

Firewall

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Her tongue invaded his mouth. Ken pulled back. “Stop. Really, promise me you won’t do anything stupid this time.”

Zoe’s eyes narrowed. “You’re no fun anymore.” She closed her spacesuit’s faceplate. Her metallic grey suit moved easily with her as it hugged her body.

As she reached for the airlock release, Ken quickly sealed his helmet. His suit, considerably less expensive than hers, was a bit harder to move in. “I’m serious. Please.”

The airlock opened and she kicked off into the darkness. The tether yanked Ken along behind her. The orbiting skyscraper they had just left disappeared into the forest of buildings that crowded the sky. Below, the artificial ring peppered the equator with shadows but Ken saw none of it. He kept his eyes squeezed shut and tried not to think.

There was nothing like this (or her) back on his colony. His colony was just a little place collectively owned by the settlers, a dull place, a lonely place, a place he hated after he found himself alone with only his parents’ graves tying him to the land. (How could they leave him like that! It still screamed in the back of his head when he thought about them.) By the time his mother died, he already knew he was a psychic and he already knew about the schools for psychics like him. What he didn’t know was how fast his money would run out. At least he had taken those college courses on firewalls. It gave him just the right skills for Zoe.

Zoe.

The last time they pulled a job, she ended up in a sonic bath for two weeks while her shoulder blade grew back. Ken pressed the safety on his gun again; if he could, he’d push that

little slider right into the metal casing to make sure the gun never went off again. After that last job, after watching Zoe fall to the floor covered in blood, after watching the security guard fall right next to her, a hole in the guard's leg from Ken's gun even though Ken didn't even remember pulling the trigger... Did they really need to be doing this? When would it be enough?

Back in his one-room apartment, which orbited about a hundred miles away, he had a book of homes that were for sale down on Earth. He had plenty of money for one and for his school and even a car and still more left over. There was plenty of money for two... and perhaps even three, someday.

Ken felt his helmet clunk against a metal wall. He threw back his hands and boots and magnetized himself to the building. The usual shiver rattled down his spine. But there was no time to catch his breath. Zoe was already at the end of the tether pulling him up the wall. He scurried to catch up. By the time he reached her, she was crouched outside the lab's window. She even had the window bugged, already. The voices inside filled their helmets.

"Are they coming tonight?" asked one voice.

"Quiet. Let me finish," said another.

Zoe set up the drilling tower. It looked like a toy rocket ship from the early twentieth century. A cable coiled out of her back pack to the back of the robotic drill bit. When activated, the drill bit would eat through the building's skin and root around inside the walls for a computer junction to splice itself into. It was supposed to be used for hacking into disabled ships for rescues or salvage. Zoe wasn't interested in rescuing anyone and salvage was yawn city.

Ken pulled a small hand mirror from his pack and looked in it. All he saw was his own eyes looking back. "Damn." He looked away then quickly looked back again trying to induce an image. Still nothing.

Zoe smacked his thigh. “Quit playing with that thing.”

Ken put the mirror away. It’s not like he was playing a video game or something. This was serious. He didn’t need it anyway. He angled his head to catch the light on the inside of his faceplate. In the warped reflection, he tried again to see the future, to see if Zoe would be okay this time. Still, no image.

“Is it on this one?” asked that first voice they had heard from inside.

“It’s the only one here,” answered the second.

“Are you turning off the other systems?”

“If I did that, what good would this test be? Come on, it’s all set.”

A door latch clicked. Zoe peeked in the window. “Clear.” She started the tower. It drilled through the steel and snaked the cable through the wall. The robotic bit found its mark, a nice juicy computer junction. Zoe screwed the other end of the cable to the jack in her helmet that connected to a plug surgically implanted in her skull. Her skull plug then fed the computer signals from the cable to her brain. Closing her eyes, Zoe saw herself inside the computer disabling the alarms.

“There’s one... and two... and three. Got ’em.”

Ken pulled the portable airlock from his pack. It was just a crinkly, yellow bag with rubber seams and two Velcro openings but they needed it to get through the window without decompressing the building. As he reached over to stick it to the window, Zoe smacked his hand.

“I found two more.” The bag spun as it slowly drifted away.

“Look, you really don’t have to be so...”

“Shut up!” She closed her eyes. “Four...”

Ken reached for the spinning bag. He brushed it, sending it spinning further from his reach. Reaching, he accidentally looked down. The vomit rushed to the back of his throat. He plastered himself against the wall.

“...and five.” Zoe opened her eyes to see the bag, the very goddamn important bag, drifting away. “If you weren’t a psychic...” she growled. The pixy girl kicked off the building, grabbed the bag, and tugged herself back with their tether in a smooth summersault, just like swimming. Like the bag, the swimming lessons came from daddy’s wallet. She stuck the crinkly bag to the window. “Now get in there before you lose something else.”

Both inside the bag, they set off a couple of oxygen grenades and waited for them to pressurize the portable airlock.

“Sorry about that,” said Ken, his eyes unable to meet hers.

When he finally peeked up, she had that look again and Ken found himself trapped in her vice like thighs. Leaning back, she started to grind her hips. “Zoe... please... stop...” he pleaded in short breaths as he tried to watch the window. “Someone could... come on...” His mind was gone, lost in her antics. It was no longer new to him but she could still melt his brain on a whim. Of course, it had never been new to her.

By the time he realized she had stopped, she was already cutting through the window. They entered the room. It was definitely a lab with that dry, dustless air that sucks the life right out of your nostrils. Ken never had nosebleeds until he left the open air of his colony. Now, he missed that sweet swampy smell of spring and that crisp scent of snow about to happen and that cool musty smell of imminent rain.

As Zoe scanned the place for more security, he stood against the wall scratching his arm, anxious. His hand nearly reached out to help her but pulled it back. He knew better by now.

“It’s good,” she said finally.

Relieved, his shoulders dropped for the first time since they kicked off from the other building.

“Quit screwing off and get to work,” she barked.

His shoulders tightened right back up. He rushed forward to the gray cube in the middle of the room. It was a Kasakah 942, standard off the shelf stuff... if you consider mainframes that can only be accessed by natural psychics as off the shelf. The mainframe had only one wire and that was a power cord. No keyboard. No mouse. No microphone. No cranial outlet for Zoe’s skull plug. The only way in was through someone like Ken.

Ken placed a small gray cube on top of the big one. It was a mainframe just like the big cube only smaller. Putting himself in a meditative state, Ken rechecked the small cube. Yup, the hard drive was absolutely blank and it would have to be. The client had said “everything”. No one asked for “everything”. They at least narrowed it down to a file type. He hoped the little cube would hold it all.

Ken closed his eyes. Soon, like Zoe with her brain cable, he’d be inside the computer. Taking a deep breath, he focused his mind and pushed it into the big, grey mainframe’s CPU. A static stream erupted from the computer... a good one too. It got into his head before he even saw it coming. With little effort he wedged his thoughts. The stream parted around him. Then another one started and another. His wedge held. He pushed in. A noise emitter cranked up. He blocked it and continued deeper into the AI consciousness. He could feel the CPU. Soon he’d be in control of its data and its flow. The firewall started a shaker. Like that ever stopped anybody... but Ken had to give this firewall credit, it was trying everything. A feedback loop echoed his thoughts back at him. Ken almost laughed.

But then his head started to hurt. The feedback was just a carrier. He shut it down but his headache stayed as if the feedback was still on. The CPU stood naked but he couldn't concentrate into it. A mob of memories rioted under his skull. He broke off and staggered back.

“Done already?”

Ken gripped his head. His pulse kicked at his forehead. He expected his brain to explode at any second... and wished it would just to end the pain.

“Ken?” Zoe's voice seeped in like an echo.

“Just... Just give me a moment.”

“What happened? Did you get the data?”

Ken groped for something to steady himself. “Firewall... head...” He found a table. It was steel, nice and cool. He bent down and pressed his forehead to it. The throbbing slowed.

“For the love of...! You didn't get it, did you!?”

Ken waved her off. Slowly, he lifted himself and fluttered his eyes open. Below him, something was happening in the brushed metal table. He blinked and squeezed his eyes. Fighting past his headache, Ken figured out what he saw in the reflection in the table. An image! Someone getting shot!

Swimming through the swirling specks that filled his eyes, he made his way to his pack. He dropped to his knees and dug for the mirror. Zoe's echo still drifted from beyond the fog around his head. Concentrating as much as he could, he peered into the mirror... A bullet. Blood. Zoe looked shocked. But who was shot?

He looked again. Same disjointed images. Bullet, blood, Zoe. He took a deep breath and... the mirror flew from his hand. Zoe's boot hung in front of his face. She had kicked it from his hand. Silver shards spread across the floor.

The fog lifted. “Zoe!”

“Quit playing and get back to work! We’re on a schedule here!”

On his hands and knees, Ken looked into the shards. In the dozens of tiny images, an image played over and over like a movie stuck in a loop. Someone held their guts as they sank to the floor. Was it Zoe?! Was it him?! He couldn’t tell by looking in the tiny fragments. That cold feeling, like a blade of ice, gutted him. “We have to get out of here.”

“You got the data?”

“No.” He looked up earnestly. “Please, we have to go. Now.”

Zoe grabbed his collar and drug him up the wall. “We have a job to do. Get on it!” She shoved him toward the mainframe.

He staggered then caught himself. Maybe it wasn’t her in the image. Maybe it wasn’t even a real one. Maybe he could get this done before it’s too late. He grabbed the grey box with both hands and threw his entire mind at it. Like a drill, he powered past its defenses and into the CPU. He could feel the circuits revealing themselves to his mind. But something gathered in the background. He paused. He could feel it swelling. Suddenly, it rushed him all at once and flung him from its world.

Ken’s brain burned.

He stepped back from the box and pried his eyes open. In the reflections on the dark windows to the outside, in the reflections in the blank computer screens around the room, in the steel tables and the polished, metal tools, in every reflective surface in the room he saw the vision. For just a moment, Ken was surrounded by the vision of Zoe dying.

He turned and grabbed her. “Get your helmet!”

She just looked at him, confused. He grabbed her helmet and tried to force it on her. She shoved him back. “What the hell is the matter with you?!”

“We have to go or you’ll die!”

“What?”

Ken seized her wrists and pleaded, “I saw a vision of you getting shot. Here, in this room, tonight. Please, let’s go.”

Zoe threw off his hands. “How often are you wrong?”

“I’m not wrong this time.”

Zoe scowled. “Yeah, right. Quit pussing out and get the data.”

“I can’t. That thing is too tight. Let’s go, please!”

“You’re pathetic. I swear, if you don’t... what’s the point? Screw you. If you can’t hang, then screw YOU.” She turned her back on him and started throwing gear in her bag.

Ken’s jaw dropped. He inched up behind her. “What are you saying?”

Zoe turned to glare at him. “Exactly what you think I’m talking about.”

Ken wanted to reach out to her but his hands just wouldn’t move from his sides. “But... us?”

Zoe folded her arms. “What us? You’re not playing right. Game’s over. What us?”

“But, I saved my share. I’ll take care of you. I have plenty of money.”

“Look, jackass,” she shook her bag of expensive equipment at him. “You think I got this for free? I have money, jackass. I don’t need your piddling share. My daddy bought this... though he didn’t really know it,” she added with a little chuckle. “I do this for fun. I got shot last time for fun. Before I met you, on one of these jobs, I killed a security guard. It was fun. You’re no fun anymore. Bye.” She turned back to her packing.

“But... but...” The floor fell from Ken. He floated as if jumping from building to building untethered. Somewhere far off, her equipment continued to clunk as she chucked it in her bag. “But, what about us?”

Zoe tossed her bag over her shoulders and snorted. “What us?”

“But...” He reached for her across the expanse, to pull her from this nightmare, to bring back the Zoe he thought he knew. “But, I love you.”

She slapped his hands away. “You and every other perv’ with a woody. God damn psychics. ‘Oh, we’re gonna die! We’re gonna die!’” she said waving her arms like Chicken Little. “What pussies. You and the last psychic I had to put up with, too. You’re worse then him!” The equipment clinked and rattled in her bag as she locked it to her spacesuit. “Pussy. Now I have to go and find another psychic, damn it!”

The moment closed on Ken like an iron maiden. Who was this person? What happened to the Zoe he knew, the playful Zoe, the girl who had told him she had to do this to get by? She had never existed. Once again, Ken was alone. This Zoe had taken his Zoe away and she would never return, just like his parents. Why did everything have to go away!

He drew his gun.

Zoe laughed. No, cackled. She cackled right in his face and said, “Oh, big man psychic gonna shoot me? I dare you.”

Ken wanted to. His hand really wanted to.

“I double-dare you!” Again she laughed.

Ken shuddered. His face twisted with hate.

Zoe leaned in and whispered, “I double-dog-dare you.”

The gun fired.

A curl of smoke spun from the hole in Zoe's suit. She dropped to her knees and rolled to her back. Ken froze. A dark red mirror spread beneath Zoe. In its reflection, Ken saw the future—two men standing over her body; one of them mentioned the police. Ken turned his eyes to the gun in his hand. The fog lifted but Ken was still alone and in more trouble than ever. What the hell had he done!

Leaving everything, even the gun, behind, Ken dove through the window, scrambled out of the airlock bag, and launched himself across open space before he knew what he was doing.

Standing in the airlock where they had started, his body safely back inside the artificial gravity, he looked across the open space. How had he come here? Had he really done that? Had he really crossed so much open space alone? What just happened? He shot her and then... Had he really killed her?

With the airlock still open to the vacuum of space, he sank to the floor, his back against the inner door. He felt like he had gone too high on a swing and was trapped at the top where gravity no longer holds you in your seat, where your guts rebel and nothing is as it should be.

The blackness of space, cluttered space, spread before him as he sat there in a daze. There was nothing like this back on his colony... or like her. It was boring back there, on his colony.

There was something to be said for boring.

After a while, Ken picked himself up off the floor, went to his apartment, and packed. He cleaned the place out, took everything he owned except for two things: a book of houses that were for sale down on Earth and his schoolbooks.

The next morning, Zoe woke to someone fondling the back of her skull. She tried to jump up and defend herself but nothing moved. Even her eyes wouldn't open. Her body just ignored her.

“Holy crap!” said a voice. It was that first voice from the night before, the one she had heard through her bug on the window. It sounded far away as if she were at the bottom of a deep, deep hole and sinking.

“She’s got a computer plug in her skull so she’s not the psychic,” said another voice, the other one from that night. “The psychic must have killed her.”

Zoe tried to yell that she wasn’t dead, that she needed help, that her daddy would reward them for helping her. Every effort drove her deeper into the hole, further and further from the voices.

“What the hell... Damn it! You said... You promised...”

“So,” replied the second voice calmly, “what you want to do with her?”

The voices barely reached Zoe’s ears.

“You killed her—you figure it out!” yelled the first voice, still growing fainter. “I didn’t want to test the firewall this way! You promised... damn! I knew this would happen.”

“At least we know it works. I wonder what memory or idea it used to get the psychic to shoot her. I wish we could record that—that would really be something.”

The voices trail off in wisps. The darkness settled in like a warm blanket. Zoe was alone in the silence, and then she was gone.