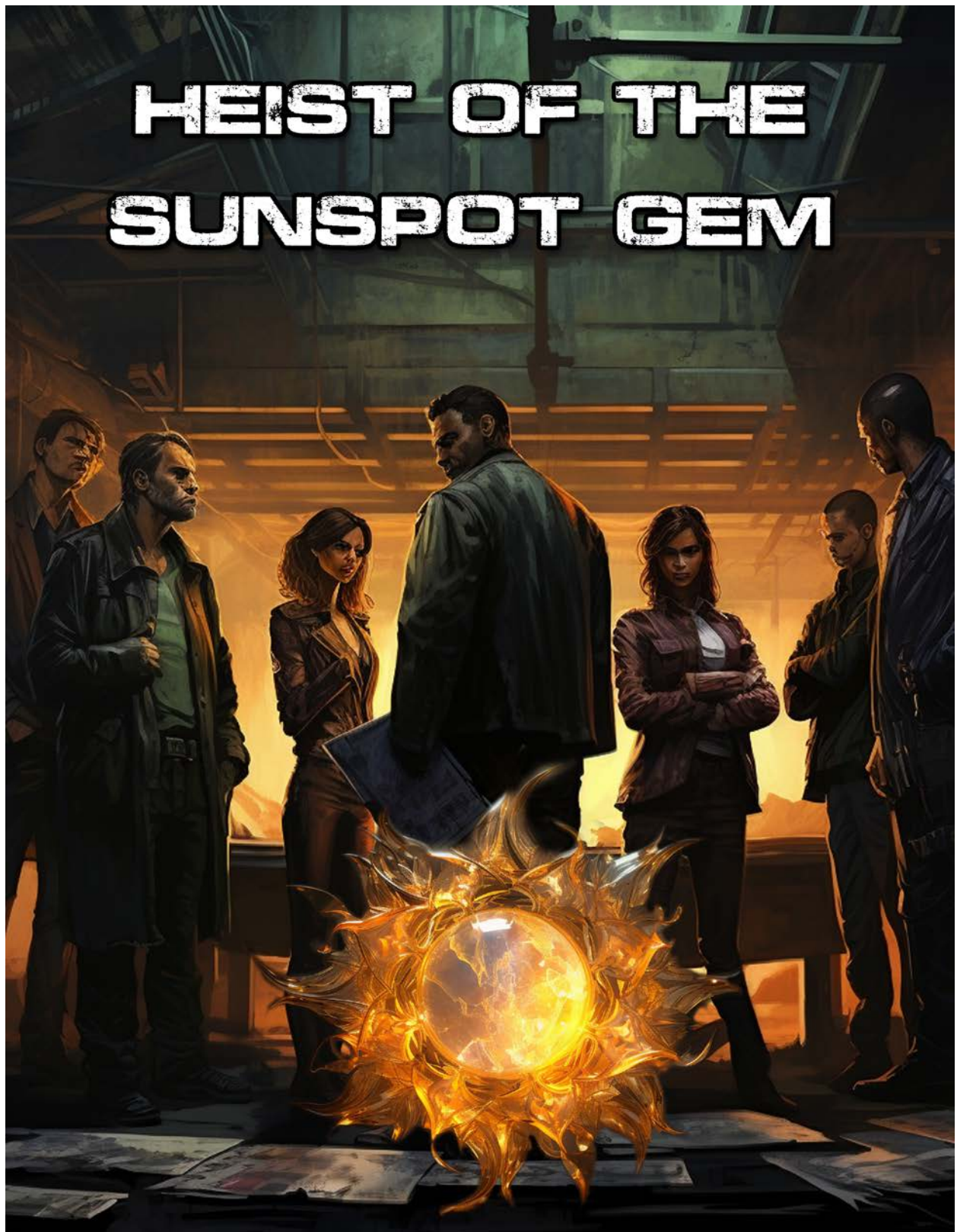


# HEIST OF THE SUNSPOT GEM



The members of the team gathered haphazardly throughout the concrete room. A few of them leaned against the walls, a couple more sat on crumbled piles of cement that were the remains of something that once stood, or had never been finished. It may be a basement if it was the bottom floor of a terra firma based planet. But it wasn't. This was a floating city above the clouds of a gas giant. They were on a floor between floors; the maintenance level where piping and wiring snaked through; above people's roofs and below their floors. It was one of the only parts of Broadview Station where they could be guaranteed privacy.

Davis, a mild-mannered looking office worker who was holding the meeting, had picked it out for this reason. Though other maintenance levels were occasioned by teenagers exploring the gaps that adults overlooked, this section connected to Davis's office building with the only connections to other "midlevels" having been closed off by his safety managers.

Sounds of water rushing through some of the pipes and air whisking through others while electrical cords buzzed were constant reminders that they were on the level which serviced all others. The members of Unter-Org were used to rooms like this; in fact, they expected them. Their jobs worked best under extreme anonymity.

Davis had invited the group with the promise of a big score. Unter-Org was typically hired to do jobs; paid by one corporation to spy on or steal from another. But this time they were to share in the profits of stealing from one corporation, then stealing from another, while splitting the profits with their employer; the one Davis represented on Broadview.

There was to be an auction during which the prize possession would be a priceless gem. One of the Unter-Org members commented on how it could hardly be priceless if it was being bid on, which drew a chuckle from others. Davis explained that the bidding was expected to be exorbitantly high, and their job would be to pump it up even higher. They wanted it to go as high as it could, and they wanted it to be won by either Olumani or Viveci.

"But whichever wins it is never to port the jewel," Davis explained. "It will disappear from the station before anyone even sees the money is gone." Everyone shifted uncomfortably. If this jewel was worth so much, it would be heavily guarded, not only by Broadview Station, but also by the corporation running the auction, and the one selling the gem; not to mention the other items in the auction which would no doubt be stored in the same room.

Davis read their fears in their faces, and he let them have it for a moment before continuing his explanation. They would be diverting the jewel while it's transported. Davis's people would facilitate the opportunity, but the team members of Unter-Org would take over transporting it. Two of them would be dressed like representatives of the auction escorting a decoy, and the other two would divert the real gem to a waiting vehicle. It would be loaded on, they would get into the escort ship, and they would fly away.

"Everyone else will provide their own means of escape," Davis concluded. "And, as I comprehend it, this will not be a thick for you."

Several of the members nodded confidently; however, they still needed more. Their commander, Guv, a man slightly larger in each direction than everyone else and a thick beard with an overly sized, stylish mustache, told Davis to give them the details for each team.

Davis nodded with a snap of agreement and shifted toward a man and a woman squeezed into a doorway together. This was Carres and Eddie, the Insanity Twins. Though images of their faces had never been recorded, they were known as the lover bandits whose cunning and wit could get them in and out of any situation. Their name derived not from any relation to one another, but to how well they were able to read each other's minds to embody the perfect teamwork.

These two would be working the auction floor; pushing up the bids and convincing the target corporations to buy in. They would need to ensure that one of those entities won, or the entire reason they had come was moot.

Once the final bid was made, the winner would have to transfer the funds. "These funds will be redirected by..." Davis said as he looked around the room. He did not see who he was looking for, and Guv held up his wrist where his watch sat.

"That'll be me, Mr. Boss!" came a jovial woman's voice from the watch.

Davis looked at Guv confused. "She's finishing another job," Guv explained. "But she'll be in place when it's time." Davis knew the real reason she wasn't there. Guv was keeping one operative out of reach in case anything went south. This was the sort of thinking that kept Unter-Org alive.

So Davis shrugged and called out through the wrist communicator, reminding Jude that she was already sent the coordinates and entry codes for the escrow chamber within Virtua. She was to plug in and go there through her intranet avatar. There she would wait until the funds arrived. Davis would send her the codes for them once he knew who won the bid. He would also send her at the same time the codes for the account she would be diverting the funds to; but...

And Jude interrupted, "I'm not to do that until the jewel is on its way to the transpo. I got it, boss-man."

Davis swallowed nervously. He didn't like this wall of uncertainty between himself and the employee. "You are also you have the correct site turf for the escrow chamber."

"Yeppers!"

"This is going to all depend on you being set up and..."

"She'll be there," Guv interrupted, and he dropped his hand to his side.

"Fine," Davis said, re-centering himself. "That leaves our team who will be taking the jewel, and the decoys." Two men and two women straightened up. They were Dillon, a man with perfect hair on his head and face whose eyes squinted as if perpetually in a question, Vincent, tall and thin and with wiry hair, Gora, a buff monster of a woman whose very presence would scare away anyone who threatened her, and Little Jack, a man whose name summed up his build, and whose large, frosted-over glasses covered half his face.

The four being addressed were scattered through the room, so Davis had to turn as he spoke to them as a group. "When the Electros enter the escrow chamber, the auction couriers will begin to move the jewel to its buyer. This destination will, again, barm upon who won. But in both chances they have to jonder through this chamber." Davis held up his arm and a holographic projection of the floor plan near the vault appeared above it. "In an orbital station you're never truly in a public space. You're always strassing through someone's territory, someone's room. While they go through this corridor, they will be passing through my company's territory."

"Gemini," Guv blurted. He wanted to make sure everyone knew the name of their client's business. It may not be important in the moment, but who knew whether it would become important in the heat of the job.

"Yes, Gemini," Davis finished. "This passage slices right through one of our structures for about 20 yards before emerging into the public sphere again. We have full control of the cameras and environmental controls. The cameras will show footage from earlier in the day so if Station Control takes a look they won't see anything happen. We have inner doors which will close on either side to hide them from the public. All four of you will be in waiting there,

making sure no one from the general public comes through before they arrive. When they do, and the doors close, you neutralize the escorts. All of you will have clothing that matches theirs, but two of you, Dillon and Gora, will replace them as they're more likely to share your builds. But first, Vincent, you're the master vault thief. You'll break into the case and Little Jack will hide it in his jacket pocket. The case will then be closed, the doors will open, and Dillon and Gora will continue piking along the path while Vincent and Jack head to the waiting crafts."

Little Jack interjected, "What happens to Gemini?"

"Excuse me?" Davis asked. He had heard the small man, but he didn't understand why he cared. This was a question he had not expected.

"You may have a plan to keep us from capture during the robbery, but they'll know that the escorts were replaced in Gemini's passage after it's done when they investigate."

"We'll handle it," Davis said with a tone of condescension in his voice.

That was when Dillon took his arm off the wall and straightened up. "We'd like to hear how you're going to handle it."

Davis began to protest again, but Dillon shot a look that told Davis he was going to tell them, so he did. "We're not remaining on the station. We've already emptied the offices except for what's needed for this heist, and we're defecting to Gerhelm. The money we'll get from this will set us up nicely."

"So you really need this to work," Carres said.

Davis didn't respond. He pulled his gaze from Dillon and looked about the room. "The two with the jewel will pike on to the contact's autocraft, where they will hand over the jewel, then climb into the escort vehicle driven by Stam." An unassuming woman in the back who had caught no one's attention, even though they knew her, tilted back her head, then continued to go unnoticed. Davis continued, "She'll give the signal that it's all clear once they're on board, and everyone else will disappear to their ships before the bidders know their money's gone. Any questions?"

There were none this time. They had all gotten a layout of the station and had heard the basics of their jobs before arriving to this meeting, so this was more of a confirmation and specifics. Davis reminded them that the auction would begin at 32:00 local time, and everyone should be in place by then. Guv would make sure of it from his office near one of the private space ports. Jude would be plugged in next to him. Everyone would be connected through mics and tiny ear pieces.

Davis turned and left, and everyone else looked at one another before heading out with their partners.

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Carres strutted through the ballroom in a bright red and deep black gown that made her difficult to miss. Far from being the hidden spy, she was catching as many eyes as possible. She had only one target, Karl Von Roberts Esteban Kareem the Third of Olumani Megacorp. But there was only one thing that attracted a man more than a beautiful woman, and that was a beautiful woman that was wanted by everyone else. She had already spotted Mr. Kareem, but she was making the rounds to let the man know just how in demand she was; and making it clear he wanted her attention as much as anything of which he was going to bid.

She had all her teammates in her ear, and they could hear her, even if she muttered. Guv told her that there was a wrinkle in her plan. It turned out Mr. Kareem was married. Eddie scoffed, and Carres said, "That doesn't trans anything. Just makes it more an ear full."

"My mark brought his mom," Eddie said.

Carres stopped in her tracks and gasped. "He brought his mom?" she said, nearly blowing her own cover. "That's so cute! I think I might want to switch."

"Not a chance, love," Eddie said. "I've got a jist how I want to approach this."

"Whatever you do, keep it crater," Guv scolded. "Don't give away the trick before it's started."

"Right," Carres said, looking around. She spotted several eyes peeking glances at her. One of them did not look away when she matched his eyes. She stretched her head flirtatiously, exposing her neck to tempt him before strolling away.

Karl Kareem noticed how much attention this woman had, and he could not miss her dress and charisma. He tried not to stare as she sashayed up near him. He could look around anywhere; at clumps of acquaintances mingling, at the food plates carried through the room, at the window where the sky races were taking place, or at the screens where the latest items up for auction were being advertised, and the latest bids projected.

Carres timed her approach so that she came to Kareem's side as the winning bid for one of the items was announced. "Oh, that's ballsuck!" she exclaimed rudely. Everyone, including Mr. Kareem, turned on Carres disapprovingly. These were high class events where you spoke with the same propriety as your outfits. But Carres was counting on this, and she doubled down, turning on Mr. Kareem's disapproving stare saying, "You know that it should have gone for almost twice that. The seller got dime-disked. I suppose that's what passes when everyone's come for one item."

"And what item would that be, madam?" Kareem asked.

"Well the Sunspot Gem, claro. That's what everyone is here for, isn't it? Tell me you're not so I have one less competition."

Kareem took in a breath and said, "I'm afeared I am, ma'am. Among some others."

"Yeah, everyone is. Look..." Carres stepped toward him and continued, "If you're blicking for other items, perhaps you bid on those, yeah? That's all I'm here for to catch it for my backer."

"So you're purchasing for someone else," Kareem said.

"Fes, yes," she said with a charming smile, and she began to feed him an elaborate story.

Eddie, meanwhile, was making friends with the mother of his mark. Mrs. Taru of Viveci Inc. was sitting down, waiting out the tedium of the event. She was used to the stuffiness of corporate culture; she had been a part of continuing it for many years. But it had grown tiresome now, and since she had no control and had aged past flirtations, few paid much attention to her. That is, until she overheard the man near her with the classic haircut and the sideburns roasting the items being bid.

Mrs. Taru corrected him on a piece of information he got wrong, and he tried to correct her back, claiming that the information written about the item had said it was a spectrolite necklace with quartz inlays. She told him not to be ridiculous as it was clearly spessartite with only a quartz embellishment. The man was certain he was correct until the written information came back on the screen proving him wrong. He took the correction in stride, and said that in any case, the jewelers did not put the same care into their work as they used to. "Now *that* we can be on with," Mrs. Taru said.

That opened the conversation up to the two, and they roasted most items which came up for auction together. Eddie could hear his girlfriend talking up the other representative as well, though he did his best to zone her out.

By the time the Sunspot Gem was placed up for bidding, Carres had won over Mr. Kareem, and they were talking shop about the various treasures they had hoarded; Carres for her fictitious boss, and Kareem for... well, for himself. He bragged about what he had attained, in fact, as most men of his status do. And he did not notice that most of the prizes Carres bragged about winning had never really existed.

As the bidding of their item was about to begin, Carres told Mr. Kareem that it was unfortunate that he would not be adding the jewel to his collection, as she would be adding it to her boss's. But good luck with other bids. And with that, she strolled away, knowing his expression behind her; one that would show her.

By the time she faced the screens, he had already begun the bidding at five million Electros.

There was a pause in the bidding as others considered whether they wanted to compete with someone who was clearly willing to go to great lengths right out of the gate.

Eddie scratched his neck as he said, "Now there's something with some class. That would go well in Jur de voir, or the back of a dress de lionel." He had named the two most pretentious old fashioned decorations he could think of where a jewel could be placed and he hoped he had pronounced them correctly.

He hadn't, but Mrs. Taru understood what he meant and, eyeing the gem, she agreed. So she told her son to make a bid. It went up to 5.5 million by typing it into a key pad that was put on everyone's wrists.

Carres took the bid up to seven. Eddie's head nearly snapped off turning toward her. "What are you doing?" he muttered under gritted teeth and unmoving lips.

"Trust me," she said, turning away from Mr. Kareem, who outbid her by a million. "See?"

"Be careful with that," he said as someone outbid him.

The bidding continued. Fewer people than they had expected were entering into it, But Olumani and Viveci fought for the top. Carres put in a bid or two, eyeing Mr. Kareem flirtatiously. He smiled in return and outbid her. Mrs. Taru, too, encouraged her son to stay in the bidding, and any time she slowed, Eddie made a comment about something from the old times of which it reminded him, and she was pushing her son again.

The bid was at 30 million and Carres took it to 33. Then suddenly it stopped... No one was raising the bar. The crowd lost interest. Carres looked over at Mr. Kareem. He had picked up his drink, saluted her; then turned away. Eddie looked at Mrs. Taru. She had lost interest and was looking up other things to purchase on her fon. The son was watching the races out the window.

"Going once!" the auctioneer said. Eddie looked at Carres. This was trouble. "Going twice!" Carres looked back at him, her teeth grinding. She didn't know what to do.

But just before the auctioneer could say "sold" another bidder lifted it to 34. The Insanity Twins sighed with relief. Now this was someone else's problem.

Then it became their problem again as the countdown started once more. This was not one of their marks. They may not be personally liable to purchase the item, but their entire heist would end here, and the reputation of Unter-Org would drop through the floor.

"Fifty million!" Eddie shouted as he typed in his bid.

An audible gasp rolled through the ballroom. Carres's eyes dropped to the floor while she held her mouth shut. Eddie answered with a look of confidence. "I didn't credit you were bidding," Mrs. Taru said indifferently.

"I wasn't going to," Eddie said. "Because I thought you all would bid too much. Thirty-five is more than reasonable."

"How do you mean?" the son asked, now interested.

Eddie turned to him, as if about to answer. Then he bit his lip and said, "Oh, you don't know."

"Going once!" the auctioneer said.

"Know what?" the Viveci CEO said.

Eddie shook his head and looked away.

"Going twice" the auctioneer said.

A silence. Then, Mr. Taru put in a bid of 55 million. Another gasp from the crowd.

Carres noticed Kareem look at her. She swallowed her relief and put her wrist to her mouth as if speaking through a Walki. She put on an act of looking disappointed, then dropped her hands, out of the bidding.

Kareem put in a bid of 60 million.

Mr. Taru put in a bid of 65 almost immediately. No one dared get in the way of these two. Their egos were now bidding, and they didn't stop until they reached 100 million Electros. At that point, Mr. Taru looked over to see that Eddie was gone, leaving his mother alone at her table paging through holographic clothing. He suspected something, and he pulled away from the bidding.

Carres smiled broadly, holding up her glass in a toast to Mr. Kareem, who beamed with pride in return. He bowed to some of the gathered crowd who was cheering for him, then he turned back toward Carres, prepared to suggest a proposition after having impressed her with his wealth. But she was gone; disappeared among the crowd. He strained his neck, trying to find her, but somehow, despite the brightness of her red dress, she had vanished.

It was Jude's turn. She hopped into the reclining chair and laid back. She shook aside her coal black hair with lava orange roots to expose the plug on her temple. Guv stepped toward her and reached out his hand holding the head modem. "I don't know how these don't scramble your mind," he said.

"Who says they don't?" Jude said, winking as she plugged the modem into her head. It was remote, and would connect her to the station's system when she was ready.

"Just don't come back as a psychopath," he said, grabbing her shoulder. Then, reacting to her expression, he added, "Don't come back any *more* of a psychopath."

"No promises, chief. But I'll be careful." They smiled, and she closed her eyes to protect them. He switched on the computer's power in the room, and Jude switched on the head modem. A high pitched whine declared it was on, and Jude's body lifted as it tensed. She then sighed as if with pleasure and her body relaxed into the chair.

Guv watched her with concern. One could access computers from the safety of their room with a keyboard, mouse, air gui, or some other tool of interaction; they could even enter through Virtua helmets or suits if they wanted extra interaction; but net jockeys had learned over the past several decades that one could gain extraordinary interaction if they plugged their minds directly into the machines. This gave them unparalleled speed and interaction, but it was also dangerous for them. If their avatar was damaged by an accident or an attack, their mind paid the

price. If there was a surge in the system, or a defense protocol destroyed their avatar, their mind took feedback damage that could render them mentally handicapped. And if the environment they were inside was shut down, or the owner of that environment closed off the avatar's escape, their mental stability would collapse, and they would become a vegetable.

Guv knew of several examples personally where agents were found in a room laying back in their chairs, breathing normal and appearing fully alive, but they would never rise again. They were brain dead. At least no one would be able to attack Jude's body. That was another risk. While net jockeys were flying through Virtua, their bodies were helpless, unaware of anyone around them. If someone wanted them dead, it was like finding a vampire in its coffin during the daytime.

But find Jude in Virtua, and an opponent barely stood a chance. She swooped through the winds of the virtual world like a sailboat riding a hurricane. Most who navigated these lands with any visual consciousness moved slower than their systems allowed for fear of a wrong move, but Jude had confidence in her talents that bordered on foolhardiness. She swayed past strings of numbers and clumps of data like a skier dodging trees, and she soon arrived at the firewall into the banking system. Jude hopped off her IO sled and came to a stop just before the static flames.

Nearby, she heard a loud electrical noise. She looked over to see ghostly figures moving toward the wall, then sparking into a bright light before disappearing forever with a "zap!" These were standard hackers trying to send programs in to steal the money. The concept was that if they just kept trying, they were bound to get through at some point. Of course they could try as many times as they wanted; they weren't risking their sanities. But without taking the risk of even looking in the world of Virtua, they were bound to never succeed.

Jude spawned the codes Davis had given her to get past the wall. One of the ghosts saw this, and headed toward her to watch. Jude tossed a wave of energy at it, and the ghost blew apart into thousands of ones and zeros. Of course, it wasn't the only ghostly figure; and a dozen more of them converged on her to try to steal her data. Jude activated her Malware, and a shield appeared around her. The ghosts stopped a meter or so away from her, but they continued to push on. Slowly, they were making their way through the shield.

The code was accepted by the firewall, and an opening appeared before Jude. She willed herself forward, and soon her avatar was sucked through like sand into a vacuum.

Jude reformed in the same way on the opposite side. Here, things drifted slower, more carefully and deliberate; like clouds drifting through the sky on a lazy day. Numeric strings drove past in perfectly ordered boxes, and data clumps were shaped like fine architecture. Jude was anxious to get to her destination; but first she needed to ensure her escape.

She found a data clump that was shaped like a box. She took that box, made sure it was not heading anywhere, and she inserted new programming into it. She then placed that box next to the firewall and left it there.

Jude then pushed off and drifted through the banking system of Broadview Station, watching thousands of numbers pass this way and that. People's entire life savings, gambling debts being paid, loans going out and coming back in, standard transactions, all in visual form. She headed toward the tubes which stretched across the sky. She concentrated on the data stream Davis had provided her, and the correct tube highlighted.

A flash of lightning through which she could move appeared in an instant, and Jude was inside the tube. She faced in the direction she knew she needed to go, and surfed away like a kite



on the wind until she found herself in escrow. There, she slid off and waited. "In place," she said.

The message appeared on Guv's screen. He was in touch with Davis, who told him the money was being transferred.

It took about a minute, but then Jude spotted the data coming toward her like a boulder. It came to a stop, and she held out her limbs, through which beams of scanning energy connected to it. "The money's all here," she said after being sure.

Guv passed on the information to Davis and the rest of the team. Things were going smoothly now. They needed to be on jobs this serious, or everything would fall apart.

Little Jack scanned the distance with his specialized glasses. The road went only so far before being interrupted by a building, but he could still see further than the others. He did not spot the escorts while he was supposed to; but then, once they were closer, he saw someone cuffed to a briefcase, knew it was them, and realized why it had taken him a while to find them. They did not look as he had expected. Though they were wearing the uniforms his team had prepared for, they were not the large ones who matched Gora and Dillon. One was shorter, about his size, and one was taller and thinner. He was confused as to why they would send such a weak team to deliver such a valuable item, but then again he was confused as to why there wasn't a larger escort. Perhaps this would be less conspicuous and encourage fewer attempts at thievery? Maybe these were the only ones the base trusted? Or maybe they were just that overconfident.

In any event, this meant a change of plans, and everyone needed to get into place. Little Jack gave the signal and the other three hurried to their hiding spots. He also told them about the switch in guards, but he did so as their feet were shuffling and everyone was spread apart. Gora stepped toward him asking what he had said. Little Jack tried to wave her into place, but she was confused, and found herself in the middle of the road.

The escorts saw this large woman wandering into the middle of the dark portion of the street where they were walking. They stalled, nervously. She was in silhouette, so they could not make out the fact that she was wearing their uniform; but it was a big individual who could be a danger if they crossed her path.

"Don't move," Dillon told her.

Gora froze. "Act natural," Vincent added. Gora tried to relax her shoulders. She peeked at the two guards, but tried not to face them.

The escorts were each reaching for their pistols. The one without the briefcase was speaking into a wrist communicator. The other one looked down another street. Perhaps that one would be safer.

"Walk away from them," Little Jack said quietly. "Don't run, just mose on away down the street."

"Then I can't help you jump them," Gora responded as quietly.

"We'll make do. Just walk away."

Gora grunted angrily, but she did as he said. As she got further from the pair with the briefcase, they relaxed as well, and they started toward the Gemini part of the street. They kept their eyes on Gora, worried in case she might turn around on them. It made it easier for the others to remain hidden on the sides.

The guards stepped under the shroud of the wide alley just as Gora stopped out of it on the opposite side... and into a brighter, more well lit area. The taller of the guards froze, looking

right at the large woman. She was wearing their uniform. Detecting something was wrong, he told the shorter one that they needed to take the other route.

They both began to back away and turn. But just then, the large iron doors slid shut behind them! Little Jack appeared out of hiding, his guns at the ready. Vincent popped up behind him, her own just above his head. The taller guard lifted his gun, unwisely believing he could outdraw them. He was shot in the back by Dillon. The shorter one raised her hands, the briefcase dangling from her left wrist, her face begging for mercy. "Tie her up, Vince..." Little Jack started to say.

But Dillon fired again, taking off half the guard's head.

"What are you doing?" Jack hissed through gritted teeth.

"We don't want witnesses," Dillon said.

"Our faces are already on wanted lists," Jack said. "Nothing she..." He stopped. This conversation had no bearing now. Instead he pointed at the handcuffs on the dead woman's wrist and told Vincent to get it off her. Vincent knelt down to pick the lock. "You'll be taking the real jewel," Little Jack said. Dillon holstered his pistol and looked confused. Little Jack responded to the expression by saying, "These two have the body types of me and Vincent, not you two. This is why we all wore the same uniforms, in case something like this happened."

"But the short one's a girl and the tall one's a guy," Dillon said. Then folding somewhat to Little Jack's glare, he said, "No offense."

"If they're coopting that, they're vising the faces," Little Jack said. "And our plan will fall apart anyway. We have to just hope Davis was right about their camera security that they're only noticing the basic body shapes."

Vincent finished with the handcuffs and the briefcase. She had the jewel in her hand. It was gorgeous; refracting every tiny amount of light which entered it and spitting it out in glorious beams of color. "Who gets this?" she asked. Little Jack pointed at Dillon. Vincent tossed the gem to him. He straightened quickly to catch it. She then took the briefcase to Little Jack, who was straightening his jacket over his pistols.

The large doors on either side were now opening, and light was streaming in. The briefcase was handcuffed to Little Jack, who called out to Dillon, "You think you can get it to the autocraft without killing anybody?"

"No promises," Dillon said with a wry smile as he strutted toward his waiting partner on the road. Little Jack glared at him, and Vincent stepped in front. "We got a mission to accomplish, yeah?"

Little Jack took in a breath, and said yeah. Vincent removed his frosted over glasses and placed them in his jacket pocket. "These tend to stand out," she said. Then she added, "I'll guide us."

The two decoys continued along their journey. They realized after a couple blocks that they didn't have the instructions on where to go if Karl Von Roberts Esteban Kareem won. That information had been given to Dillon and Gora. So they decided to move slow and hope the other team would get to the autocraft soon. At least Dillon's problem was impudence, not languor.

Hearing that the package was on its way, Jude took the next step in Virtua. Using the code Davis had given her, she opened up a new tube out of the escrow chamber, and sent most of the funds into it. She then used the code into her team's account and opened a new tube with that; sending the remaining funds down this path. It was always tempting to send more of the

funds into her team's account, or to open a new one directly to her own account. But she knew that the trouble this would bring her would be greater than the reward, so she never did. Instead, she closed both tubes once the funds were on their way.

Little Jack's hopes had been well placed. Dillon was strutting proudly and Gora's strides were naturally long. In no time they arrived at the causeway where autocraft hovered in for a landing, or took off from the platform; sometimes for other parts of Broadview Station, and sometimes to other stations around the planet.

The two crafts waiting for the corporate spies were painted a faded purple with rust and dirt layered over their weather-beaten bodies. Not exactly the romantic spy craft Dillon liked to fashion for himself, but it would keep their low profile.

He strode toward the front autocraft, removing his jacket as he went. Rather than pulling out the jewel for all to see, he figured it would be better to hand them the entire jacket. Gora, meanwhile, went toward the back. She had watched around them to make sure they weren't followed. Everything had gone smooth. No one was onto them. They were about to get away with this. But that was the thing. The steps had gone a little too smooth. Dillon had a sudden thought that if Davis had so much control that he was able to cover their tracks so well, why did he hire such an expensive outfit as Unter-Org? There was a piece that wasn't quite fitting here.

Dillon had handed the jacket to the driver, who had grabbed it. But Dillon was not letting go. He was thinking, considering. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Gora get into the back autocraft. Stam was in the driver's seat chewing some gum, an impatient look on her face as she waited. Dillon looked into the front autocraft. The driver was in the front and there was one passenger holding a small controller in her hand. The backseat was clear, and with plenty of room for himself and Gora. Why hadn't Davis arranged for them to just ride in that vehicle?

He pulled back on the jacket. The driver immediately reached forward and got a firmer grasp on more of it, and he yanked it into him. Dillon still had hold of the jacket when the passenger pressed a button on her device. The rear autocraft exploded! The surprise and the shockwave knocked Dillon over, and he lost hold of the jacket. The autocraft sped away.

Little Jack and Vincent heard the explosion from a half dozen blocks away. Vincent looked toward the sound, then at her partner with uncertainty. Little Jack had taken his glasses from his pocket and calmly placed them on his face. Subterfuge was now a burden, and their best course of action was to maneuver as flexibly as they could. He held forward his wrist with the handcuffs, and she picked them off him as easily as if she had a key.

As soon as the cold iron was off him, the small spy's hands drew his pistols, Huginn and Muninn, and he turned toward a doorway where a squad of security officers were emerging, guns drawn. Huginn fired a flurry of laser blasts while Muninn shot small explosive rounds which spewed fire and smoke and chaos. By the time the survivors of the squad had cover and were able to peek out of it, the pair of criminals were gone.

The explosion of the autocraft had been heard as far away as the ballroom. Something in the acoustics made it sound like it was closer, and the crowds began to panic. People were running every which way. Carres and Eddie searched for each other. They were beaten around by the crowds like a boat in rapids. Eddie felt someone kick him, and he was sure it was on purpose, but he couldn't find the culprit. Carres could feel people stepping on her dress, but she could swear someone was grabbing at it, and she yanked at the folds to draw it in.

Then they found one another. Through the swirling bodies they could see each struggling against the storm, dodging and weaving to unite. But then they each saw something more.

Behind Eddie was a man raising a knife, about to bring it down on him. Behind Carres was a man with a gun, about to fire. Eddie spotted a small plate on a table near him, and he scooped it up and flicked it like a Frisbee at Carres' assailant, hitting him squarely on the nose.

Carres dodged to the right of Eddie, leaping off the ground and planting one of her high heels into the back of an innocent bystander. She kicked off of him and flew at the man with the raised knife, a feral look across her face. He tried to turn the blade on her, but she simply slapped it away, and landed on his head. Blinded by her dress, he swung wildly to get her off. She arranged her legs around the sides of his head, grabbed his shoulder firmly with both hands, then twisted with a jolt, and he crumpled beneath her.

Eddie's fist landed in the middle of the other man's chest. His lungs fell to his back, and his head fell forward. Eddie's hand cupped under the man's chin, and he pulled him up and forward, causing him to flip over. The pistol flew away somewhere. Eddie didn't care. Once he had the man on his back on the floor, he punched his face several times until he wasn't moving.

The crowd around the Insanity Twins had now parted; afraid of them as much they were any explosion. The two lovers paid them no heed. Their eyes locked on one another. Her face was covered by her scattered hair; his face was covered with another man's blood. They ran to each other and embraced in a massive kiss, their faces smashed together, him pulling her into a dip and her leg reaching out of her dress and around his butt.

Through their earpieces they could hear Little Jack calling to Guv. He was responding with urgency. "They're breaking in. I could use some backup," he said.

Eddie and Carres released one another, and Eddie responded, "We're strassing our way." "Jude is..." Guv began to respond, but then they heard a blast and a thud.

Guv had been shot down. The station agents moved toward him cautiously, their guns raised in professional movements. The closest one confirmed he was dead. A voice came over the comms for them. It was Davis. "The female agent should be in the next room. She's in Virtua so she won't be any trouble. Finish her off; then support the other squads."

They acknowledged, and approached the door on the opposite end. Once set, the one closest to the open button pressed it and the door slid up... partially. It stopped at waist height. One of the agents leaned down to look inside, his gun at the ready. He could see a hand splayed out of one side of a deeply cushioned chair. She was in there, and probably still vulnerable. He would just need a slightly better angle to get a killing shot. So he leaned forward, watching the hand connect to an arm, then...

The door slammed shut on the floor. The man was beheaded. All that was left on the side with the five remaining agents was his body and blood leaking out of his neck. Two of them in the back turned to leave. The door through which they had entered slammed shut, landing on the foot of the front one. She screamed in agony, stuck to the door.

Then the door to Jude's room slowly opened again, invitingly. This time it went up only a couple feet, just high enough for them to see the head of their comrade. Cursing under his breath, the commander pulled back the beheaded body, then he leaned down, lying in his drained blood, and aimed his carbine into the room, up at the chair. If he filled it with shots, he was bound to hit her.

Just then the lights went out. There were no windows, no reflections. They were in pitch blackness. The commander was about to create some by firing into the room. But then a loud, mechanical squeal pierced the room, stunning everyone and making them clutch their ears as they screamed in pain.

The officer overcame his pain enough to pick back up his weapon and fire a plethora of rounds at the chair, green light strobing as he did. The chair chipped into pieces. One of the other men managed to turn on his wrist light. It shook around the room as he pulled himself together, and he managed to point it into the next room where his boss was shooting. The chair had been blown to pieces, but no one was in it. The hand they had seen earlier was gone.

Then there was another disturbing detail. The man was pointing the light at chest height, meaning that the reason they could see the chair was because the door was open again. All the way.

The woman dropped suddenly from the roof. She landed a blade through the face of the commander on the ground. Her other hand bore a pistol, which she fired into the one with the light, then the other two not stuck to a door. The last one managed to pull his carbine and fire wildly, but was down before he got off another shot.

The last one cried with panic as she shook at the outer door. She tried in vain to press the open button, but it would not budge. She was alone in darkness.

No, not alone. She could hear the footfalls of her killer walking across the metal floor. Closer. Closer. Each step caused the agent to gasp. Then the woman was right behind her. The agent could feel the cloth of the woman's toga shirt against her uniform. She could hear the brush of her fingers against the gun near her back. She could smell the breath of the woman after it brushed against her cheek. The agent tried to hold back her tears. Crying at one's own death was for the weak.

"Name," the woman's voice said.

"Agent... Crystal L..."

"Not your name. Who sent you?"

The woman tried to say it, but it came out as a stutter. She cursed herself. She would die because all she could say was the sound of the letter "D" over and over again.

"Davis?" the woman demanded.

"Y-Y-Yes."

The door opened before the agent. The light of the hallway blinded her. She was pushed forward. She fell to her knees; her feet could no longer hold her upright. She heard the door close behind her. She did not wish to look. If the woman wished to make her escape, the agent did not want to be shot for witnessing which way she went.

It would later be discovered that a hole was blown in the floor, and no trace of the woman was ever found.

Little Jack and Vincent tried to move quickly while not in a full on run along the side of the street which led to the autocraft causeway. It was difficult to blend in since they were heading in the opposite direction of most people, but they kept going.

They were a block away when they saw the wreckage of their escape vehicle. They could make out a burning body inside. Little Jack could make out more through his glasses, but he spared Vincent the graphic description.

And they saw Dillon struggling along the ground, trying to get to his feet and stumbling, making slow progress. Vincent started toward him. Little Jack grabbed her arm and stopped her. She began to protest, but before she could say anything he motioned his head toward a group of guards hurrying to Dillon, weapons drawn. This was out in the open; there was nothing they could do.

They were coming up from the side of Dillon, so he did not see them. He raised his head and saw only his two co-conspirators, his teammates, his fellow members of Unter-Org. They had come to save him, so he had thought. But he spotted Little Jack's hand on Vincent's arm. He saw their planted feet. He realized they were not there to help. They would only watch. A rage boiled up within him.

But the rage was useless. The guards were soon on him. One of them prodded Dillon with an electro-rod, causing him to scream and convulse on the ground. Another bound his hands, while another kicked him. There was more electric prodding. There was no need for it, but no one was going to complain.

Vincent wanted to, but she had to pull it all inside. "We have to go," Little Jack said. Vincent understood, and they backed away into the crowd.

It was the last Dillon saw of them before a boot knocked him unconscious.

Eddie and Carres were also trying to remain hidden among the crowds. Unfortunately they had dressed so much to impress that this task was nigh impossible; that and the fact that Eddie still had blood all over his face. They were on their way to their escape ship. This had been the plan if things went wrong, and things had definitely gone wrong. No one was answering on comms, so this was all they could think to do.

But Carres got a strange feeling as they got close to the space port. She wondered why they hadn't been able to at least reach Davis. He had controls within the city. Eddie reminded her that he didn't have control *of* the city, just within it. "I know," Carres said. "But you'd think he would leastways be able to get *something* through."

"He might have gotten something through to Guv," Eddie said.

"I know," Carres said, trying to reason it through. "But let's slow up a bit. Make sure no one's ranging us."

"Okay, babe."

The pair staked out the port from a block away. Above them, the roof of the station gave way to the thin yellow sky above with several twinkling stars peeking through. They saw nothing suspicious about the port from the outside; no reason to believe they couldn't get out in that manner. Carres took in a nervous breath. Eddie searched around them. No one was coming up from behind. They looked to one another, nodded, and started forward.

Suddenly their comms opened up within their ears. Vincent's voice came through some static. "Come in. Any of you still out there? Hello?"

"Team Ballroom, check," Carres said.

Eddie shot her a strange look. Carres shrugged and whispered, "Good a name as any."

"Team... Fakery is here as well." Carres widened her eyes a little toward Eddie as if to tell him others have odd names, too. "Things are a bit of a bust, so..."

"No shaz," Eddie added.

"Best route is public transpo extraction," said Vincent. "Port of entry three."

Eddie turned away from where he had been facing, about to explode into the comm.. "Public transport, are you m..." He stopped. There, he could see Vincent and Little Jack through the window of a coffee shop. They were sitting on stools facing outward at Eddie so they could speak softly and not be heard by the baristas.

"We have few choices. Staying on Broadview Station will get us picked off eventually. But..." Carres noticed Vincent and Little Jack pointing frantically to the left. She pointed this

out to Eddie, and the two of them rounded a corner. Vincent continued, "...if we all meet at Port Three I know a driver we can bribe."

Eddie and Carres suddenly saw why their teammates were pointing to the side so frantically. A squad of guards who had been inside the space port hurried past. They did not look to their left, where they would have found their marks. They were in a hurry to get to Port Three to capture their targets.

Carres made sure to wait until all the guards had gone by to respond, "That's a good jist. We'll be there."

Vincent and Little Jack then rose from their seats, leaving the communicator behind. Carres and Eddie tossed theirs away as well. The two teams met, and, though Eddie and Carres had a plethora of questions, all was held until this was done. Little Jack clearly had a plan.

They went to a quieter, side portion of the space port; a gateway where Little Jack could bribe a single guard to get through. It had cost him everything he had been paid for this job, but it beat being imprisoned.

Once through, the small group could pick among several private vessels. They would all be owned by the rich and powerful, so they would be angering someone who would go after them. But that would be the future. For now, they just needed to get to another star.

They picked one with sharp edges, a cockpit on the right side, and a bust at the front of storm clouds. It was called the Cloudman. Little Jack ordered Eddie and Carres to keep watch while he removed his specialized glasses and handed them to Vincent. "Use these to vis what you need in order to get that door open," he said. Vincent fumbled with the glasses and put them on. They looked even more comical on her than they did on their owner, which was saying a lot, as far as Vincent was concerned. But she immediately saw why he wore them. The sensors within them provided her with every sort of vision type she could need: X-ray, gamma, targeting, focal point, everything. She could even see where extra amounts of energy built up.

And so, as Vincent pressed each button, she could see how much energy was utilized and exactly where it went. Being a bit of an expert on lock systems since she used to help build them, she knew where the energy was supposed to go when the correct code was being typed. So with each button press, Vincent spotted whether the electricity was going to the right location or not. When correct, she took note and continued on. When incorrect, she cleared the entry and started over, typing the keys that were right until she got to the point where she was at.

This process took a couple minutes; a time when Little Jack was useless to them since his glasses genuinely helped him see; but Carres and Eddie were able to watch for anyone watching them. Through one of the long windows, Carres spotted a few station agents that had been left behind. They were looking among the crowds, still expecting their small party to go in through the standard way.

Eddie noticed some of the port security taking an interest in them. "Let's get this done," he said in a sing-songy voice. Carres saw the guards as well and seconded his voice with a grin on her face.

The pressure unfortunately caused Vincent to miss a button, and she cursed as she fell behind. "I'm going as fast as I can," she hissed.

"Do I need to shoot something?" Little Jack asked. His eyes were facing entirely the wrong direction, so Eddie told him to sit tight.

Carres noticed the station agents inside. They noticed the port guards walking in their direction, then they noticed their little party gathered around a ship's entrance. "Shaz, shaz, shaz," she sang in the little tune she and Eddie were humming.

“It’s now or a gunfight,” Eddie hummed, his hand going to his holster.

“Now,” Vincent exclaimed, and the ramp began to lower with a depressurizing hiss.

The station agents were joining the port guards on the tarmac in chasing after the spies as they jumped onto the ramp before it was fully lowered. Vincent shoved the glasses back onto Little Jack, and they were the last up the ramp.

By the time Little Jack made it to the cockpit, Eddie was powering up the ship. Jack leaped into the seat next to him and shouted for someone to close the ramp. He then began their liftoff. “We’re not fully powered y...” Eddie started.

“Hang on!” Little Jack shouted. He knew that they had enough power for the lesser gravity of the planet and the distance of the station from its core. Having practically grown up on ships, Little Jack could almost feel how much power they needed to escape the ground. But that door was still not shut. “Close the geffaring door!” he shouted.

Eddie pressed a button. The cockpit door closed. Good enough for the moment. At least no one would be thrown out.

Laser blasts were knocking against the hull of the ship as it lifted off. There was a slight chance they might hit a weak spot, so Jack turned the back thrusters toward those firing and brought them up to full power. The men and women scattered, and the Cloudman raced away into the yellow-brown mists of the gas giant.

It was effectively the end of Unter-Org. Davis had known where their primary base of operations were, and who knew how much else. Guv had trusted him with a lot. He had been slipping recently, and the organization had been failing as a result. So the best plan now was for the survivors to become as difficult to find as possible. That meant spreading out.

And so they did; laying low, taking jobs as individuals, bringing on one another when they could, and biding their time for the day when they could find Davis and his organization again, and take their vengeance.

**The End**