

*Sashal types rapidly, each key silently moving under his fingers. The light of his screen glints off his glasses, the only source of brightness in the dark room. The text on the screen steadily decodes, forming readable phrases. As letters slot into place, he smiles slyly. His mouse moves from window to window. Suddenly, he whoops, having cracked some cipher known only to him. He recovers from his celebration and gets back to work. He enters more lines of code, and the screen clears. Letters are now replaced by numbers. Very big numbers. He smirks. It was too easy.*

Wallace mops his brow, pacing around the room. It was one person. One person! His entire NSA division at his disposal and he couldn't catch one person! Billions in digital assets, entire banks emptied out in one fell swoop. The NSA couldn't trace or lure them. But the most frustrating part for him was that he didn't understand. The motive wasn't purely money. But they weren't some twisted Robin Hood either. All of the funds promptly went to hidden accounts across the globe. Wallace knew nothing about their background, not even his real name. All they knew was @jackalope, a handle. Wallace paces around. He thinks for a moment, then picks up his phone.

"You want us to do what?" The director of the NSA sits across from Wallace, dumbfoundedly gaping at his rising star. "We've traced him all across the globe. The closest we've gotten is a spoof in China, and that was a diplomatic nightmare! If we cut a deal, it's a win-win." The director shakes his head, rubbing his bald scalp. "Do you believe they'll agree?" Wallace nods. The director sighs. Wallace had never been wrong, and he'd never failed. "You can make a deal. But they return everything. Everything." He sternly looks at Wallace. "Yes sir!"

*Sashal breathes deeply. These hacks were too easy. Hundreds of millions of dollars, stolen. It wasn't like they were going to miss it. The funds were already being transferred. He childishly laughs. He starts thinking. What could he do with a million dollars? A hundred million dollars? If his dad wasn't in the picture, what could he do? He clears his head. He was only doing this for his dad. That was it.*

Wallace rubs his eyes. He had been tracking dozens of leads all day and all night, but they still couldn't pin down @jackalope. He groans. This was supposed to be the easy part! His computer beeps with an Outlook message. An email from the Cybersecurity Lab. He reads it out loud, "We've developed a new method for tracking signals. We think we can find what you're looking for. Can you meet in 15 minutes?" Wallace stumbles to stand up, his tired mind quickly waking up. He grabs his coffee and runs out the door.

"So what you're telling me is you can find where the signal is coming from using... satellite images?" Wallace asks dumbfoundedly. The pitch had sounded speculative at best, and he was even more confused once the methodology was revealed. He wearily approves the experiment. "It'll take a few minutes sir. We recommend you get some rest." Wallace shakes his head. He could survive on coffee for now. He would sleep later.

Number pairs scroll across several screens. Some of them stop. The researchers turn towards Wallace. "We've found your target within a few yards. That's as close as we can get." Wallace astonishedly gapes. It had succeeded? He thanks the man and rushes away.

*Sashal grimaces. Someone was trying to track him through satellite imaging. Amateurs. He might as well play along. He reroutes his proxies to an airport hangar nearby. He intends to see who arrives. Hacking into the traffic system and airport security network with ease, he leans back in his chair to watch the show.*

Wallace carefully trods into the hangar, loaned FBI agents in tactical black gear creeping alongside him. The hangar is empty, its dark slab walls void of anything but decades of wear. Dim bulbs line the ceiling, barely lighting up a quarter of the space. Wallace ponders for a moment. @jackalope was smart. Maybe even smarter than them. He glances around. He spots a camera hidden in a dark nook of the hangar, invisible to anyone who didn't look for it. It blinks red, tracking his steps. He watches as it scans over the group. Suddenly, he's struck with a realization. Cursing, he yells, "It's a trap!"

*Sashal laughs out loud, his brain racing. His opponent was clever, not easy to trick. This would be fun. He stretches his fingers. He assesses nearby targets. Finally, he spots the perfect one. An electric vehicle server nearby. Everyone had one these days. He just needed to... commandeer them. He rushes past the firewalls in mere seconds, selecting a few cars by random. He launches their automated driving, watching them rush towards the hangar. Their bulky forms block off the exits. Smirking, he mutters to himself, "Let's see how they get out of that!"*

Wallace hears a loud crash on both sides of the hangar. He sees smoke rising from wrecked cars by the entrances. He groans to himself. Approaching the wreck, he sees no drivers in the front seats. Large screens inside the car - miraculously intact - display messages ranging from "Autopilot Engaged" to "Self-driving Beta In Progress". He groans again. Who did this kid think he was? He shouts out, "Anyone see an exit?!" The others respond one by one. "Nope!" "Negative!" "What does negative mean? Just use English, man!" "Fine! No!" "Great! I don't see one either." "None here!" "Can't find any on this side either!" Looking for anything out of place, Wallace runs around the edges of the hangar. He stops at a porta potty near the back. Running his hands along the sheet metal reinforced walls, he finds crevices hidden in a rectangular shape. He pushes hard, and the entire section of wall opens up. "There's an entrance!" he begins to shout. As he does, heat rushes towards him. Clearing away the smoke with his hands, he sees more burning cars piled up around the whole perimeter. He curses furiously, noticing no visible gaps in the smouldering fence. They would just have to wait until the smouldering remains of the cars cooled down.

Wallace jerks up, finding himself leaned against the cold metal wall. The sun peeks over the burnt and twisted metal of the previously burning cars. Two agents stand guard, but most are asleep. He stands up, wincing as his back pops. An agent runs up to him. "Sir! The cars have cooled down, but there's still no gaps. We'll have to climb over them." The other agent runs to wake up the rest as Wallace converses quietly with the first agent. Seeing the waking group, he claps his hands. "Eyes here! We have a way out, but no idea where the kid is. We report back to base, and wait for more orders. Is that clear?" He doesn't wait for an answer,

nimbly jumping up the pile of cars. Agents follow, scrambling over. Wallace leaps to the ground. Pulling out a satellite phone, he talks into it, "We've traced a spoof. Awaiting further orders."

*Sashal watches as his pursuers climb out of the hangar. They wait outside as their leader speaks into a satellite phone. He watches for a moment. He types rapidly. After a few more clicks, he can hear the leader's communications. He's talking to some command center. "spoof. Awaiting further orders." Then, "This is Command. We're running the algorithm again." Sashal looks at his screen. The satellite script was indeed running again. He presses a few keys, not even looking. The line comes to life again. "We've found a new location. When you find him, remember. You can offer a job in return for everything he stole. Nothing else." Sashal cocks his head. They wanted to cut a deal? His mind races for a moment. Could it work? Maybe. It was worth a try. He clicks on the intercepted audio feed. "This is @jackalope. The location you're tracking is spoofed. The next one will be too. And the next one. But I hear you're able to make me a deal. How about this? You release a prisoner and drop all charges, and I'll return everything." He watches the leader glance at the camera, his face a look of pure surprise. He waits. "This is the NSA. We can offer you a job. Nothing more." Sashal sighs. Watching the feed, he sees the agent nervously look around. He realizes that he has the upper hand. He screenshots the agent's face. After a short moment, he joins the channel again. "I don't think you're in a position to bargain, Mr. Wallace. I've hacked into your so-called secure channels, your treasured industry servers, and your precious NSA. I have enough information to take your employer and its affiliates down in minutes. Take my deal, or the stakes rise." The line goes silent. Sashal laughs, reveling in their discomfort.*

A murmur spreads throughout the group. Wallace stares at the phone, rattled. Without warning, another message comes through. Not from the kid though. "This is Command. Name the prisoner." What were they doing? "Destance, Steve." Wallace gasps. He shouts into his phone, "Do not release that prisoner!" The line pauses for a moment. The kid again. "You have a deal."

*Sashal numbly gapes at the screen. Was it a trick? Could he... hope? The NSA was offering him his dad. His dad. He could see his dad again. He could see his dad again! He jumps up, cheering. This was real. It was happening!*

Wallace stands frozen to the spot. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't be real. Not him. Not Steve.

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Sashal taps his foot impatiently. They had told him they would meet here. As the seconds pass, he begins to doubt his decision. *This was a mistake. He shouldn't be here. This is a trap.* He breaks out of his thoughts as black vans screech to a halt outside. A young woman in a well tailored suit climbs out, agents surrounding her with guns. "So you're the little brat that's been causing all this trouble." Sashal shrugs. He discreetly steers the hidden security system he'd installed earlier. Small tranquilizer guns track each agent, cameras following their

every move. The leader pulls out a badge and several pages of paperwork. Sashal carefully examines each one. He nods in approval. Slipping out a pen, she commands, "Sign here." He takes the pen and signs his name. Agents surrounding him pull out their guns. He shouts, "Woah! Cool it! Shoot me and you're tranquilized in an instant!" The leader laughs loudly. "Relax cowboy. They're not for you." Another van pulls up. Its door slides open. An unshaven man dressed in an orange jumpsuit climbs out, flanked by two men. "Our end of the bargain," the leader gestures. Sashal scans the man. He smiles. Running into his arms, Sashal looks up at his dad. The leader loudly clears her throat. "The money?" Sashal smirks. "Already forwarded to NSA accounts." She motions for an agent. "Is that true?" "We just got a report from base ma'am. We've received over ten billion dollars in the past few minutes." The leader looks back at Sashal. "Trusting. What if we hadn't held up our end of the bargain?" Sashal only looks at her. She answers her own question, "All that money in one place. Just one hack. Of course. Not so trusting after all." As the entourage begins to leave, she turns back. "We have one more offer. A job offer." Sashal straightens up. He could have a stable job. He had his dad back. He had no charges against him. He was free. He walks towards the leader. "Accepted."

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Wallace paces around the meeting room, mopping his brow. The director rushes in, papers rustling around. "What is it, Wallace? What is so urgent you felt the need to call me at 2 in the morning?" He laughs maniacally. "Steve? You let him go? You just... let him walk free?" The director stares at him. "It was the best choice! He returned the funds. We even got to recruit him. A boy genius, all ours." "Best choice. Funds, money, power!" Wallace mocks. "That man is a danger to society. He will be the end of us all! I caught him, and I'm not about to let him go free." Wallace pounds the table, his eyes strained. His hair flies everywhere, and he trembles with every word. The director stands up. "What is wrong with you? Don't let this get personal. We will continue this discussion once you've showered and calmed down." Wallace storms out of the room muttering under his breath.

Sashal looks around, a campus full of tall, glimmering buildings and state of the art tech. The agent who had made the deal walks around, pointing out the cafeteria and the control center and the servers. The entire place is like paradise. The agent finishes, "and this building is where you'll be working. Cybersecurity!" Sashal chuckles. Even now, he realizes the irony of the situation. "It'll be nice to have you here kid. You seem smart." As he marvels at the situation, a tall man walks up to him. He recognizes the man from the grainy footage at the hangar. "Agent Wallace, right?" Sashal grins at him. The man only grunts, his annoyance clearly visible. Sashal frowns. "I'm really sorry about the whole EV thing. And the spoofing thing. And the runaround thing. I'm sorry about all the things!" "Of course you are." Wallace walks off, his sarcastic footsteps fading.

Sashal lies in bed, thinking. His dad lies in the bed next to him. "You did good, kid." Sashal grins. "Well now I don't ever have to do it again. That's a good thing, right?" His dad turns his head to look at him. "What if I told you I had a big scheme in the works? Lots of money. We could do it together!" Sashal whips his head around. "Are you joking? We just got this. Why

would we throw it all away?" His dad shakes his head. "For the money, son! For the money!" "Well I'll be making plenty of money here anyways. No need for a big scheme." His dad sits up. "What do you mean? It's all set up! It'll be fun. We can get out of this god forsaken place and get everything we've ever wanted." Sashal gapes. "What happened to you? This. This is what I've wanted. To be free!" "You aren't free! You're working for the doggone government! You're under control!" Sashal sits up too. "No. I'm not doing anything. End of convo." His dad lies back down. "Ok. If you say so." Sashal sighs. It was just a little hiccup. He had nothing to worry about.

Sashal wakes up, his phone flooded with alerts. "Data breach. Intruder detected." He looks to his side. He groans as he sees his dad's spot replaced by a note. He unfolds it. "I'm doing this for you son. For your own good." He slips on a fresh suit, resisting the urge to scoff at the ridiculous dress code. Racing out of his dorm, he heads toward the NSA campus. He picks up a phone and makes an urgent call. Grimacing, he grabs his government issued taser and walks out of the booth.

Wallace stares as his phone rings. Once. Twice. Finally, he picks it up. The boy, the darn boy's voice comes through. "The data breach. I know who did it. Meet me at the server room." Wallace doesn't have a chance to respond before the line hangs up. He pulls on his warm suit, breathing in its fresh scent. He carelessly picks up his weapon and slides it into his holster. "I guess I'm taking orders from a kid now," he scorns.

Sashal and Wallace stand in front of the server room door. Sashal trembles as he charges his taser. He opens the door silently and makes his way down the hall.

As Wallace follows Sashal, his weapon drawn, he notices that the boy is shaking. He knew that the kid's dad was behind all this, but hadn't paused to think how the kid might have felt. Was this what he was now? Cold, thoughtless, selfish? He lays a hand on the kid's shoulder. "It takes a lot of guts to do this. You deserve to be here. Never forget that."

*Steve takes out a thick, black card from his wallet. Pressing a small, embedded button on its reflective surface, he slides it into the card reader by the server door. The card beeps, then lights up. The door clicks open, and Steve slips inside. Steve glances about the room. Servers blink around him. He slides a plain black USB drive into one of them, his eyes drifting about. He would be rich. So, so rich. The drive beeps. He runs out of the room, making a straight run for the exit. Suddenly, a small form steps into his path. It shoots a taser at him. He collapses onto the floor, groaning. It was supposed to be clean. What had happened? His mind shuts down as his vision darkens.*

*Steve wakes up in an empty gray room. A dark, reflective mirror covers the wall in front of him. The door opens, and Sashal walks in.*

"Son?" Sashal just sits. "What's going on?" Sashal slams the metal table. "Don't call me that! I had everything I wanted. We had everything we wanted!" He breaks into tears. "Why'd you have to throw it all away?" Steve mutters incoherently. "I was doing it for you. For you."

Sashal stands up. "Keep telling yourself that." He leaves the room, softly closing the door behind him.