

On a liquid crystal screen, another Van Gogh masterpiece flickered. His hobby was copying a master. He had settled on Van Gogh as his new subject and spent a week deliberating his next target. *The Potato Eaters* was under contemplation. He felt no attachment to the peasants and their supper under the lamplight. He stepped away and wandered into the kitchen, shifted the rubbish bin behind the door. The kitchen counters were clean, no stacked dishes, no notes attached to magnets on the fridge door.

He sighed, opened the fridge, and stared inside, unsure if he were hungry or not. He removed a brown packet and inspected the contents: Nando's peri-peri chicken, mild, two days old. He replaced the packet and closed the fridge.

He left the kitchen and strolled across the open plan living room. He could still smell her perfume, her disappointment.

He unclipped his cast and massaged his fractured wrist, stared out the window towards the horizon.

What an unusual day.

First the altercation with the trainer . . .

Then a stranger breezes into his apartment asking him to break laws so she can find her missing boss.

Who was the last woman who sat on his couch? Or came through the door of No.4? He could not recall.

He was sure she had come dressed for the occasion, assumed he would fall all over himself to help an attractive woman. He could not tell if the tears and the emotion were part of the act.

There were four internal cameras in his apartment disguised as LED lights. If he wished, he could replay Carla's visit, including their conversation. He also had external cameras covering Victoria Road and linked to software using license plate recognition (LPR). He had customized the system using open source stubs downloaded from a public directory of software, and linked it to the national car registration for tracking purposes.

He looked at the unfinished game of backgammon on the coffee table. He wondered if she had guessed he played games against himself. Perhaps she had wondered about the plunge pool on the patio and the white gowns and carefully folded towels.

He pumped his fist lightly into his other hand then looked at his image in a mirror on the wall. Black long-sleeve T-shirt with "Keep your coins, I want change" logo and straight blue jeans, bare feet. Maybe the *Mr. Robot*

thing was not so far off. His hair needed a cut.

She must think he lived a sad and empty life.

He picked up the remote and activated the metal gate on the far side of his apartment. The gate rose automatically, revealing a room of chrome furniture, multiple screens on counters, mounted on the walls and suspended from the ceiling. He named it "The Chrome Room." There were no windows. An array of computer gear twinkled in a large rack. When not in use, his processors mined Bitcoin transactions for a small share of the crypto currency booty. A cooling tower fanned cold air onto the system.

On the far side of the room behind a wooden panel was a spotless work bench with an attached vice. A soldering iron and pair of miniature pliers were the only tools on the bench. Various tools were suspended from hooks on the wall. A glass cabinet consisting of plastic jars containing screws and plugs and connectors was in reach of the bench. A large cupboard on the other side of the bench was closed.

He entered and illuminated the room, examined a scrolling screen of flashing digital numbers and graphs. He paused on a display of the London stock exchange, noticed the Footsie indices were up, all except the tech stocks.

You're a gambler?

Day trading had been logical. The thousands of hours playing *Grand Theft Auto* and *Dwarf Fortress* had honed his single-minded assiduousness. Other than concentration, all it needed was good news or bad news. He bought and sold shares online, holding the position for the rest of the day, and sometimes into the next day, before liquidating. Initially he incurred losses, but as his understanding of peaks and troughs grew, his profits increased. The business required volatility not normality or moderation. The enemy was no news. He spent many hours of each day trolling the web for information and opportunities.

But now he had something else on his mind.

He stepped away from the financial screens, pulled on his headphones, and booted his Omega workstation.

He used TrueCrypt to mount a drive then a utility called Tor to tunnel into a virtual connection and hop between proxy servers. Rule #4 of the internet: *Anonymous is legion*. He did not want anybody—Internet Service provider or dodgy marketing company—tracking his browsing history. His screen emulated a DEC VT220 terminal, the characters glowing green pixels on a black background.

In between the day trading, he did special jobs for an organization called Cybercrime.

Two years ago, he had been given a choice of twelve months scrubbing graffiti off Cape Town's infrastructure or putting his knowledge to good use. Cybercrime was a quasi-government organization that operated on corporate funding. They dealt with cyber fraud, phishing, and identity theft. His obligation to repay society for his impetuosity had long since lapsed, but he had stayed connected out of loyalty to the organization's head, Ian Coulson, who had looked after him and never treated him like a criminal.

A week ago, Coulson had given him a new assignment. A gang of ex-bouncers had installed themselves as gym trainers, were extorting cash from the clients.

Le Fleur paused and took a deep breath. What he was about to do went beyond his obligation of installing hidden cameras at the gym. He pictured the old man on the treadmill. *Don't worry about him, Mr. P.* One good turn deserved another.

Using a process of injection, first by locating a staff login screen on their public internet then invoking an SQL string to attack the table where the user's names and passwords were stored, he hacked into the gym's staff record database.

You've picked on the wrong guy.

Kevin's surname was Halstead. His membership record listed a pending disciplinary hearing at the gym. Le Fleur typed a short memo to the manager and another to the email address listed under Kevin's personal details:

CHECK LOST PROPERTY FOR YOUR FINAL WARNING.

He then went backdoor into the national car registration database. Many years ago, he had worked on its design and inserted guest logins into every government system he could access.

I'm going to tattoo my name on your forehead with a screwdriver.

Using Kevin's ID, he located traffic fines linked to a white Toyota Cressida. He changed the status from "issue summons" to "warrant for arrest."

He logged off the registration system and started a remote program called SearchMe to check whether anyone had recently searched for him on the Internet. In the online world, paranoia was not an affliction, it was a necessity.

His cell rang, unknown caller.

"You were looking good at the Sea Point gym. Any pussy?"

He recognized Ian Coulson's rasping voice.

"You're the one watching their new CCTV all day," he replied.

Coulson laughed. "I saw you shaping up to some muscle head. Good

work, Daniel, the owner is delighted with the new surveillance.”

Coulson owed the owner of the gym a favor.

“So you decided to lay down some law, Daniel.” Coulson chuckled.

Le Fleur paused. *An inexplicable urge to bypass reason...*

“I like to see what I’m dealing with. It makes it feel real.”

“It’s real all right. We’re going to bust those scumbags.”

Coulson controlled the single biggest source of tech expertise in the land, and was well connected in business and government circles. Le Fleur had met him once in the flesh, a year ago, outside the Labia theatre after watching the movie *Algorithm*. He had recognized him from a solitary picture on the Internet, Coulson uncomfortable in an oversized jacket, long straight hair flecked with gray, dominating mustache. Le Fleur respected him. Coulson had come through at a low point in his life. They communicated mostly by secure message, and occasionally, Coulson called him on his cell.

“Is everything OK with you, Daniel? How’s the wrist?”

Le Fleur touched his cast. “It’s on the mend.”

“You look after yourself.” Coulson ended the conversation.

Le Fleur powered down Omega and checked the time. He had been online for fourteen minutes. He pushed back his chair and stretched. He still could not work out if he was hungry or not.

He exited the Chrome Room and strolled onto the outside balcony.

I really need your help.

Carla Vitale. She had wild theories about her boss being kidnapped, a whole cast of suspects. All he could smell was trouble.

Pulling cell phone records of random people was illegal, an invasion of privacy, and a serious violation of his probation. Ditto finding out about porno sites surfed during private and not so private hours.

He did not need that trouble.

He sat on an ottoman and aimed the remote at the LCD screen. The last station he watched was Disney Channel.

Surfing channels without method or concentration, he paused on Bloomberg. The JSE was up half a percent. He had not made a single trade today.

He toggled to Summit, on Business Report: GALI were acquiring Supertech.

Le Fleur leaned forward.

On screen, a man identified as Bruno Pittman, MD of GALI Africa, expounded the potential in Africa. GALI would bring their expertise, he said, create jobs, investment opportunities. Pittman was a squat man in a gray suit and loose tie. His ruddy face glistened with practiced integrity.

Fat chance, Le Fleur reflected. They would haul the proceeds offshore. Like the arms deal. Africa was a dumping ground for obsolete European shit at inflated prices. Corrupt officials and gullible consumers: Africa was a price.

The interviewer asked what synergies GALI brought to Supertech.

Pittman stated Supertech's local knowledge combined with GALI's international expertise would be a powerful force. He explained that demand in Africa and South America had overextended Supertech's resources and finances and they required a big player to address the opportunities.

Le Fleur concentrated as Pittman spoke. There was something unusual about his face. It was not immediately obvious. It was his eyebrows.

The camera shifted onto someone called Gavin Marx. He was tall and tanned, with a full head of graying hair. His suit was tailored to fit his slim shoulders.

"Gavin Marx represents Supertech management. Gavin, what has been the effect of Nial Townley's disappearance on the staff?"

Marx seemed irritated by the question. His deep set eyes had a haunted look.

"Everyone is devastated."

"Is he out there? Do you think he is out there somewhere?"

"Are you seriously asking me that question?"

Marx put his hand in front of the camera.

The camera panned to an office façade, glass doors with large gold letters: GALI AFRICA, some administrative staff standing outside.

The camera was back on Pittman.

"It's a difficult time," said Pittman. "Nial Townley was Supertech. Supertech was Nial Townley. But we have to go forward."

The camera shifted to interviewer.

"We've been talking to Bruno Pittman, the new MD of GALI Africa, about prospects for the amalgamated engineering concern. Supertech staff members are still visibly traumatized by the disappearance of their founder Nial Townley who has not been seen since twenty million dollars was transferred out of Supertech's company account three months ago."

Le Fleur switched off the TV and wandered onto the balcony, gazed out at the Atlantic in the late afternoon sun, water sparkling with false promise, the cold Benguela current lurking beneath the surface's blue invitation.

Trouble.

For a moment, he felt frozen. The cars below became soundless and his heart quickened.