

As my shift rounded the 53rd hour, a flashing indicator signaled an incoming message. It was Wylie and I gestured to the console to answer his vid-chat. His blonde, round face came into 4K view.

- Sup Doris.
- Sup Wylie.

I greet him without turning away from the switchboard. I knew he wouldn't take offense, as this was standard operator protocol.

- Garcia is going to be a couple hours late to relieve you today.
- Really? Sup?
- Ocean stuff, delayed outside Bermuda. His ride is docking here right now, and it'll take him a bit before he can get suited up and into the elevator.
- Suuuuuuucks.
- Ya, anyway, just a heads up.
- Am I getting overtime...?

He signed off before listening to my question, probably on purpose. I'd bring it up after Garcia eventually got his ass down here and I got back to sea level. But that wouldn't be for another 20+ hours. For now, I was stuck at the switchboard. The giant console of live fiber-optic relays connecting Brazil networks to EU servers in southern Portugal faced me like a platinum and carbon fiber porcupine with quills on end. My lung regulator fluctuated slightly as the tides turned above me. The switchboard room ached a bit as it often did when the ocean floor shifted a little along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge.

I've been working as an operator since the first Sovereign Internet Treaty was signed. Murmurs of the need for sovereign networks started while Merkel was still chancellor, and when I was a kid talk of the EU needing autonomy from the US telecom industry sparked an entire movement. Many, like my father and uncle, felt it would balance out the distribution of data storage throughout the globe, but I'm not sure if much has changed since the adoption of this switchboard system. The first provision of the Treaty stipulated all the submarine fiber lines had to be retrofitted by third-party consoles like the one I sit at now. At first an international committee agreed that operator positions should be done remotely or automated in some way. But no one could agree on which subcontractor should oversee the project. Eventually even CERN was ruled out due to bias. It was decided by the IEEE that operators would have to be onsite, and that in the initial phases switching would have to be done by hand.

As a result, all these new companies—like the one I work for—emerged out of the ashes of defunct staffing agencies that used to find unskilled workers for data storage and other digital

labor jobs. Since a lot of those jobs became automated in one way or another, staffing agencies had a surplus of workers, but hardly any jobs. I guess politicians thought it would be a win-win for everyone to take those workers and literally throw them into the sea to become operators.

The agency I worked for was based out of Bogotá, but all filings and regulations came out of some charter city I'd never heard of in the Amazon. The city was like a neo-liberal, non-jurisdiction paradise, so somehow the committee that oversaw the implementation of the Treaty figured it could be trusted. Their rationale is beyond me, but then again most state-run things are. Go figure. In any event, I signed on and then got a new passport and steady employment, a first on both accounts for an unregistered citizen like me.

The job wasn't exactly a coveted position: switching signal batches from one server to another for 72-hour shifts at the bottom of the ocean wasn't exactly what kids aspired to be. But I didn't have the test scores to get into terrestrial planning or a material science masters. My sister, on the other hand, did fine with that kind of stuff. She works as some principle engineer for this huge wind farm in the Pacific. I think Elon Musk has a hand in it, but my sister couldn't break her NDA to fill me in on the details. She swears she's jealous of my "ocean floor dream job," but I think she's just being nice. I bet she imagines me as some Gundam pilot or anime character. She went for that kind of thing.

We don't really get to see each other all that much. She lives in the Bay Area and I'm stationed in a repurposed oil rig off the Saint Peter and Saint Paul archipelago. Another agreement from the Treaty reclassified all these little island colonies into non-national territories—21st-century city-state municipalities. I remember the Dutch having a fit when they had to give up the Antilles. Those islands were essential in constructing the coastal elevators necessary to take operators down to their switchboard stations.

It took the better part of 15 years to complete the first round of switchboards. During that time, barely any functional international telecommunications network existed. A provisional satellite uplink was offered for a hefty subscription which subsidized the cost of building elevators and new sovereign servers. But most people just went offline, or else used LAN configurations for local newsletters and file sharing. My sister and I were part of the "overlap" generation that grew up with the web but spent most of our teens and young adulthood on temporary mesh networks. I remember missing some things at first: skyping with friends in Miltú, listening and singing along to internet radio we streamed from America, playing Rakion with strangers in South Korea. Our sadness didn't last too long though, as my sister went to university and I started working at a Fedecafé coffee plantation during the agricultural boom that happened after the web was discontinued.

That was many years ago now, and I've been an operator at this switchboard for almost four years. I suppose that made me a veteran in the field. After Wylie hung up, I tried to remember my old social media handles, watching the switchboard for any irregularities. Many hours down here were spent recollecting the past. Mostly I try to avoid regrets and moments of embarrassment. In some ways that time wasn't spent on remembering, but on trying to learn how to forget.

The vid-chat indicator flashed again and I signaled "answer" to the sensor above the console. Garcia's bushy eyebrows and high, wide cheekbones blipped into view. While turning back to the switchboard, I felt my face stretch into a smile.

-Doris?

-Suuuuuuuup.

-Fucking weather... we got held up out at sea. I wanted to commandeer the gyrocopter on deck, but the captain said I wouldn't get altitude to clear the storm in time. My bad.

-Don't blame the weather...

-Anyways, I'm in the elevator with my gear, I'll get dressed before making the first decompression checkpoint.

-Cool.

-You alright?

-Yayayaya. Just getting a little butt sore, you know?

-Again, my fault. By way of apology, I got broadsheets for you to read on your way back topside.

-Thanks, did I miss anything?

-Nothing major, couple of obits.

-Well, don't spoil the news.

-Ya, wouldn't dream of it.

-Is it storming up there now?

-No no, skies are clear, just some shit up north.

-K.

-Things pretty quiet down there?

-Ya, an agency request from Poland, but nothing really strange.

-Well I'll be there in a couple of hours.

-K.

-Garcia out.

My smile went blank with the dropped vid-chat. Garcia and I became operators at the same time. We were recruited in the same round of hiring that occurred a couple years before the switchboards were turned on. During that time, we both had to undergo extensive surgery and

training to prepare for operator work. Lung augmentation required loads of recovery and adjustment time. It took me about ten months.

After medical procedures were completed, we underwent operational training. We learned how to read call signs, understand handshakes between server protocols, and know how to spot crypto-scams that would try to bury themselves within large packet batches. It was like learning a new language of numerical arrays and cipher algorithms. After three months of operation, the job kind of became second nature, and I started to recognize patterns of signal batches between servers. There's what I called the Five-O'clockers, people checking messages and playing casual holo-sims as they took the high-speed train home between Frankfurt and Zurich. Allnighters were the folks looking for on-demand companionship in the middle of the night. Then there were Jockeys who were making server requests all the time, like whipping a horse to speed ahead. Jockeys usually had unique IPs and other streamlined protocols developed when the first switchboards came on. Even though it was advised to run their request through scanning gateways, I usually just waved them through, daisy chaining their batches through several central servers in order to push them along. I figured at worst they were trying—clumsily—to commit electronic fraud. Catching criminals wasn't my job anyway, I was merely directing traffic. If I were directing cars at a busy intersection, I wouldn't stop each one to see if their insurance was up to date, even if I was supposed to. Most of the time, Jockeys were just Script Kiddies trying to impress their imaginary girlfriends, so why get in the way of simulated love?

Occasionally I'd get vid-chats from server admins for specific requests and patches. Most of the time relays of this kind were delivered in the form of automated requests. A bot would send a vid-chat of an attractive, ageless avatar with the familiar terminology required for making server handshakes. Though their simulated images were seamless, their grammar was always somewhat off—a remnant of spam days. It'd be more suspicious or worrisome to get a hail from an actual human. Usually these were only made in desperation. Either a central server was down and required rerouting, or an officer from some extra-sovereign data request management agency needed access to something that required voice-activated identification. I always found it easier to trust the broken wording of a bot than a request made by an actual human. With bots, motivation was clear; with humans, you could never be sure.

Human interaction wasn't limited solely to admins, agents, and other company employees. Most of the comm lines were open, and anyone with my callsign could PM me. Some thought the switchboards ushered in a second renaissance of amateur radio operators—though the technology and the protocols were more than a bit updated. Occasionally, I'd get a vid-chat request from an unknown call sign, and would pick up just for fun. It'd usually be some land-locked kid from Idaho or Oklahoma or some no-name place in America. For some reason, those people found talking to someone at the bottom of the ocean fascinating. I guess what they say is true: opposites do attract.

Operators tended to keep each other company during the middle 10 hours of a shift, and many times I'd get vid-chat requests from others working along the ridge. Jane, who worked on the Sebras-1, not far from here, would sometimes hail me to kill time. She was a sweet, even if distant, woman whose family came from southern France. I was amazed that her skin could retain its olive hue given her work schedule. But I guess her time topside was mostly spent outdoors, otherwise I don't know how she'd be able to maintain that Mediterranean complexion. When she faced away from the vid-chat camera her hair would cover the side of her face, making it hard to read her sarcasm when discussing the joys of life as an operator. As a result I agreed with her jokes sometimes, making me accidentally seem more of a misanthrope than I would want people to know. But for her being an operator was only temporary, a job to pay the bills before her husband got the VC he needed for some terraforming startup. If I sound jealous, I'm not.

The Sebras-1 is a line that connects Brazil and New York, so Jane's switchboard was a bit more congested than mine. She'd PM me usually once a week, and oftentimes we'd go for several minutes without talking as she made her patches from servers in Manhattan to a farm on the outskirts of Santos. I liked those moments best, sharing the company of a fellow operator without having to engage in actual conversation. It was the best way of being alone: in the company of others. Those moments reminded me of sitting in cafes during the early years of the overlap. People were still conditioned to the isolation of enjoying their networked life at home. But after the Treaty was signed the only way people in La Macarena could get online was by sitting together in—often illegal—relay hotspots hosted by local bodegas and snack bars. Satellite uplink signals weren't designed to accommodate multiple IPs at once, so people would have to sit in cafes and wait for their turn. My great-uncle once told me it reminded him of when there were timeshare mainframes at the university he attended in America. Seemed to me though that the whole thing was like going to the butcher, taking a ticket at the counter and waiting for your number to be called. Though we'd all be there at once, no one ever made small talk with strangers. We all donned a middle-distance stare, as if practicing our screen-eye look in anticipation to logging on.

Sitting in those cafes was like a rehearsal for my current occupation. As I sat and donned my default operator face, I could sometimes feel my cheeks atrophying, as if the muscle memory of a smile was slowly becoming harder to recall. Though around some people it was still easy to accomplish. As I thought this, I heard the airlock of the Garcia's arriving elevator hissing loudly. A red LED light flashed in my periphery, signaling that decompression was underway to acclimate Garcia to the beginning of his shift. I undid the tethers that connected my operator suit to the switchboard in prep for the end of my shift. The photocell watch embedded into my suit told me that Garcia was just under two hours late, not as bad as I had initially expected.

The LED ceased flashing and I patched the switchboard into a temporary autopilot mode and turned around to see Garcia bashfully waving as he entered the corridor connecting the decompression chamber to the switchboard room.

-Hola.  
-Hey Doris.  
-Que Pasa?  
-Ha, well...

He shrugged as he did.

-...Nada?  
-Si, Nada.  
-Mira... don't feel bad about being late.  
-I don't like to keep you waiting.  
-No worries, I'm just glad the storm wasn't that bad.

He was close now, and I could smell the sea level air that he brought down with him. I kissed him on the cheek in greeting and he returned the gesture. We hugged for a second, and he squeezed me to crack my back, lifting me slightly off the ground as the lower vertebrae popped in relief. He lightly sighed onto my neck as he left my embrace, smiling without showing his teeth. There was a time when we would've been a good couple, but I think we're past the point of seeing each other in that way, now he was more like kin than a crush. He kept his hands on my waist an extra beat as he finished his tight lip smile, a silent gesture of comfort that I'm glad to have noticed.

-And you? Que Pasa?  
-Nada.  
-Bueno. Well I'd better get to work. The papers are in the elevator for you.  
-Gracias.  
-You got it. Talk later?  
-Yup.

I crossed in front of him as I grabbed the duffle bag I brought down for my shift. I walked backward down the corridor, watching Garcia switch back from autopilot while getting comfy at the operator console. He made a quick patch that had been on hold while we traded places with an automatic gesture that I could feel myself doing during my next shift. The decompression chamber door slid shut with a mechanical clank as the interlocking latches hooked together. The room whirred and hissed preparing for my ascent, and I paced in the room before eventually getting into the elevator car. I saw the small pile of e-ink papers rolled up on the single, angular

armchair in the middle of the compartment. I picked up the top of the stack and scanned the headlines. Garcia was right, nothing out of the ordinary.