

Darkwitt and the Facilitators

Chapter Two: Shades of Hats

"Relax. Allow yourself to let go."

Cyan eyes stared fixated into the Rabbit's eyes. To Ms. Yates, She was trapped in a forest. An ebony silhouette coiled around her, towering like a serpentine god. It hissed triumphantly, leaning close to let its eyes help her descend further into serenity.

"You struggle with your efforts of self-realization. In truth you just wanted to live a life free of consequence and responsibility. You can do that here. Just let go."

The moment the rabbit attempted to open her mouth, she tilted her head back to allow another loop of coil gag her. Her spade of a tail wiggled to give away just how much she was enjoying the pressure of a snake's coils holding her in place.

"uh...I uh..bh..buh.." She could barely form a word, let alone a response.

The serpent chuckled. Lashing the tail round and round her belly until she practically squeaked under his grip. The inky black apex predator was her universe, her mind and body twisted in knots in the hope that she would never have to look away again.

Pity none of it was real.

Ms. Yates drooled as she sat limp on the therapist couch. A small inviting social area for a large private office. Her mind was far gone, reliving the scenario Darkwitt implanted in her head. A bunny with a snake. It seemed like a hackneyed scenario, but it's hard to deny the effectiveness of a classic. Ms. Yates ran a patent troll company. Businesses that toss lawsuits at anyone using proprietary software of programs they were inventing. With a mechanical patent, it was straightforward to prevent theft. But with software, if you so much as right clicked, a patent troll could sue you for the *idea* of using that in your program. Like vultures far too picky to gut an entire corpse. Something Darkwitt couldn't stand.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Yates. But I'm going to have to take these patents away from you. You have a fairly successful business here, but it's at the cost of about forty nonprofits attempting to do some good. Perhaps when I am done, we'll work on reconsidering your business practices for something legitimate." Darkwitt mused.

The vapid expression on her face never made the silhouetted canine question if his words were wasted or not, he was doubtlessly talking to himself. He waked casually over to her computer and plugged in a USB cable from his wrist computer. Code made short work of her security. Patent trolls ironically had fairly outdated computers.

"You've only brought this upon yourself. You make hundreds of thousands of dollars preventing people from doing anything. It's a detestable profession."

The computer flashed to life, filling the screen with folders. She didn't even bother to keep a hard copy. Hack.

"You're lucky I came along before some outraged engineering major came in to express his grievance from the business end of a shotgun. I'd certainly be put out if someone was trying to legally mug--...hm?"

Darkwitt blinked to find there was only a single file in the patents folder. A Text document. He clicked on the file, and an image flashed on the screen.

"Kanji and Hanzi are similar. In the same way German and English use roman script, sure." If she had glasses, Rehme would be

pushing them up the bridge of her muzzle. Darkwitt sighed.

"In Japanese it apparently means 'transformation, but that's just on its own.'" Darkwitt stroked his chin but eventually softened his posture a little. He really needed more bilingual people on staff.

"Why didn't you have Code scan and translate it for you?" Rehme asked.

"I wasn't sure if it was a lowkey Trojan waiting to happen. Figured it was safer to let you look at it." Darkwitt folded his arms defensively. Rehme gave a small snort of a laugh.

"A little paranoid don't you think, Sir?"

Darkwitt averted his gaze.

"I Doubt an ASCII file would have a virus in it. Do you have the text file?" Rehme held out her hand expectantly. Darkwitt handed her the printout. She scrunched her lips and stared at him flatly.

"The *computer* file." "Oh." Darkwitt handed her a small usb stick. "Keep it off the network."

"Yes Sir." Despite how overly cautious he was, Rehme knew better than to give attitude. She plugged the usb into a laptop and hummed as it sprang to life. Once the folder was opened, there was an error.

Could not read file. Access Denied. Requires Administrator access.

That didn't make sense; Rehme was already logged as an Administrator in her own computer.

"What happened?" Darkwitt rested a hand on rehme's chair. She selected the ASCII file and scanned it. "Apparently there's a subroutine to convert the ASCII text file into something else; an ASCII Shell command to do... something. I'll quarantine the hard drive." The jackal leaned forward and blinked once another error popped up.

"The hell? It opened my CRISPR program"

"Isn't that the DNA editing tool?" Darkwitt asked.

"Yeah but... wow. This file is programmed to use malicious code disguised as whatever program dominates the drive."

"So I was right to be paranoid." Darkwitt couldn't resist the opportunity to be a little smug.

"Look. GATTOCATCATT..." Rehme pointed at the stream of letters.

"I don't follow." Darkwitt scratched his head. The golden jackal's eyes lit up as the computer flashed seemingly irrelevant letters rapidly across the screen.

"Oh my god that's *Brilliant*." She nearly squealed.

"What is?" Darkwitt looked at the sequence with no better understanding than before.

"Think about it, there's four known bases in DNA: G, A, C, and T. If you have each represent a binary pair, 00, 01, 10, and 11. You could *lace a virus* into a DNA sequence as short as 176 bases long." Rehme's tail wiggled furiously.

"Riveting, dear. But does that mean your computer's at risk?"

"If I was online, yeah. It would have pinged back to whatever proxy it was meant to send through. Thankfully the laptop's airgapped but I never *imagined* using DNA base pairs as a virus! It's so elegant."

"Is this a problem?" Darkwitt's tone was not nearly as amused.

"O-oh. No no sir! I'm careful. Normally if the computer had net access it looks like it would find any valuable data, erase it, and ping it back to the hacker. We just have to eject the drive and--"

"Wait." Darkwitt held Rehme's hand just as she was about to remove the drive.

"Would there be a way to give them something that we can track, or broadcast with... like a hologram file?" he asked. Rehme folded her arms and looked at him. She shook her head.

"I sincerely doubt he'd have hologram technology in his house. You have to carry nodes on you wherever you go."

"Well, he'd probably have a few proxies around the world. It's what I do." Darkwitt shrugged. He took a step back to lean against the counter beside Rehme's desk.

Rehme paused. Setting her laptop down on the desk, she stood to face Darkwitt properly.

"Just what are you hoping to accomplish? You want to piss this guy off?" She folded her arms. "You realize how terrible an idea that is, right?"

"I'm not interested in upsetting someone using DNA as malware, Ms. Menat." He said patiently. "The Facilitators tasked me with finding people. Capable people that can help change the world for the better. Or at the very least prevent it from changing for the worse. If this person is as impressive as you're making him out to be, I want to know about him. He might be just what I'm looking for."

The words of the Qualm continued to rattle in Darkwitt's head. He was green, but the old owl was giving him a chance to prove himself. He needed new blood. Young blood. And without connections to younger generations, the facilitators would age out, or worse, become a relic of the system desperately clinging to relevance like the very antithesis of what they set out to be. Darkwitt took note of the people in the Facilitator conference that day. Business, Science, Politics, Military, Media, and Philosophy.

But no internet, no communications. Would he assume those fell under Spline's field? It was entirely possible they weren't dedicating enough resources to handle that field. Would he be overstepping bounds if he volunteered such a notion of incompetence? But without anyone dedicated to managing an entire facet of digital evolution, the Facilitators would break their own tenet on progress. Was it better to just ask for permission? Darkwitt shook his head. He couldn't take the chance of his colleagues dismissing this need, and they needed to trust him to know what he was doing. Permission could be misconstrued as doubt and weakness.

. His internal monologue was disrupted by a delicate blonde hand resting on his shoulder.

"You're debating with yourself again." Rehme smiled.



The sunlight did nothing to convince his internal clock that it was daytime. To him it was near five O'clock in the morning, and no matter how often he rubbed his eyes, he wasn't waking up more. A 16 hour flight overseas to Japan would do that to you. He could have gotten sleep on the plane, but the front passenger had decided their comfort was more important than his and leaned the seat as far back as it could go. He was tempted to push back, assert himself, but his sense of decorum held his tongue.

Let it go. Choose your battles

As much as he was used to being the puppeteer and master of manipulation, he'd been having a hard time finding reason to cause a fuss lately.

Darkwitt scratched his blonde hand, looking at himself in the mirror without his silhouette. It would have drawn too much attention, but he grew unaccustomed to the look of his face with the hologram down. The Cyan dress suit and black tie hugged tightly against his body, the black blazer was folded and resting on the empty chair in their booth. His eyes glazed over as he stared off, past the glass toward passing trees that did not exist; a distant mountain provided a backdrop to open fields of rice whipping by. He was startled by the sudden drop of his head from the palm of his hand. He looked over at his companion, she was sprawled out with a puddle of drool collecting in her mouth. Rodi was sleeping on the other side of the private train car. She almost looked comatose. The train rattled and the husky snapped up with a surprised "WAW?!"

"I take it you didn't sleep on the plane either?" he yawned as he nestled his chin back on his palm

"Oh no no. I slept. Just at the wrong time. I'm jetlagged." She yawned back and gave a long lazy stretch. She wore a tanktop and a sweatervest, along with a pair of tight jeans that make her tail fluff out a bit bigger than it actually was.

"The proxy pinged this guy to an internet café in East Keburiko. He lives in an internet cafe. You know... I didn't expect us to be dealing with an army or anything. I could have gone alone."

Rodi's sleepy expression fluttered once or twice, her stare could have been mistaken for bedroom eyes.

"Oh? And who would have kept you awake during your train ride?" She rested her hands on her knees and leaned forward, pushing her ample chest into his lap. Darkwitt straightened up.

"I could keep you awake sir. I'm amazing at that." Rodi slowly poked her tongue out and tilted her cap down, resting her chest across his lap till the heat started to spread. Darkwitt shook his head.

"Nhh. At this rate, your chest will put me to sleep before you accomplish anything." He knew when jetlag had the better of him. Rodi pouted and licked his chin.

"Just think of all the fun you could have had if we weren't on the clock." She fluttered her eyes, slipping in tantalizingly close.

"Mhh. But neither of us are ever off the clock are we?" there was a long silence before Rodi folded her arms and rested her muzzle atop the white fluff poking out of her uniform's bust.

"Maybe that should change some time." She teased.

"Maybe. But it's not going to be on this train."



Darkwitt needed to permanently slouch whenever he was indoors; it was hell on his back. It wasn't a matter of trying to look less imposing; just that the buildings were not built for a man his size. He punched the small of his back once or twice to stand up straight and tighten his posture.

"At this rate I'll have a curve in my spine before we meet this guy."

"Oh no, Master's dealing with back pain! How DO you survive?" Rodi poked her tongue out cutely as she gave a slight shake of her clearly oversized rebuttal. Darkwitt went quiet, having gotten the point.

The two of them stood outside a cluster of shops and restaurants in the city square. Café Yondeya was hardly an impressive sight. The glass was stained with hard minerals from the thick pollution in the city, the air made Darkwitt want to bury his face into his dress shirt. The door handle was polished with overuse save the slight corners seldom touched, which collected soot. The smell hit him first. A musty scent of unventilated burnt incense meant to mask the burnt ozone of old computers. The roof was only a few inches taller than Darkwitt, but the slight wind passing between the tips of his ears and the ceiling was something he couldn't stop noticing. The rest of the room was dimly lit by the glow of monitors coming from the cubicles, contaminated by cracks of light from the front windows seeping into the room. People hunched over in their desks sat in gray office chairs with seams haphazardly torn. Some desks were clean, but many occupied were surrounded by discarded boba tea containers and glass soda bottles. Darkwitt peered over the cubicles; each person working at their computer seemed too occupied to notice him. The first one that did glance up performed a double take; an egret, staring slack beaked as the canine walked by. More accurately, he stared at Rodi, because of course he did. Rodi gave a slight sheepish wave but kept close to her Master's side.

He rounded the corner to a row of private booths. The only occupied one carried a faint glow a green from the frosted partition window. He already knew the blueprint of the café had no access aside from this entrance. Darkwitt glanced to see the ventilation shafts were only a few inches wide. It was entirely possible this café was a decoy, and a few claymores were set up. Or there might be a ping set up to alert the authorities, ready to arrest him on the spot. It was also possible that the people leading up to this place was informed of his approach, and had taken measures to—...

No. No he was thinking like an assassin. Rodi had her hand near her concealed carry and gave a nod to Darkwitt, but he held up his own to call her off. Something rational told him it wasn't nearly as complicated as the rest of him was insisting it had to be.

He slid the partition open and his heart sank.

The first thing that hit him was the smell: a rank cocktail of stale ozone from the running computers, and the stagnating body odor that permeated all of the cloth in the room. The place had tainted eggshell, as if the plain undecorated walls had a few millimeters of sweat caked on due to the lack of proper ventilation. The space was 6 feet long, 3 feet wide with a foot's worth of junk surrounding the center to make it even more cramped. There was no chair, just a series of monitors surrounding a battered floormat. Boxes of junk and scrapped hardware were stacked all the way to the ceiling. The desktop tower was a stained eggshell, and surrounded by mounds of chip and snack wrappers. Tea cans had formed a layer of insulation under the shallow desk that kept the monitors off the floor, and the pillow on the floor mat was dented flat in the middle; likely used to double as a back brace. The computers were filled with lines of code. C++, Dos, and Python windows were open across the multiple monitors, Black backgrounds and Green Text. The desktop background was of a young vixen with a pink staff blasting the head off a hellhound, but it was buried under an avalanche of icons and sticky note widgets. The small booth was at least 10 degrees hotter than the rest of the building. How anyone lived like this was something Darkwitt would never be able to wrap his head around.

At its center was the mottled shell of a leopard tortoise in a plain jumpsuit and ruined slippers. He had a white mask stained with overuse covering his face, and a pair of massive glasses as thick as the bottom of soda bottles. His skin was clammy and beading sweat. The two locked eyes for a moment. Darkwitt was unsure of how to even start.

"...Daisuke Saito?" Darkwitt's tone was unsure, hesitating. But upon hearing his name, the tortoise jumped and immediately started climbing onto his computers nestled into the back wall like a terrified mouse. He yelled out in panic, pawing at the wall with his stumpy fingers.

"私を傷つけないでください!"

Darkwitt hadn't even introduced his name and it seemed like the man already feared for his life.

"I...uh... *Gomenasai*. Do you speak English?" he tried to speak over the tortoise's yelping. It didn't seem to make him any less panicked. The canine turned over to Rodi and shrugged helplessly. Rodi leaned over master and rested her hand on the door partition and leaned forward in an obvious ploy.

"Hey, nerd! Calm down. K? If we were gonna hurt you, wouldn't we have sent more people?"

Daisuke paused, staring at Rodi for a moment before taking his blocky fingers off the wall.

"Please... I do no wrong. Leave alone." His English was halting and a little rough, but he seemed to understand fine.

"My name is Mr. Yeoman. I represent a security firm that's interested in your services. We tried to contact you at your home but found no one was there." Darkwitt quickly produced. Daisuke pressed his fingers to his glasses and yanked a USB stick from a chain he kept around his necklace, brandishing it near his computer as if he was holding a knife against its neck.

"You lie." He whined desperately, like a helpless cornered animal.

Darkwitt glanced around the booth and he felt like an idiot for not realizing it sooner.

Japan frequently had very little room for housing, even an apartment was often a luxury in this cities. Some unfortunates in particular, whether through financial strain or otherwise, would find themselves 24 hour internet cafes and simply live in one of these booths. They were not suited for such things, but the cyber cafes would offer a small amount of amenities, Food, water, small lockers, even showers. They weren't here due to a lack of interest in contributing to society, but merely because the pay they received for their jobs wasn't enough to even afford a bed. It was indicative of a much darker side of their economy. They had a word for this.

Saibahomuresu Cyber-homeless.

Darkwitt held up his hands in a disarming manner and gave an understanding nod.

"You caught me. I felt it was better to approach you in person. You are a very talented person. Daisuke-san."

The turtle did not relax.

"I'd like to talk. But the nature of my conversation is not for here."

"Text me." He chirped meekly, he held his gaze and kept the USB Stick close to the port..

"I understand you would prefer that, but I can't do that." Darkwitt fumbled into his pockets and produced a roll of notes, about 300,000 yen.

"Look. All I ask is for a conversation. If you step into my car, I will pay for the next two months of your rent here. It should care for a stay at a hotel if you want it. At the very least, it'll handle your living condition for a while."

Daisuke went very quiet. Darkwitt hadn't realized that would easily pay for the better half of a year for living in this place.

"If you don't like what I have to say, you won't see me again." Darkwitt reassured. The turtle's eyes glanced over at the husky looming behind Darkwitt.

"Will... she come?" The turtle nodded slightly to Rodi.

Darkwitt nodded back, and Daisuke hesitantly lowered his Ubb stick.



Darkwitt had decided not to keep the conversation in the car. Partly because he didn't want to present a condescending impression, and partly because renting an 8,000 yen-per-hour limousine in a pedestrian positive city infrastructure was absurd. So he opted for a lunch at a private partition of a rooftop garden. Rodi leaned against the archway behind Darkwitt's seat scanning nearby skyscrapers for rifles and parabolic microphones. A platter of sushi and gyoza divided him and Mr. Saito, along with a polished walnut table. Filtered windows kept the outside world from peering in, but the sight of stucco balcony partitions overgrown with ivy, and the centerpiece of a large zen garden were free to observe. Daisuke did not drink in the sights. He simply stared into his sashimi and fumbled with his chopsticks nervously. Darkwitt was hunched forward, fingers steepled as he looked straight at Mr. Saito. Nothing was said for a few minutes before Darkwitt mercifully broke the ice.

"Are you going to eat that?" He asked, calmly gesturing to the chilled salmon on Mr. Saito's plate. The turtle's eyes darted between the plate and Darkwitt's cyan eyes. He took note and nodded understandingly. Taking a pair of chopsticks and gripping a slice of salmon off of Mr. Saito's plate.

"This food is too good to poison. Besides, I already said we would be having a conversation." Darkwitt rested the salmon on his tongue and savored the taste slowly. Daisuke paused a moment to watch before greedily shoveling the food into his mouth. Darkwitt wasn't expecting to get much food from this anyway.

"How long have you been living Café Yondeya?"

"I... long."

"Does long have a number?"

"...two years." He didn't seem too proud of that.

"Have you been working?"

"Sometime. It not much." Daisuke took a deep exhale after inhaling a ball of compacted white rice. Darkwitt plucked a slice of ginger for himself to cleanse his palate.

"I imagine it's been difficult. Are you cracking servers for a company?" Daisuke tensed up. But Darkwitt raised a hand while keeping his wrist on the table.

"Relax, This isn't an interrogation, you don't have to tell me." Saito took a moment to answer, popping a dumpling in his mouth.

"Your... shadow encryption. Not good."

"My what?"

"The hologram. Its Bluetooth... can be pinged." It was Darkwitt's turn to tense. He hadn't expected Daisuke would have figured out about his hologram so quickly. But he couldn't let him know that. So Darkwitt rolled his fingers and leaned back in his seat, looking entirely at ease. Maybe Mr. Saito isn't as observant in body language cues.

"...If that's true how come you didn't see me coming?"

"You...not using it now. Yes?" Daisuke asked slowly, his second language wasn't quite as refined in speech. Darkwitt hummed a little in recognition. It was always a paradox to him Hackers seemingly had the world at their fingertips. A skilled one could probably get whatever they wanted. He was starting to think this might have been a mistake. He willingly exposed the facilitators to someone who could easily extract all the data from his servers and pull the organization apart like unraveling a cardigan. Daisuke could easily mistake the Facilitator's goals to be hostile and take them apart. The majority of them are old, probably have decades of spam in their emails. He wouldn't even have to do it out of some righteous need for revenge; merely morbid curiosity.

But what of it? They used him, were using him. Maybe this was the exit he needed. Burn it all to the ground for daring to manipulate him into field work. It would have been a setback, sure. But he's burned bridges before. Starting over so soon would be discouraging, but not impossible. It would be so easy to let go and watch it all burn down. He thought of the derisive sneers among the other facilitators. He thought of their condescending tones and blatant disrespect. Treating him like some upstart child swinging above his station. But then he thought about the Qualm. Who genuinely respected him enough to offer him a job, let alone bring him into existence. He looked at the Turtle's pale green skin and the face mask he wore like a necklace. The only reason he had it down was to eat, but he wasn't sick. So it was likely that he was so convinced of the toxicity of the outdoors that he simply no longer trusted it. The Qualm's lessons on altruism sobered his paranoid thought cycle.

Knock it off, Hackers aren't magic. Darkwitt chastised himself. Daisuke wasn't some destructive force of nature. He was a scared man in a world that never valued him.

"I'm not using it now. Think of it as a show of respect. Daisuke-san." He gave a slow subtle bow of his head before Daisuke took another dumpling.

Rodi glanced over her shoulder, briefly wondering why Darkwitt was beating around the bush so much, but her boss seemed to be interested in giving the turtle a little time to breathe before talking shop. Darkwitt seemed to pick this up when they matched eyes and got to the point.

"Mr. Saito. I represent a coalition of people that are working to help manage a better status quo than the one you've been dealing with."

"Coalition?"

"A group of people."

"Like business?"

"A little." Darkwitt wiped his nose nonchalantly but Daisuke never broke eye contact as he ate.

"I no need new job." Daisuke sounded almost resigned.

"With respect, Daisuke-san, you live in a hole no larger than a closet. And it's not because you're not applying yourself."

"It is not that." He began. The tortoise shuffled in his seat uncomfortably.

"What I do. It is not something that is suitable for sarariman. You work for others. You handle quota. But what I do is not measured in fortune or wealth. They do not value."

Darkwitt gave a quiet nod and considered his words thoughtfully. Daisuke's culture had a pretty clear idea of what was expected of a man. Hobbies had a time and place, and if there was no productivity or good service to their superiors, it was not considered to have value. But so many professions fall through the cracks. And a few further are far too understated in their importance. Though that gave Darkwitt an idea.

"The first time I was made aware of your existence, it was after what you did at Patently Pending."

"how did you-"

"I admit, I wasn't sure about how you managed to cut through their firewalls, seep into their data files and burn everything from the inside out, but I was impressed." Darkwitt flashed a coy grin. "You did my job for me. So why did you do it? What was it about them that motivated you to rip them out from the root? It certainly wasn't money. Blackmail perhaps? Revenge? Did they steal one of your ideas in the past?"

"They deserve it!" Daisuke barked back. Darkwitt allowed the interruption.

"So many people try to do good. Support some with disable. But these eh... Hagetaka. They demand money for doing nothing but holding code. Information must be free. It not right what they do."

"You might not think what you do has profit, but it has value, Daisuke-san. They aren't the only ones who prey on people wanting to make the internet a more interesting place. Some are just here to make money in the quickest way they can. But people like you and I. we're not interested in making money. We're interested in making a difference. But the difference between you and I is that I don't think I need to be in poverty to do it. Neither should you."

Darkwitt looked down at the plate of sushi and gave a small hum. He picked up a pair of chopsticks and plucked a roll of eel for himself.

"I will not dismantle hagetaka for my prosperity." Daisuke slid back into his chair, but Darkwitt could see there was bitterness in his body language from the way his neck was sinking a little into his shell.

"Let me clarify, Daisuke-san. The nature of this job is not one of prosperity, it's of sacrifice. The work you do here is noble, but limited. With your resources and your current conditions, you're only going to scratch the surface. With real support, a living space that doesn't have you questioning if you're going to be fed tomorrow, and access to the best equipment, you can make a difference."

Darkwitt stood up and slid the payment for dinner, as well as a small card with a Japanese address, to the table. With a small adjustment to his tie, he bowed respectfully.

"Take a few days to think it over. There is an address on the card. Be there within three days, or I will assume the offer is declined." Darkwitt started to walk out before Rodi took a step in to block his path, eyeing him with a critical glance. Darkwitt closed his eyes and mentally cursed at himself before turning around to face the bewildered Tortoise.

"...Mr. Saito. Would you like a ride back?"

"...Yes"



"Why didn't you get an answer from him then?" Rodi watched the alleyways surrounding the agreed address in the center of the downtown with a pair of binoculars. She perceived Darkwitt behind her, but she knew he was in her head.

"The same reason that I didn't sign up with the Qualm right away. What I'm offering is too good to be true. But I also might be just another corporate stooge trying to get a leash on him" Darkwitt's voice stimulated the small bones in Rodi's ear while she kept her eye on the street. The vibration provided to the sound was designed to not only communicate with the husky, but have her associate his voice with light levels of euphoria and dopamine. To most others, it would be easy to zone out and listen all day. To Rodi, she was far too well trained to be distracted by that.

"I still think it would have been better to just take him if you were planning to expose yourself like that." Rodi adjusted herself uncomfortably. The idea of Darkwitt getting exposed so early in his facilitator position was something that always put her on edge. Though, the idea of any kind of social exposure put her on edge.

"Sometimes you have to work with an open hand. If I played my usual games, he would have set fire to his hard drives and moved out of the city. Here he sees I respect him, and I'm giving him the option to decide what would be best for him. Whether he wants to make a difference or if he's content with being just another hacktivist is up to Mr. Saito now."

"What's stopping him from doing that anyway and just deeming us a threat?"

There was silence for a moment.

"Sir?"

"...well I did pay for his lunch."

Rodi pinched the bridge of her nose. Their conversation was disrupted by the squealing brakes of a bus. Rodi looked down to see the passengers offloading, and was pleasantly surprised to see the shell of a tortoise covered by a jacket stepping off the bus. He looked around. Still his mouth had a face mask, and the glare of the sun hid his eyes behind his thick glasses. He had a shopping bag with two strings taped together multiple times, and a few stretches of duct tape along the bottom to repair some holes. His entire life could fit in a shopping bag. Rodi tapped her ear twice.

"Confirmed. He's here."

The automated vehicle rounded the corner, the smooth black frame with polished rims was unmistakably impressive. but what really caught Daisuke's attention was the QR code for the license plate, he didn't have time to whip out his phone and take a scan, as the window was already lowering.

The blonde canine smiled to him and opened the door. Daisuke hesitantly climbed in and sat at the other end of the limo's seating. The door to the other side of the car opened, and Rodi slid inside to sit along the lengthwise seat of the limo. It never ceased to impress Darkwitt how quickly that husky moved when she wanted to. Daisuke settled in his seat, but said nothing. Darkwitt looked down at his shoes and noticed there was a hole formed in the sole, the grip treads worn away.

"I'm glad you decided to come." Darkwitt broke the ice. He gave a polite bow of his muzzle from his seated position. Daisuke shuffled forward in his seat, his body language betraying the confidence in his choice to be here. The tortoise locked gazes with

the blonde canine and pulled a portable hard drive from his back, holding it tight like a security blanket. "Before I... work for you, I must see something." Daisuke tried to sound as firm as he could be, despite English being his second language.

"Of course. I'm here to facilitate an easy transition for you. Daisuke-san." Darkwitt waited for Daisuke to answer. But he couldn't tell if it was because of his difficulty with the language, or the gravity of the request.

"I... wish to see face." He gestured around his face with a stumpy hand. Rodi looked at Darkwitt a little confused. "I'm afraid I don't understand. This is my face." Darkwitt hesitated. Daisuke shook his head. "No. This face you wear is for me. We all wear mask. For work, for home, for shame or formality. This... face. Is not you." He rested his elbows on his knees, interlocking his fingers. "Show me real face." Rodi's brow raised, this was a little beyond her. Darkwitt on the other hand, knew exactly where he was coming from.

"I see. Very well." He reached for his watch, and a holographic computer formed along his wrist. He deftly struck a few keys, the hologram flickered to life and he was swallowed up by an absence of light. The void formed a crisp silhouette where he once sat. When the blackness consumed every inch of him, wire frames drew into existence, tracing the outline, forming cyan details to redraw the tie, the suit, even his eyes. Until Darkwitt's silhouetted appearance sat before the two of them. The Facilitator purposely let the transformation go slowly, mostly for form rather than function. "Greetings. My name is Darkwitt. I am a Facilitator."

Daisuke gave a slow, understanding nod. "This I trust more."

"I'm glad you feel that way." Darkwitt nodded back. Daisuke took a moment to look around the car.

"Where are we going?"

"This is a rental auto driver. We're en route to the airport. A private plane will be relocating you to the states, your immigration papers will be processed but it will take some time. So try not to start any fires until we settle your identification. You'll be given a place for operation, and a few contacts to get you started. Compile a list of supplies you need to be able to process 7 petabytes of data, and store at least 2 exabytes. I expect a ledger by the time you arrive in the states."

"*Exabytes?!*" *なんてこった。* Daisuke rubbed his head, gripping the hard drive in his other hand just a little tighter. "What are we doing that needs so much?" Darkwitt gave a small smirk. "What are you talking about? This is just to get you started." Darkwitt flickered out of existence, the hologram disengaging, leaving Daisuke and Rodi in the car alone together.

"So uh..." Daisuke started. Rodi glanced at him over her red shades. "Sup?" She teased a little. Daisuke's posture snapped straight and he started sweating a little.

"Do you uhh... Do you like uh... Anime?"

"*Do!/?*" Rodi Wewfed out.



Darkwitt relocated Daisuke to the eastern seaboard, near Ashburn, Virginia. It wasn't a well-known place, nor as populous as silicon valley. But it was home to some of the largest data centers in the country. It was an easy place for Daisuke to connect into without much fuss. The tortoise spent the next several weeks undergoing a transformation to be presentable to the facilitators. A new attire, some language courses, and of course, readily available cleaning supplies to bathe with. Darkwitt spent a small fortune fulfilling the exhaustive list of equipment Daisuke would need to handle his work: from a panic room

underneath a storage facility. He was initially scheduled to live in a high rise apartment in Baltimore and commute to the office, but Daisuke expressed a distaste for the open concept windows and preferred to sleep where he worked. Provided the tortoise wasn't living in a pool of his own filth by the end of the month, Darkwitt had no objections. Though, that didn't stop Darkwitt from installing holographic projectors, for direct conversations.

Daisuke sat in the center of an array of monitors, two motion capture gloves with several buttons along the wrists and fingers on each hand. The seat itself was an Imperator 'Scorpion,' A seat that provided zero gravity back relief and had monitors mounted along a neon green tail. Complete with massager, cup holders, and a minifridge stocked with imported bottles of lipovitan. The monstrosity was more expensive than Darkwitt's first car.

The panic room was also fitted with a server farm, with a tank of recycling liquid nitrogen that kept the room and the processors, near freezing.

"I take it this has been to your liking?" Darkwitt asked as he walked around the monitor room, actually observing this place for the first time. Daisuke decided to wear a jump suit with a pale green cloth cover for his shell. His glasses fit him better, and he wore a pair of bedroom slippers. Darkwitt quietly acknowledged the bookcase full of Anime box sets, and suspiciously one copy of the 'clint eastwood' western collection and a documentary for the Smith and Wesson Model 3 revolver. Guess Rodi and Daisuke possibly traded movie recommendations.

"Yes sir! It is amazing. I never imagined I would have this...much!" Daisuke scrambled out of his seat, a procedure that actually required the hydraulics to lock in place before he slipped out to gesture gratitude with his hands profusely.

"You'll be spending the next few months trawling data among the big three and their subsidiaries. When I think you're ready, we'll be reintroducing you to manage data across millions of points of entry. Don't make this place go to waste.

"N-no sir! uh. However..."

"You don't have to call me sir, we're supposed to be colleagues. But what is it?"

"Will I be able to use equipment for... fun?"

"Like what?" Darkwitt folded his arms, suspicious. Daisuke tapped his fingers together sheepishly. "Uh... Final Fantasy?" Darkwitt almost couldn't stifle a brief laugh.

"With this equipment, you could be running the new Doom at 1000 frames per second. I only know that because Rodi kept telling me. Yes. It would be cruel of me to give you all of this and not let you have a little fun. Just don't let it distract you, okay?"

Daisuke gave a respectful nod, eying the monitors, eager to indulge now that he had permission.

"Oh, one more thing. You'll need a moniker."

"I... not familiar. Moniker?" Daisuke tilted his head. "Ah. An Alias, a nickname. Something to go with," Darkwitt clarified. Daisuke

nodded and pulled his new face mask from his bag. A Black mask with a neon green etching of the turtle's symbol on the front:

化

"I'm afraid I don't know what this means. Is it Kanji for transformation or..." Darkwitt asked

"Is small joke for my name. The meaning is 断片化." Daisuke excitedly explained, the first time he sounded truly comfortable since they met. Darkwitt folded his arms a little and gestured for Daisuke to clarify.

"Ah. 断片化. Danpen-ka. It means Fragmentation."

Apt. Darkwitt thought.