

# 1. I SHOULD CUT BACK ON CAFFEINE ANYWAY (INTRO)

People wound their way through the arches and over the mosaics of the train station like ants, occasionally bumping and jostling one another, trying to make their respective platforms in time. Estacion La Gran, situated at the heart of Mid-level Serana Metro, was always busy no matter the day, but today was exceptionally worse. The week-long Festival of Nanos was in full swing and many children did not have classes that day, so families were traveling all over the Metro and into the surrounding Territories to celebrate. This year was the tricentennial, marking three hundred years since nano technology had saved the people of the planet Nera from ecological extinction and pushed the world into the tech dominated future.

This many people meant more security, which spelled trouble in the mind of Lucas Ritter, of Nibelung Metro, but there was not any time to try and debate or delay. Like it or not, his package had to be delivered and it had to be on schedule. As he walked, an ad point on the wall activated and an ad appeared on his Retina-enhanced Display, or RED, from Jakob Bruner, the maker of the nanowool, navy suit he was wearing.

Looking away, his attention caught an ad point and an ad-

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vertisement popped up, reminding him election season was right around the corner, and with it was coming the first of several Executive Board debates. The CEOs of the top thirty corporations on the planet Nera, would duke it out in a virtual “fight to the death,” all in an attempt to convince the citizens of the Metros to spend as many vKampffs as they could on their favorite Corpos. The top ten would comprise the Executive Board for the year, while the other twenty would be relegated down to the General Council with the other 280 top companies. According to the ad, InSight, along with its CEO, Mark Elos, was looking like a strong choice to break the top ten, but he dismissed the ad before it got any further.

He walked a bit further before another ad point caught his eye, a documentary about Elegua, Goddess of Doors and Paths. She was a member of the Triumvirate, a group created when the three major religions of Nera merged into one. This had ushered in a new era of tolerance and peace, according to the doc anyway. These days, most people only mentioned the Tri to swear. Lucas rolled his eyes as the blond-haired, blue-eyed actress portraying Elegua sang a song about everyone working together as one. The doc was considered educational, which meant it was propaganda, so he could not dismiss it away. He was forced to watch the entire five minutes.

Tired of the ad bombardment, Lucas considered running an ad-blocker, but decided against it as he walked past a pair of heavily armed security officers, outfitted head to toe in black, military-grade, Monarch tactical gear. Their faces were completely obscured by the opaque face-shield of their helmets, featuring a glowing Monarch logo. Underneath it, a waveform appeared whenever they spoke. The officers’ hands each rested on the handle of the assault rifle that was tethered to their chest, ready to draw and open fire at any given moment. The one on the left looked up mid-sentence to scan Lucas as he walked by, having previously ignored an affluent, mid-level white family that had just walked ahead of him. Lucas kept his head down and kept walking.

Ad-blocks were a way of life, especially on the mid and low-levels of a Metro, where the amount of ads one might encounter were staggering, but the reigning government bodies, the General Council and Executive Board of the United Corporations of Nera, had summarily made possessing and using them a misdemeanor, so running them meant running the risk of conversations with the police, and for people of his particular shade, those conversations

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did not always end nicely.

Lucas checked the time, 13:42, meaning he was a little early, when another ad point crossed his view, triggering a commercial for Fuel, a major coffee Corpo with a nearby stand. He moved into range of the stand, ordered a latte from the menu that appeared on his RED, and nervously waited near the pickup area. Next to him was a family with two children, a sullen, teenage girl in a black Disorienters tank top and a pasty, pudgy boy, with a t-shirt playing a moving graphic of the popular cartoon pair Rufus and Rusty, an anthropomorphic dog, and his dim-witted, human pet. The duo starred in Pro-Corpo cartoon sketches with segments in between where they pitched products “for only the best kids on Nera!”

One of their most popular segments was “Star Sleuths of Week,” where they encouraged kids to scan as many people as they could with a custom Rufus and Rusty scanner, designed to spot those using ad-blocks, fake ID codes, and anything else that might propose a danger to society or lose the Corpos money. The kids who exposed the most people that week got a shout-out live on the show, meaning that legions of kids everywhere had turned into potential Corpo spies. “I want a Liquid Nitro Mocha!” the child yelled at his mother.

“But Honeybear, you just had ice cream for dessert. How about some milk to tide you over until dinner?” the mom pleaded with a worn look.

“I don’t want stupid milk,” he said. “I want Liquid Nitro Mocha! Liquid Nitro Mocha! Liquid Nitro Mocha! Liquid Nitro Mocha!” He was stomping his feet into the ground with every chant.

“Mom, please make him be quiet, he’s embarrassing me,” the sullen girl said, arms crossed and watching a livestream of her favorite vid star, Sierra Lunera, getting her nails done. The girl’s face was turning a bright shade of pink with embarrassment, the same shade as the animated kitten that was bouncing back and forth between Sierra’s nails.

The dad finally snapped. “Both of you, be quiet,” causing both children to sit in stewing silence. “Jayden, why don’t you use that scanner you begged me for a whole month to buy you?”

The boy crossed his arms in a huff. “Fine.”

Lucas watched as Jayden typed a few commands into the air, his face lighting up when his scanner launched, a holographic spyglass, while the Rufus and Rusty cartoons on his shirt now

donned matching deerstalker hats and scanners on their own REDs. Jayden, also now sporting a digital deerstalker hat, began by scanning his sister, causing her to groan and stamp her foot.

“Mom, will you make him stop scanning me? Shit! You’re so annoying,” she said.

“Excuse me, young lady! Watch your tridamn language,” the mom said, turning pink herself. “I just want to order one simple drink for myself and you two have to turn it into a fiasco. Jayden, stop scanning your sister. She’s not a criminal. Mikayla, take your brother over there so he can scan everyone else and I can get five minutes of actual peace!”

Mikayla grabbed her brother by the arm and began dragging him off in a huff.

“Ow! You’re hurting me!”

“Ugh, stop whining or I will actually hurt you.” Mikayla tightened her grip.

“Mikayla! Be nice!” her dad said, shaking his head as the pair of children left his view.

Finally, Lucas’s order was up and he chose the “pickup” option, making sure “drink now” was also selected. The digital coffee appeared on his RED, digital steam coming out of the hole in the top. He grabbed it and took a sip. As the nanos simulated the hot liquid pouring down his throat, he quickly started toward his destination. He considered the moving sidewalk but seeing how packed it was and that the crowd on it was content to stand in place and not walk, he decided it would be faster to walk next to it.

While walking, he saw another child walking alongside a holographic, purple bear in a princess costume. His scanner immediately recognized it as the one thing his daughter, Mayra, had been begging for all year, Princess Pinderberry, ruler of the Cutesy Bears.

Immediately, an option appeared in front of him to purchase it and pickup at a nearby kiosk. He couldn’t believe his luck. He had been trying to find one for months, but even the resellers were out, as this was the hottest digitoy of the past decade.

He was running short on time, but luckily, the kiosk was only a little out of his way. A few types into the air later and the receipt was sent to his RED along with a confirmation that the digitoy was ready for pickup.

The kiosk was a short distance away, so he wound his way to it, more ads showing up on his RED for more Cutesy Bears and oth-

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er similar products. He found the pickup stand and a “Deliver Now” button appeared in front of him as he approached. He pressed the button and his purchase appeared in his inventory, wrapped in digital paper, and customized with a special greeting for Mayra. He checked the time and realized this detour had taken longer than he thought it would, so he decided to try his luck with the moving sidewalk after all.

“Excuse me,” he said, as he moved around people standing still, trying to make himself appear as inconspicuous and invisible as possible. He was about halfway up the line when he ran into a roadblock: pudgy Jayden and his family.

“Excuse me,” he said as he had to the people before, only this time, Jayden and Mikayla did not move.

“Excuse me, please let me through,” he said again as politely as he could. Mikayla simply rolled her eyes.

“I said...” Lucas started before being cut off by the dad.

The dad turned to glare at him. “Don’t talk to my daughter. She doesn’t have to move if she doesn’t want to, so you can wait your turn like the rest of us. I don’t know why you people think you can just barge ahead of everyone else.”

Lucas’s dark cheeks burned hot with rage, but this was not the time and definitely not the place to cause a scene, so he raised up his hands in surrender. “Sure, my apologies.”

The dad turned away with a sneer. Lucas began to nervously tap his foot. He was nearing his window and needed to get to his platform, deliver the package, and board the train at precisely 14:02. Shifting around, he tried to look at his map to see if there was a faster way to the platform, but his map already had him on the fastest route. Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by a ping on his RED. He looked up to see that little Jayden had trained his scanner on him.

Lucas’ stomach dropped. His ID code was good enough to stand up to single scans here and there. Even law enforcement scans had a 99.4 percent chance of being fooled by the code. However, sustained, intense scanning would eventually lead to the flaws in that code being exposed, and those flaws would cause the whole thing to evaporate, exposing his true identity.

In fact, he was not Lucas Ritter, of Nibelung, but Deandre Slay, of Langwick Territory; a man painted by corporate media in the Metros as a terrorist and known in the Territories as a father

and a freedom fighter, working to completely liberate them from Corpo control. At the moment, he was carrying a physical document, some fate of the world thing that had been entrusted to him by the most wanted man on Nera, Dietrich Boateng. Boateng was the most patient and meticulous person Deandre had ever met, but Dietrich had thrown all caution to the wind and organized this exchange on a moment's notice, ratcheting up the danger to him and his contact significantly. Whatever he was carrying, it was worth potential exposure in broad daylight during the biggest holiday season of the year.

Deandre began to fidget even more as Jayden's scan began to pick away and unravel the ID code he was using. A small meter appeared on his RED with a percentage of the code's integrity and he watched it start to drop, slowly at first, but occasionally in chunks. Deandre knew it was only a matter of time before the scanner found the solution and unraveled the whole thing, and then he would have the weight of Monarch's security forces on him. More and more security officers were beginning to show up in the station now, causing the knot in his stomach to twist even further.

Finally, he got to the end of the moving sidewalk and made a sharp left to get away from the family, only to hear a familiar, irritating voice.

"This way is too crowded, we're taking a detour," he heard Jayden's father say, making his heart drop.

Picking up his pace and deciding to weave in and out of people, Deandre tried to avoid the irksome family with their pint-size private detective, but the station was too congested for it not to draw attention to himself, so he tried to walk as casually as he could. Jayden was still hunting him with his scanner in between periods of childhood distraction and Deandre's ID code was steadily unraveling. Soon, the game would be over.

Seeing the escalator for his platform in the distance, Deandre picked up the pace, glancing around to see if Jayden still spotted him. He turned back around just in time to see that an elderly man was not paying attention and ran straight into him, falling to the ground. Deandre's coffee cup also tumbled to the ground, the digital liquid splashing out, before the entire thing faded away.

"Are you okay?" Deandre broke his gait to attend to the man.

"Oh, I am so terribly sorry," the man said as Deandre stopped to help him up. "I didn't even see you there. I just get so

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caught up in trying to navigate this place! Even with the map directions, everything is so terribly confusing and it's so busy! Let me get you another coffee."

"It's fine. My doctor says I should cut back on caffeine anyway. Have a nice day."

"Nonsense. I insist on reimbursing you for the coffee. It was from that Fuel place and the Triumvirate knows that place is expensive."

"It's really fine, believe me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to catch this train before I'm late."

"Oh, right you are, my boy. Sorry about all of that. Thanks for not being too hard on an old man."

"It's no problem, sir. Enjoy your trip," Deandre said, turning to walk away. Suddenly, another ping made his heart sink again. Jayden had caught up and found him again, this time determined to finish his scan. Seeing that the bar was already dangerously depleted, Deandre dialed a script into the air and Jayden's scanner suddenly went dead.

"Hey!" Jayden began frantically hitting his dad's leg. "That man broke my scanner! He broke it! He broke it!" He was now in a full-on rage, wailing and screaming at the top of his lungs. Deandre tried to move away, but the assembled crowd was blocking his passage.

"What did you do to my son, you thug?" Jayden's father said, leveling a pale finger at Deandre. The crowd was starting to gather more now and over his accuser's shoulder, Deandre could see the black boots of security officers starting to head his way. Not seeing another way out, Deandre took a deep breath and took off at a dead sprint in the opposite direction, shoving his way through the crowd.

Jayden started running as fast as his chubby legs would carry him to give chase but was quickly overtaken by a security officer. The officer, gun in hand, hit the child in the head with the butt of his rifle, sending him sailing through the air, his head bouncing off the ground with a sickening thud. None of the officers broke stride as they sprinted past his lifeless body.

"My baby! My baby!" Jayden's mother's wails echoed throughout the terminal as Deandre ran for his life. The security officers all scanned his ID code at once and it unraveled completely.

"Deandre Slay! You are under arrest! Stop running, put your hands on your head, and lay down on the ground!" the lead security



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officer boomed as they stormed after him.

Deandre did not comply and kept running as fast as he could. While he ran, he tried to type a message to his contact, but his connection to the global network, the LINC, was being jammed. While the LINC was jammed, he still had a local connection, so he dialed up a script called a hax and sent it to the security officers. Suddenly, their REDs filled up with thousands of ads for digisans, obscuring their vision while the ads' offers for digital sex boomed in their ears.

Deandre used the distraction to duck into a nearby bathroom stall, where he hastily checked the time and train schedule. It was 14:00 and he could tell from the local network that the trains were still running. If he could make it to the platform, he could at least make it out of the station. Assuredly, there would be more security forces waiting at the next stop, but he would be clear of the LINC jamming and be able to alert his team, which gave him a fighting chance. If he stayed in the station, he had a one-way ticket to a black site on the moon.

Without a minute to spare, Deandre dialed a command, and his navy suit was replaced with a pair of ripped jeans, a leather jacket, a black cap pulled low to his eyes, and small, freckle-like dots on his skin to fool facial recognition scans. Activating a fresh ID code, he exited the bathroom as Andrew Nash, of Neo Columbia Metro, and turned to head back to his platform, doing his best to walk casually, but quickly. The security officers were back on patrol after neutralizing his hax, scanning everyone they could find. Luckily, his new ID code would buy him at least a few scans to get up the escalator.

In the distance, a crowd had gathered around some medics, who were zipping up a small bag, about the size of a pasty, pudgy boy who was probably the same age as his daughter. Deandre fought back the pangs of guilt that stabbed him in his gut. He had to focus if he wanted to make it out of this to see his little girl again. A few scans pinged his RED, but the code was holding. Finally, Deandre reached the escalator that held his freedom. His clock hit 14:02 and the train arrived, right on schedule.

He started up, realizing that a group of officers had formed a checkpoint at the top, and he knew he only had seconds to board that train. Taking a deep breath, Deandre activated a stim script, the nanomachines in his blood flooded his body with adrenaline,



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and he took off up the escalator at a dead sprint. The officers, seeing what was happening, stood to block him, but he leaped with all his might and hurdled them, not breaking stride as he landed. The door was closing just ahead of him, so he reached out his hand to stop it.

The door recognized the obstruction and opened, only for Deandre to see the barrel of a shotgun pointed straight at him. He looked up and saw a glowing Monarch symbol as a slug struck him in the chest, stopped from penetrating by the armor woven into his jacket, but knocking him flat on his back. Immediately, the officers were on him, kicking him, beating him. He was not fighting back, yet they continued the assault. One of the officers activated a script that forced everything he had in storage out of compression, his possessions spilling out on the floor: a gun, a small, antique notebook, and Princess Pinderberry. The digital packaging unwrapped, and the holographic princess started to wave her wand, showering the air with cutesy dust.

“It’s so wonderful to meet you, Mayra!” Princess Pinderberry said. She waved her wand and sparkles showered around Deandre.

“Mayra.” His daughter was the last image he saw before he passed out on the ground.