

TINKER

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Dark. Buzzbuzz.

Smells like... no. Is it? It's...

His mobile, desperately vibrating to get his attention. Who is he? He barely remembers... but it's coming back:

„Wha?“

„Tinker?“ The tinny voice sounds vaguely familiar.

„Ya...“

„Go on IRC.“

Click.

Tinker, trying to keep his eyes open, frantically starts looking for information. `S dark - outside, inside it's 2:30 in the morning. Unidentified caller (says his mobile). Tells him to go on IRC. Head hurts. Whiff of cold sweat (now gone - probably gotten used to it, stopped smelling it). Body dislikes being woken up in middle of night. Mind still making up same on issue. The mobile... yes: Voice sounded like...

Lurching over to his workstation gently humming along, opens IRC, pings

Tinker: Loppe, wazzup?

Loppe: Chatter.

Tinker: bout?

Loppe: u

Tinker: lolz

Loppe: srz. Somebody dislikes your work

Tinker: ?

Loppe: look outside

Tinker lurches over to window looking out over the parking lot 10 stories below. Nothing strange down there: just the usual clutter of old cars, *immobilized* old cars and misplaced dumpsters languishing in the sodium light. Must have rained, some wet glittering to be seen. Tinker was ready to turn back, scald Loppe for waking him up in the middle of the night with some paranoid poppycock about who the hell would interested in my work, nobody is interested in... when he noticed movement in the corner of his eye. Took a moment to focus, but then he saw: black van, newish built, slowly drawing into the parking lot, idling, stopping.

Tinker watchers: four figures jumping out the back. Hair covered, it seems. One carrying a box.

Tinker is awake, switches on the audio/video on his workstation, grabs a bag.

„Can you hear me?“

Loppe: yes.

„If they have keys I have 4 minutes.“

Tinker yanks drives, puts them in the bag, always has an eye on the IRC

Loppe: They have keys.

„Paranoid fucker.“

Loppe: CCTV downstairs says they have.

„You are right. You were right all along.“

Loppe: Being paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you.

„They inside?“

Loppe: Yes

Tinker switches on the lights, glaring LED floods his single room council estate hacker cave: a space filled with a lab bench, monitors on boxes and tables, and stuff that makes it look like a flat: bed, chair, fridge. Giving the whole setup a visual once-over, Tinker grabs a handful of petri-dishes and turns to a small laptop balancing on top of a stack of papers.

„Will kill the servers, but leave the little one running. So you can watch the show and tell me afterwards.“

Tinker proceeds to power down the workstation. The large monitors wink off. Tinker turns to the laptop again: dark screen, but camera and mike active, holds up the dishes again:

„They are code, remember that. All you need to know is on them, should you ever need to know. These I take with me. They need to go back in a fridge within an hour. I'm going down now, say *Hi* as soon as I can. Over and out.“

Kills the light, slips out the door.

Loppe watches darkness.

Knock knock.

Tinker's watch says he has about 90 seconds left until they break into his flat one story below. He's out of breath from bounding up one stair, counting the seconds until his incessant knocking and ringing of the bell is answered. 89..88..

Tinker's brain says it's probably another 60 seconds before they start looking for him, scouring the hallways and stairs for traces of his body.

Knock knock.

Come on, Belle! Door opens - finally! Belle appears - tiny, crumpled, with her organic haircut shaped like the antiallergic cushion it just rose from. The bright hippie-smile, that can turn the world into a psychedelic poster, is still booting up as her eyes focus on Tinker standing in front of her door, leaking impatience. Her mouth opens, but her eyes ask the question Tinker answers:

„Crawlspace.“

„Aaawww.“

Tinker rushes inside while she hurries into the kitchen, grabbing a strangely non-organic bottle of cleaner that has its own cupboard and lavishly sprays the floor in front of her door before shutting the same. Tinker has made his way into her bathroom and has already removed the fake wall, opening the small crawlspace at one end of the room that has just enough room for him and his bag.

Belle grabs the wall once Tinker is safely inside. He mouths: Thank you! She shrugs, smiles that psychedelic smile:

„Who needs a cupboard in their bathroom when they can have this? This is way cooler.“

And then she closes the space, leaving Tinker in the dark, where he slides the bolt that locks the space from the inside.

Loppe watches darkness, then light: tiny pinpricks of highly focused torches strafing Tinker's room, finding nothing in terms of opposition, turning into broader patches of illumination, searching to room, searching for... the light switch.

Loppe watches as they switch on the light. Four figures in black hazmat suits and mask, getting to work straight away: one taking a good look at the dirty linen in bed, one preparing a large spray can with a pump at the end of a hose, one taking a axe to the array of monitors - CRASH - Loppe has to turn down the volume - CRASH - watches plastic splinter, table cave in, workstation smashed against the wall. Notices the guy interested in the linen out of the corner of his eye, sees him take something and stuff it into a sequencer, one of those one off thumbdrive thingies, waiting for a result, checking on a second sequencer that it's the right DNA, not the bed bug's dandruff. Guy with the spray can starts spraying the walls, methodically, top to bottom, once the sequencer guys nod their approval. Starts spraying where the workstation used to be, while axe-man takes the bed apart.

There's two of them now. Axe-man and spray-can. The others have left with their sequencing stuff. Axe-man goes on smashing stuff: lab bench, incubator, even the fridge. Spray can proceeds to spray what he can: linen shows a strong reaction to the stuff sprayed: bleach, maybe. Then in the blink of an eyelid, Loppe sees the axe approaching the camera trained at the room, and, after a short bout of static, Loppe watches darkness.

Inside what he calls his crawlspace, his Plan B, where he can hide, Tinker meditates: What gave him the idea that he needed to hide one day? That he'd have to sit in the dark one day, waiting for the loud noise, the knock, knock, knocking down the door, Belle shoved aside or worse, the sound of searching, possibly sniffers, dogs - or worse - until they found him, until they started taking a bat or an axe to the flimsy wall protecting him? Why? Because they were onto him, and that was not paranoia. Why? Because his work was going to fucking cost them, fucking don't-need-your-Alzheimers-med-any-more-wise, disrupt their business-model, which they wouldn't like, would they? O no, they wouldn't like to say *Hasta la vista* to billions of dollars of sales for Alzheimer this and Alzheimer that. But that'S what this will do. Cure Alheimers, just like that, and dead cheap. Why? Why did he have to drag Belle into it? Because, because, *Belle... I hope they don't hurt you. This won't happen again.*

Knock knock scratch...

Very gentle. Have they found a quiet way in? Is this when the axe meets the cardboard and...

The scratching continues, gentle, below. Tinker drops to his knees, pressing against the concrete wall, feeling around on the floor for an intruder: some tech, a camera? A hose to poison him? Some...a piece of paper? He feels a piece of paper being shoved through the tiny crack at the bottom. Then the shoving stops, no sound. Tinker cautiously tries to feel if the paper has been shoved through entirely, if taking it up can be detected from the outside: he can detect

all four edges, so slowly, carefully takes up the piece of paper, wriggles himself around so that he can hide the light from the small flashlight he has on him, reads the paper.

No words on it: just a drawing, colored pencil. A rainbow and a big smiling sun. The words come via audio, whispered through the wall, and make him jump:

„Loppe says it’s all clear.“

Make him jump so hard he almost crashes through the wall. He slides the bolt open once he has got his bearings back, steps out, cramped, hurting, weary, blinking at the bright light. But it’s smiling Belle all right - that rainbowcolored smile that makes his heart sing. Gives him ideas for splitseconds: that all this is a silly game. A boyish, geeky paranoia RPG Belle tolerates, bemused, because she.... *Likes him*. But that passes quickly.

„Loppe says they trashed your space, though,“ Belle adds, holding up her mobile.

„I wasn’t going back anyway.“

„What do you mean?“

The hurt in her eyes.

„I’ve got to get away, finish some work before“ ... Groping for words, frantically, without showing.... „I can come back.“

She hesitates before she leans in to kiss him, ever so gently, on the lips.

„Take care.“

He nods, leaves.

Takes the stairs down: safer, because you can stop and listen if there's somebody else, because you can get out at any landing if you hear steps, maybe take the other stairwell. But there is nobody. He makes it down and out into the parking lot in what felt like hours but was a mere 90 seconds by the clock. The parking lot is equally void of dangers... seems equally void of dangers.

Tinker decides: connecting is safer than blackout - he needs Loppes eyes. He boots his smartphone, opens chat, pings Loppe

Tinker: u c m leave?

Loppe, instead of answering, pushes a video through. Grainy CCTV, the one right above Tinker, showing those four hazmatted strong-arms climbing into the back of the van, driving off.

Tinker: K THX

Keeping to the shadow and out of the perimeter of the CCTV as much as possible, Tinker makes his way to his well aged Prius, getting inside, getting ready for getting away when he notices a fluttering hum that has no place inside a car. The low frequency thrumming, much like an insect-sized Harley, approaches - until his subconscious tells him to duck and swat, hitting otherwise empty air, but avoiding the collision with what turns out, after some switching on the overhead light and trashing around in the car, to be a super-sized bug.

That's funny.

Tinker eyes the huge bug - several centimeters long, dark, and sitting on the dashboard, eyeing him. Tinker voices into his chat while staring at the beetle:

Tinker: gotta see this

And adds a photo of the bug into the stream - just as, in a moment of inattention on Tinker's part, the beetle takes flight, and homes in on him like a WWII fighter plane, going in for the kill. Bemused, Tinker tries to swat it, only to see it take evasive action, swerving around and making straight for his face (ignoring the light - aren't they supposed to be attracted by the light?), getting past his defenses, landing on his forehead, where he grabs it, pulls it away, but not before he feels a little prick. He takes the offending insect, which is unusually calm in his hand, and takes a closer look as he prepares to chuck it out the window.

That's funny.

Stuff that looks like a circuit board glued on top of an insect isn't what you'd expect when inspecting a member of the species - whichever species this is... Curious, even though beginning to feel the drag of waking up in the middle of the night, he takes a photo of the beetle's cyborgy makeup and sends it to Loppe before he chucks the offender out of the window.

As he fires up the car, concentrating to stay awake, rubbing his eyes, he voices to the chat-app:

Tinker: Seen that bug?

Loppe's answer clearly visible on the large-screened smartphone mounted to

the dashboard as Tinker pulls out of the parking lot.

Loppe: Mecynorrhina torquata, second largest of the Flower Beetles, known in some geek circles since Sato's 2009 paper demonstrating [Remote Radio Control of Insect Flight](#).

Which is funny, Tinker thinks as he drives on, through deserted suburban streets, feeling tired and somewhat squeamish.

Loppe: Holy Shit. What did you do with that beetle?

Keeping his eyes on the road is enough of a chore - so Loppe's question may have been there for a while before Tinker notices it.

Tinker: Threw it out.

Voice slightly slurred. Stomach fluttering with butterflies, skin crawling - hot and cold and some ugly flavour of pinpricky icypricks. Add some cold sweat and and general nausea.

Loppe: You got a Sato bug there. You know Sato's thing was supported by DARPA looking into insect cyborgs and military applications and... are you okay?

Tinker finds that speaking is not so much an option now. The car rolls on somehow, while he feels that every cell in his body is vibrating at a different frequency.

He tries to speak, opens the mouth, out comes a croak: „*there's a copy in Belle's jam*“, it was meant to say. God knows what Loppe made of that. But Tinker sees what voice-recognition made of it and sent through the chat-app:

Tinker: Ers a Copy in Bells Jam.

Close enough, Tinker smiles.

As the car is rolling by itself, Tinker thinks, switching on the front facing camera on his smartphone might be a good idea, and switching on the overhead light also, because he can't focus his eyes properly anyway, so what's the use of looking out.

As Loppe gets the visual, he opens voice, shaking, shouts „Stop the car, I'll get somebody to your position as fast as possible... Tinker!“

Tinker nods, vibrating cells make him cramp, shudder...

„DARPA fucking worked on droned Insects genetically modified to give you a very precise anaphylactic shock... Tinker! Stop the fucking car! Do you have some medication on you?“

Tinker thinks *I'm not allergic*, when the car lurches then suddenly stops as it meets the bottom of a ditch where it comes to a rest, lopsided.

Lopsided - like Tinker, wheezing, working really hard like a good boy to get air into his lungs, *but it can't be done, I'm sorry, so sorry, please...* wheezing his last as his body gives up under the onslaught of strange proteins it is not prepared to live with - so it dies, and Tinker with it.