. Get him!"

The boys rushed in and tackled Paul. Paul tried to wiggle free. While DJ continued to cower, the kids hoisted Paul by his arms and legs and tossed him into the hall. Paul landed hard on his butt. His drum kit followed, sliding across the white metal floor and into the white metal wall beside DJ.

As the door slid shut, Paul collected himself and his kit from the floor. "Well, that was fun."

DJ shoved his hands into his pockets and grumbled, "You're gonna get both our butts kicked."

"So, you're gonna be a data jockey like dear ol' dad?" continued Paul as if their conversation hadn't been interrupted.

"What?"

Paul leaned in, his eyes bulging. "*Have you figured out what you want to be when you grow up?* You're blowing off that talent I wish I had. I hope it's for something better than a life of searching for your donor mom. High School is coming to an end. It's time to make a plan before Black Mountain makes one for you."

"You're one to talk. Your plan is suicide... stowing away... insane!"

Paul waved the words away with the back of his hand. "People do it all the time."

"And they get killed all the time. Even if you don't die just trying to get out to the domes, do you really think that you'll get all the way to Middle Black? And then what? Never mind corporate security, customs..."

Paul rolled his eyes. "Blah, blah, blah."

"Even if you make it to the other end, they'll send you back as a contract deserter." DJ threw his hands up. "They don't care if you ever had a contract or not."

"I'll get there. Unlike school, I've been studying for this. I don't know why I'm waiting around for graduation, really. What'll I need a diploma in the mining arts for?" Paul shrugged. "I'm just building a money cushion at this point."

DJ shook his head. "Seriously, dude, who saves up to be a farmer?"

"Speaking of which..." Paul grabbed DJ by the wrist to check the time. "I gotta go!"

"Poker?" As if DJ had to guess. It was nearly 23:00 on a Friday. There was definitely a game going somewhere.

"Henry's playing. I'll have enough to buy two landers after tonight!"

DJ had always found landers to be ugly things—tightly packed metal boxes half-covered in heat-resistant tiles to survive their one drop into the atmosphere during a planet wide land rush. They carried

up to four people and unfolded into a homestead and the equipment needed to covert untamed acres into fields of food. But even when converted into small houses, they still looked like ugly metal boxes.

DJ and Paul had first seen them when they were eight, lying on DJ's living room floor, watching holovision. The newly terraformed planet Everett had opened for settlement. Paul couldn't close his eyes as the steady stream of the landers cut bright streaks into the atmosphere, descending upon the unspoiled planet below. Everett's dark continents came to life as farmers staked their claims and lit their landers like a billion little candles in the dark.

With the news of Everett had come the news of New Greene, the next planet in this region scheduled to open for settlement—and right when Paul would turn eighteen. Upon hearing that, Paul announced that he was going to be a farmer and started saving. Now Paul's stack of data chips held more than enough credits to buy a lander. Paul knew this because he'd crawled all over the stowaways' secret websites learning how to cross the void and what to expect on the other side. Paul was ready to go light his own little candle in the dark.

While Paul headed off to earn, DJ trudged into the late evening silence, heading for his empty apartment. He imagined his dad asleep somewhere, probably in a brightly lit server room, while a progress bar gradually filled on the unwatched screen before him. DJ didn't have a clue about what he wanted to do for a living but he knew it wasn't that. But DJ didn't want to be a farmer either and the idea of making a living in music... Graduation was just four months away. He had to figure something out but there seemed to be only those two options and DJ wanted neither.

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By the time DJ reached his residential level, the only sound was the mind-numbing whir of air rushing through the dusty vents. Under the stark, white light of the ceiling's LEDs, DJ stopped at an intersection within the eight-by-eight grid of corridors. He peered down each hallway. Nothing moved. This was the perfect time and place. He popped an access panel off of the white wall.

If security walked up on him, they'd turn him over to his dad for another endless lecture. If one of the desperate and hungry unemployed happened to find him first, things could be worse. DJ would rather do this from his apartment, just a couple of corridors down, but his dad would absolutely find out if he did. The network cable junctions located at corridor intersections were his next best option. He had to risk it.

Light-years away, on planet Hestia, inside a tall stone building at the heart of Hestia City, DJ expected the government's Consumer DNA Registry database to hold his name right next to the name of the woman who had given him half of his DNA. She was DJ's lost helix. All DJ wanted to know was why she did it. Was it just about the money? Did she ever wonder about the kid she helped make? Did she even know that DJ existed? All DJ knew about her was what every "donor baby" knew—she was most likely some grad student who sold her egg to help pay for college and neither DJ nor his dad had any legal right to know who she was.

Purchasing an egg through a commercial service was a common practice amongst the male miners of Stone River, a symptom of the significant gender imbalance. The companies claimed that women just didn't apply. The miners complained but then they'd ask for sons from the DNA services while not adopting the boys in the system. To DJ, it all seemed like a Mobius strip of bullshit.

Tapping across the virtual keyboard hovering above the computer-watch on his left wrist, DJ cut through the local security locks. In no time, he had access to the server where messages gathered for transmission back to civilization. DJ found the 23:30 data burst and implanted his worm, a program designed to move itself across networks.

Hopefully, the new protocol wrapper that he stole would make his worm look harmless, getting it past the firewalls at Black Mountain HQ on Hestia and out to the rest of the internet. As it breached each barrier, the worm would return a report until it either came back with his mother's name or an error code telling him that his worm got caught. The first report would come at 23:30 but there was no way to time it after that.

The holographic screen floating over DJ's wrist counted down while DJ kept an ear out for anyone coming around any of the many corners. With just under a minute to go, DJ thought he heard the squeak of a sneaker. He looked in all directions but saw nothing. At the half-minute mark, there was another squeak. It was definitely a sneaker and security didn't wear sneakers. DJ listened hard but all he heard was his own pulse. His display counted down the last seconds and the first report came in. His worm was away. The next report would come from the other end of the void.

"Hey!"

The single word echoed from all directions. DJ crouched like a spooked rabbit, scanning for predators. If he disconnected now he'd miss his report and he'd never even know if it worked. And if it did work, they'd know it on the other end, which meant that the worm would never work again. He couldn't miss a chance to find his mom's name. He had to stick with it.

The second report hit his watch. The worm had crossed the void. Now it had to cross Black Mountain HQ on Hestia. While DJ waited, someone squealed, a kid, maybe fifteen. DJ was pretty sure he knew what the squeal meant. If he was right, he didn't have much time. Where was that next report?

A voice roared, "Give me the shoes, sysie!"

DJ froze, pressing himself flat against the bright wall while tremors rolled through him. That second voice belonged to someone that DJ knew too well. You'd think that the only two kids who were regularly up after midnight would become friends, but not when one of those kids was the psychopath Bill Krieger. Bill's favorite sport was hunting "sysies," kids in the system, like their lives weren't crappy enough.

The next report came and so did the error code. The network caught his worm. DJ would have to get closer to the source if he was ever going to get into that database, maybe as close as the server itself. But how could he ever escape this gerbil maze and get all the way to Hestia? He had no idea but, at the moment, he had a more pressing problem.

After stashing his guitar behind the service panel, DJ peeked around the corner. Just a few feet away, Bill's wide torso crushed down on some hapless middle school kid wearing blue and gold coveralls.

The kid kept squirming but Bill wanted his grow-shoes. DJ knew exactly what Bill would do with them. He'd done it to DJ's sneakers when there were no grow-shoes around to target.

DJ clenched his fists and whispered, "Not tonight."

Dancing his fingers across his keyboard of light, DJ broke into the maintenance controls and shut the doors located a meter down inside the necks of the garbage chutes, a feature that allowed residents to continue dumping trash while repairs were being made on lower levels.

As Bill's coarse laughter filled the metal halls, DJ glanced back around the corner again. Bill had his foot pressed into the kid's back while he fed the grow-shoes through the elastic mouth of the garbage chute. But that would not be the end of it. DJ needed to get help.

Taking control of the security software, DJ unlocked every apartment door in every corridor on the entire floor. A collective thunk resounded through the halls as eighty-eight magnetic locks released their bolts all at once. It didn't wake any of the slumbering residents but hopefully it would wake someone down in the security offices.

When Bill jumped at the sound, the middle school kid made a run for it. Sliding around the corner in his socks, the kid saw DJ and his floating screen. He clearly knew what DJ had done but he wasn't about to stop and thank anyone. He just kept running.

Bill ran after him but stopped cold when he saw DJ flattened against the wall—as if that would make DJ invisible. A pungent smile stretched across Bill's face. "Donor baby!"

DJ couldn't move. He wanted to run. He wanted to fight back but he couldn't even shield his face. His muscles were locked. DJ was useless.

Bill grabbed a wad of DJ's t-shirt. "What the hell was that noise? What did you do, donor baby?"

DJ's lip quivered but all else remained frozen.

Bill threw DJ across the hall, bouncing him off the far wall. DJ landed flat on his face and Bill's barrel of a chest dropped on him. "Cry, donor baby, cry!" laughed Bill as he turned DJ over and pinned his wrists. His fist drew back. DJ winced. This was going to hurt. Then his dad would see it, a big black bruise on his face. He'd never hear the end of it.

Another hand appeared. It seized Bill's wrist, freezing his chubby knuckles in the air. "What the hell are you kids doing out this late? Where the hell are your parents?" The security guard yanked Bill to his feet and aimed his stun gun at DJ. "Get the hell off the floor before I buzz you!"

DJ complied. While the guard berated them, Bill's grim gaze cast dark promises to DJ. When the guard finished telling them how they were screwing up their lives, they all marched down to holding. DJ had escaped without a bruise but he was still never going to hear the end of it.

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DJ sat in a white chair in the corner of a long, white room. He was as far from Bill Krieger as he could get. He didn't dare make eye contact and Bill didn't dare make a move on DJ, not with the security camera staring down at him.

On his watch computer, DJ tapped out a message to Paul. Someone needed to recover that kid's grow-shoes. And, with his dad coming back the next afternoon, DJ needed that Data Strummer back as soon as they released him in the morning.

Right after DJ hit send, the silence ended. The door slid open and Bill's mom wobbled through, yelling, "What the hell you been doin'!" Even from five meters away, DJ could smell the cheap, synthetic gin pumping through her veins. "I tol' you, stay in the apartment!" She smacked Bill across the back of his head. "I tol' you! I tol' you!" Smack! Smack!

The guard followed her in and said, "Please, Ms. Krieger. You can kick his butt at home. But you have to sign for him first."

With one smack after another, Ms. Krieger chased her son from the room and the guard shut the door shut behind them. Alone in the silence, DJ waited for his turn. He could already hear it, the lecture that his dad would give him tomorrow. It would be just like the last one and the one before that.

When the door opened again, DJ expected it to be the guard coming to lock him up for the night. Instead, there stood Derik Fletcher Sr., his worn backpack slung over his shoulder and his usual angry disappointment all over his face.

DJ sank his head between his shoulders. "What are you doing back?"

"I got done early. Apparently, not early enough." Derik dropped his pack to the floor. "I can't even get my shuttle signed in before I'm getting a call from security."

The guard pushed a datapad under Derik's face. "Mr. Fletcher, I need your thumb on this and then you can take the kid. He's getting too old for this. If I have to pick him up again, I'm putting him in front the Arbitrator and he'll be getting a few days in the hall." The guard stabbed his datapad at DJ. "You hear that, kid?"

DJ just stared at the floor. Just like last time, his dad wouldn't even want to hear his side of things and he knew it.

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Derik rode the elevator to residential level nine with his son. His travel bag hung on his shoulder while his last mission weighed heavy on his mind. Even if he ended up in jail for it, Derik had done the right thing on that mission; he had to keep telling himself that but, right now, he needed to stop thinking about it and deal with his son—picked up by security again.

Staring at the back of his DJ's downturned head, Derik asked, "Is it true what the guard said about you showing off for your friends? I didn't teach you hacking so you could screw around. I taught you so you could protect yourself. It's dangerous on a station this big, a couple hundred thousand people and unemployment being what it is...and what the hell were you doing out that late? It's the middle of the night!"

"Playing with Paul." DJ jabbed at the white, steel floor with his toe. "It's Friday."

"Why can't you play at our apartment?"

"Mrs. Schumer," mumbled DJ, barely audible over the whoosh of the elevator.

"Then play softer!" yelled Derik before stopping himself. He was doing it again, redirecting his anger at DJ. His anger wasn't really about DJ. It was about his job—his inescapable job and the inhuman things they made him do.

Derik's job was to plant viruses in the computers of other companies' mining vessels, damaging them to free up valuable asteroids that were drifting out of McKenna or Western Consolidated owned space and into Black Mountain owned space. That's all it was supposed to be about, right, knocking the other guys off? Why did people have to die for that? Why did Derik have to live in fear for *not* killing people?

Someone at Black Mountain had to have noticed that Derik had switched out the last computer virus assigned to him. Derik had to get out of Stone River. More importantly, he needed to get DJ out. His son deserved a real life on a planet. DJ shouldn't have had to grow up out here in the first place. But he did and just because Derik signed a contract once, back when he was only twenty-fucking-two! And no matter what, they just kept renewing it, forever pushing off the free ride back that was supposed to come at the end. Derik had figured it out too late, his contract had no end. And then there was the "promotion." They promoted him to mandatory murderer. Kill or go to Black Mountain jail.

Derik tried to calm down and think of something even remotely helpful to say to his son but all he could think about was him going to jail for not killing people while DJ ended up in the Unclaimed Youths Ward or worse. It was one thing if Derik condemned himself to slavery in a corporate prison, but what if he'd done that to DJ? Derik had to stop thinking like that. They wouldn't arrest DJ. They probably wouldn't arrest him because Black Mountain would probably never know...he hoped.

Derik told himself that he had no reason to believe that anyone knew anything. He needed to just calm down and keep it together.

Finally, the elevator doors opened and DJ and Derik walked in silence together to SJ-923b. Inside, Derik found the holovision still on...*again*. Reflexively, Derik grumbled, "Really, DJ?"

"Yeah," DJ replied, his eyes still fixed on the floor. "I forgot."

"Come on, DJ!" Derik threw his bag at the couch. "You're seventeen for crying out loud. You're graduating. It's time to grow up!"

Derik marched over to the HV. The news was reporting another mining accident for McKenna. His eyes stretched wide as he stared at the hologram of the Cronus Class mining vessel, Derik's most recent target. The assigned virus would've overloaded the antigravity well, destroying the entire mining rig and killing everyone inside. Derik's replacement virus caused its legs to let go of the asteroid, letting the vessel just float away. It was supposed to save the miners while still freeing the asteroid. But the news reported that they'd lost contact with the miners. Something went wrong. What had Derik done? Every part of him shook.

Derik couldn't deal with this while he still had DJ standing there. He tapped the hovering pause button and turned away from the HV. Again, he tried to say something calm and helpful but it came out, "I thought I raised you better than this!"

DJ slowly looked up, his face burning red. "You didn't raise me. You're never here. I don't even know why you *bought* me."

The insinuation sank through Derik's chest like a spear of ice; when donor babies said *bought*, it said a lot more. It said *you don't really care about me, I'm just a life accessory to you, a thing to own, a box to check on the to-do list of life*. But DJ wasn't any of that to Derik. DJ wasn't even a donor baby.

"DJ, I didn't... You just don't understand..." Derik urged himself to tell DJ now—tell him that he was not an egg bought through a service. He had a real mother and her name was Norma Brennan and Derik loved her but he had no idea where or how or why... "Dammit, DJ, I put my life on the line to take care of you!"

"Whatever, Dad." DJ stomped off to his room. Just before the door closed behind him, the face of his friend, Paul, appeared over DJ's wristwatch computer.

Derik dropped onto the couch and pressed the St. Barbara medal against his chest. Norma had given one to every miner that she'd met until she gave her last one to Derik, the one that she'd meant to keep for herself. Now, other than DJ, it was all that he had left of her. He needed to stop lying to their son.

He'd kept telling himself that he'd tell DJ about Norma when he was old enough but DJ had been old enough for a long time.

At first, it had seemed the lesser of two evils—either his biological mom sold him as an egg, nothing unusual out here, or she vanished without explanation, possibly by choice. Which would hurt less? Derik didn't know anymore. And after what Derik had just done, DJ might not have his father for much longer either.

Derik looked at the HV and ordered, "Unpause."

As the news report of McKenna's latest accident continued, the holographic image of the mining vessel shrank to make room for anchorman Chandler Kai, who sat in a studio on planet Hestia, lightyears away. "There are unconfirmed reports that a second craft may have been involved. A midsized, multi-use spacecraft, also registered to McKenna Mining, was in the area and may have collided with the mining vessel after it dislodged from its asteroid. Pirates were also reportedly active in the area."

Derik had tried to save those miners by switching out the virus...but another spacecraft? A collision? Instead of saving the miners by not blowing up their rig, he'd killed even more people by accidentally sending them on a collision course.

"McKenna officials released this image of the pirate ship." In place of the mining vessel graphic appeared a poorly lit, low-resolution blob that may or may not have been a brown or orange ship. "Known to have attacked mining operations in May of 3592, this pirate ship, known as *The Butler*, was recorded by a security buoy just hours before the mining vessel went silent."

Kai's image shrank to make room for his guest as he moved smoothly into the introductions. "Ten years after this same pirate ship was involved in another tragedy, *The Butler* still remains at large. What is being done about this ship and others like it? Here to discuss the issue, we have the Director of Communications at The Way Home Foundation, Cassandra Mitchell. Ms. Mitchell, in the past your organization has defended these pirates."

Ms. Mitchell glared at Chandler Kai but quickly regained her interview-appropriate poise. "I am not here to defend pirates. I'm here to ask you why you consistently defend the corporations. Your whole

story is based on reports from McKenna. Do you have any idea who these 'pirates' really are? Have you even..."

"Off," ordered Derik and the hologram vanished. Derik wiped his face as if he could wipe away his thoughts and memories. He needed to not think about it.

"Computer." The holovision created a computer interface of hovering icons that surround Derik while he sat on the couch. They gave him access to the computers built into almost everything in his apartment—the HV, his datapad, all of the walls, the refrigerator, and even the kitchen sink. Reaching in, Derik pulled the myriad of tiny floating images past himself as if he were a giant swimming through a galaxy. Weaving through an intentional maze of folders linked by shimmering threads, he eventually reached a very old and very large file.

The file was a diary of crime. Derik had started it shortly after his first mission for Agent Coreman. It contained copies of viruses and, whenever possible, orders telling Derik where to plant those viruses. He even had a vaguely congratulatory memo from ISO George Ulsterman; that mission had killed four miners and injured two executives from Mercury Ore and Refining. Mercury pulled out of Stone River after that, freeing up trillions of credits worth of ore for Black Mountain, and Derik got a memo and another dark mark on his soul.

From his pocket, Derik pulled out a plastic chip, the same size and shape as a standard poker chip—much bigger than needed for the electronics within but perfectly sized for a person's hand. Like a legendary tale, Derik's diary had been growing larger with each retelling and the chip contained its latest addition. Derik placed it next to the HV, making the chip's contents available to the apartment's computers. Now he just needed to decrypt the ancient file and copy the new data in.

From memory, Derik rewrote a little program that would use DJ's song, Lost Helix, to generate a 183-character encryption key based on the computer's numeric representation of the song's core melody. The program would then combine the key with the encrypted diary to create a text file that could be read and updated. The key's 183-character length was overkill but it didn't feel like it to Derik, especially not today.

The song, Lost Helix, was about DJ's allegedly anonymous mother. It was the worst lie Derik had ever told, captured as an instrumental using a classical acoustic guitar sound profile. Derik couldn't bear to listen to it but he'd been using it to encrypt his diary ever since DJ wrote it at age fourteen.

Reaching over the end of the couch for DJ's Rigozy Data Strummer, Derik found nothing but air. "Mask," he ordered and the holographic computer interface turned fuzzy. Looking over the end of the couch, Derik found an empty stand. "DJ!"

"What?!"

"Where is your Rigozy!"

There was a pause. "What?!"

"Your guitar! Your stringless guitar! Are you playing it in there?" He waited but DJ didn't answer. "DJ!"

"Paul has it."

"What? Why in the name of... Why?!"

Again, DJ didn't answer. With his fists balled up, Derik stormed over to DJ's door. How could he explain to DJ how important that guitar was without explaining why? "Dammit, DJ, do you know how hard it is to get a Rigozy out here?!" It wasn't a real Rigozy; it was just a generic student-grade mimic of a Rigozy but still. "DJ!"

"It's with Paul!"

The doorbell rang. Derik froze, his eyes locked on the door. Black Mountain knew that he'd switched the virus. They knew he'd caused that collision. Every part of him was shaking. He tried to calm down. It didn't have to be Black Mountain coming for him, he told himself. It could be anyone...at two in the morning...*yeah right.*

Almost in a trance, Derik moved across the living room to the door. He could have opened it with a word from back there. So why was here? Derik dropped his head. He was here to surrender, that's why. He could already feel the plastic straps tightening around his wrists. There was no fighting it. Derik said, "Open."

The door slid open and before Derik's downturned eyes was someone wearing grow-shoes. Derik looked up and there was Paul with DJ's Rigozy in his hands, a datapad under his arm, and a stupid grin all over his face. "Mornin', Mr. Fletcher-dude!"

Relieved but also baffled, Derik demanded, "What the hell are you doing out at two in the morning?"

"Oh, just dropping this off on my way home from work," said Paul as he put the long-necked instrument in Derik's hands. He then typed something into his school datapad.

From the bedroom, DJ yelled, "Told you so!"

Paul threw a salute and sang, "Have a good one, Mr. Fletcher-dude!" Then off he strolled as if it were two in the afternoon instead of two in the morning.

Derik quickly locked the door and got back to work. He ran Lost Helix through the program, generating the encryption key and finally decrypting his diary. With a wave of his hand, Derik scooped the contents of his plastic chip into the ever-growing file before encrypting it once more. Then he paused. He needed to stop leaving this file in the walls. It was too big now, and too old. It would start showing up on random network audits soon.

Derik moved the file to the chip and picked it up. Between his fingers he held a decade and a half of evidence against his employer. Maybe he should use it now, send it to a lawyer on Hestia and then offer it and himself to Black Mountain in exchange for a ticket out of here for DJ. Should he do it? Would it really work or would he and DJ end up in prison instead? He wasn't sure. Finally, Derik stuck the chip back in his pocket.

The file's broad shadow remained in the apartment's hard drives, still recoverable. It wouldn't be until Monday before an automatic cleaning process really deleted it. That would have to be soon enough. Derik didn't want a report of him clearing away a giant, old file showing up in someone's Information Security Review. That meant he couldn't leave the song in the walls with that shadow. Nor could he keep it on a chip in his pocket. For security, he had to keep his diary and the decryption key separate. The only copy of the song would have to stay in DJ's guitar, at least until Tuesday.

With that done, Derik found the icon for his bank account and opened it. He moved ten percent of his latest paycheck over to a secured trust account and reset the timer that he'd added to the trust account. If Derik was ever unable to reset the timer before it ran out, it would send a message and the money to DJ. It still wasn't enough to get out of Stone River but it was getting close. Most of the rest of Derik's pay would go back to Black Mountain for rent, food, and anything else he bought from the company store.

Derik glanced at the clock. It was almost three in the morning and he was about ready to black out. It had all been too much. "Holovision off," he muttered as he pulled himself off the couch. But the HV stayed on. The holographic head of Agent Coreman was hovering above it; it was an incoming call.

Derik's whole body clenched. This was it. They knew. He would be arrested. *By phone?* Derik asked himself. *Don't be an idiot.* Derik took a long, slow breath and answered it.