

ECHOES

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Loopholes

Mallory Park hunches forward over the desk, icy blue eyes glued to the screen of the laptop, a single glow in the otherwise darkened room. Numbers and letters filter through her mind, faster than most people could read, let alone make sense of. The digits on the screen appear jumbled, random, but there is always a pattern, always a solution – and she always finds it in the end. She watches as the code expands, letting herself sink into it, becoming immersed in it, sorting and searching...

Searching for...

Loophole.

She spots it. Her pulse lifts a notch as everything clicks into place; a beautiful, crystalline stillness inside her mind. She checks it again, breaths coming a little faster.

Yes, she thinks. There it is, hidden within the programming; a way in, a weakness everyone had claimed didn't exist. Adrenaline ripples through her, elation coupled with the underlying urgency she always feels this close to the end of a hack. Her thin, black-gloved fingers stir to life and race across the keys, the tips just poking out of the cut-off ends and clicking softly against the plastic. With each stroke, she starts to edit the code, starts to mold it, to persuade it... and she begins to ease her way through. Her pulse is racing now; she is alive and surging and *powerful*...

The minutes tick by.

A strand of dark hair falls down across her face. She flicks it back with a jerk of her shoulder, barely lifting her hands from the keys. Everything is slotting into place, fitting deliciously into a pattern with design and logic and cohesion...

It's going to work.

Finding the password had only been the first step. Now, after layers and layers of security, after bypassing hidden traps and authentication checks, she is almost there. She can almost feel it...

Almost...

She types the last few strokes, blood pumping in her ears...

And she slips through.

The screen changes, the code disappearing to reveal the flying bird logo of Harrison Copeland Pharmaceuticals – the final layer of security bypassed with no alarms triggered. That's the key; soft and silent, not loud and damaging.

A needle, not a knife.

Something inside of Mallory releases – both a rush and a kind of relief – and it's as if in that moment everything around her feels clear, where usually there is so much noise. Her lips quirk upwards at the corners. Even Warden had warned her off this hack when she'd told him she'd accepted it. Too many layers, he had said, too many things that could go wrong. He'd kind of sounded worried for her. Her smile widens a touch.

There is always a loophole. You just have to look at things the right way.

She stretches out her fingers, flexing each joint with a sharp, controlled energy, then uploads the program she built to locate the content The Asker had requested. She watches as it starts sifting through the network, searching for the relevant files. He had given this hack specifically to her, specifically to Echo Six. He had said it was important, and Mallory doesn't screw things up.

Echo Six doesn't make mistakes.

She taps the middle finger of her left hand on the desk while she waits – four taps, three taps, four taps, two – watching as the status bar slowly fills, empty black to shimmering green. She rechecks for any signs that she might be being traced...

Careful, careful, careful...

But there is nothing untoward. No one even knows she's there.

The minutes tick by, then finally; SEARCH COMPLETE. Two hundred and forty-six files have been identified as mentioning the initial round of testing for the newly approved cancer drug Estalan, eighty-seven of which are marked with the highest security clearance; files that someone tried to bury. She copies them all. The transfer window counts down from one minute, fifty-four seconds as the status bar refills.

Mallory starts tapping again.

She checks for traces.

When all the files have copied, she opens one, a high security one. A quick skim confirms it is what The Asker was after; results Harrison Copeland didn't want anyone to see, evidence of mistakes, fixes and side effects. Results they had tried very hard – and, from the looks of it, paid a lot of money – to hide.

It was a waste, she thinks, feeling the slightest rush again. They couldn't hide them from her.

She closes the file and wipes her search algorithm from the HC network. Then she rewrites the system logs to remove all memory of her actions, before hacking her way back out, closing all the loopholes behind her. In a few days, when the files turn up leaked on the net, the techs at HC won't have any idea how they got out. There will be no recorded log off or log on, and no recorded search; no evidence she was ever there at all.

Just silence.

There's a knock on the door. Mallory starts out of her chair.

'Mal?' calls a voice, as the latch clicks open. She slams the laptop closed.

'Shit, Jed!' she snaps, yanked harshly back to reality as her little brother peeks into her bedroom, yellow light from the landing spilling in with him. She blinks in the brightness. 'I told you to knock.'

'I did,' he says.

'But you didn't wait for an answer!'

He seems to shrink under her glare. He's eleven, five years younger than she is, though he doesn't look it yet. He's short and skinny, seeming even smaller draped as he is in his oversized red Falcons jersey.

'Sorry, Mal,' he mumbles. She feels a tug of guilt. She shouldn't have sworn in front of him.

'What is it?' she asks, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice.

'I just wondered about dinner.'

She glances at the clock – she doesn't like watches, tight and restrictive – it's nine thirty.

Shit.

That one was only in her head. Her eyes flick back down to the laptop. The Asker will have to wait.

'I won't be long,' she tells Jed, but he's not looking at her any more. He's staring at the desk, where her finger is now tapping furiously. She self-consciously scrunches her left hand into a ball. 'You finished your homework?' she asks. He nods, looking back at her. 'And you wrote down all your workings like it asked?' He nods again. 'Okay,' she says, 'just... just read something else for a few minutes. Maybe sit with Roger.' He hesitates.

‘I could start – ’

‘Not by yourself,’ she stops him. ‘I told you before. Just wait, okay, kiddo.’

Mallory keeps her expression firm, clenching her fist tighter to keep it from twitching.

Jed hovers a beat longer, then leaves, closing the door as he goes.

Nine thirty, she thinks. *Damn it, Mallory*. She feels a fresh prickle of guilt.

He’ll be late to bed now and it’s bad to sleep on a full stomach. She’d read that and she knew it and she should have thought better. She should have.

She bites her bottom lip and sits back down in the frayed grey office chair, wheeling it back to the desk. It’s almost pitch dark inside her room now. Barely any light from the street lamp outside her window makes it in through the blackout curtains. She sits for a second, just breathing into the darkness, trying to resettle herself, then she reaches for her laptop, flipping open the screen and letting out its pale glow. Slowly, she unfurls her left hand, rests it carefully back on the keypad. The new files are still displayed on the desktop. Her muscles relax a little.

She did it.

She knew she could, but still...

She runs her usual system checks and scans. Every step must be careful, especially the last... She is clear, though; nothing new on her computer but the files The Asker wanted. No traces running.

Safe.

The smile returns. She wants to log in to the Forum right now, to share the files with The Asker, to tell Warden. She *wants* to... but it will have to wait. She glances back at the clock. She taps the pattern once, slowly.

Four, three, four, two.

She powers down the laptop.

Locking her bedroom door behind her, Mallory heads downstairs to the living room; a twenty foot by sixteen rectangle with a dark green carpet and fading olive wallpaper that her mom Jeanie had picked out when they'd first moved in and her dad Roger had hated but put up anyway because it was after that point when he'd stopped saying what he thought. He's sitting, now, straight-backed in his usual spot on the left seat of their too-flowery wicker couch, jeans and *Iron Maiden* T-shirt ironed to lines of military precision. It's a Monday, so he's re-reading the latest edition of Watertown's literally-named *Town Times* with a focus he rarely bestows on anything else besides ironing, Falcons football and the slowly dying engine of his '71 Chevy Nova.

They'd moved to Connecticut from North Carolina six years ago, after he was discharged from the Marines with post-traumatic stress disorder. Mallory had never liked the moving that had come with her dad's assignments – what with all its inherent uncertainties, and different people touching and boxing up her things – but that last time had been the hardest; so much more than the usual changing then, so much there was no control over. They had stayed with Jeanie's mom Ruthie the first few months before they'd found this house. Jeanie had grown up in Watertown and Roger had started reading the *Times* after she'd told him he should get more involved in her local community. He reads it twice through every week now, cover to cover, even the classifieds – and never goes anywhere beyond his twenty-six hours portering down at the hospital.

Jed is perched silently beside him, NFL sticker book resting in his lap. The kid wants to play, but he's so damn small. Mallory's started going running with him twice a week; if you're small, you've at least got to be fast. It's startling how similar they look, her brother and her dad side by side like that, and it catches at her a moment

because when it's like this you could almost imagine nothing was wrong. They look kind of like scaled versions of the same person – the same contented person – both with light brown eyes and thin mouths made thinner through pursed concentration. Their short hair curls in just the same way too, only the color different; Roger's a greying brown, Jed's jet black.

Jet black just like Jeanie's had been, before she'd started dyeing it.

Jet black like Mallory's.

The memory of an ache she usually keeps buried tugs deep inside, and she blanks it out sharply. Remembering doesn't change a thing. Whatever it seems, Roger still looks old, older than he should just sitting there. Where Jed doesn't quite match his eleven years, their dad appears well beyond the thirty-six he was last February, cheeks beginning to line like Grandpa's back in Atlanta. His eyes are tired too. He always looks tired.

Mallory bites down once on her lip. It's grating.

Jed looks up as she comes down the stairs, his solemn little face smiling at her before he gets up. He carefully folds his book closed and rests it on the wicker coffee table that matches the couch. Roger nods and says, 'Evening, Mal,' in his quiet gravel tone, still with a trace of its original Southern twang. His eyes don't quite meet hers, though, and he soon returns to the *Times*' stories of potholes and council meetings.

'Evening, Roger,' she replies, then crosses the room, tapping the pattern against her leg. No, remembering doesn't help. She'd started using first names for her parents shortly after her mom had left, four years ago, now. With everything that had happened... something about Mom and Dad had just started sticking in her throat, like it almost hurt to, like she *couldn't*... First names were more practical anyway. Roger hadn't even commented on the change.

Mallory heads through the glass double doors into the narrow kitchen-diner on the side of the house and Jed follows, coming to stand beside her as she takes their well-worn copy of *100 Healthy Recipes* by Irma Pardy off the shelf by the microwave. All of Jeanie's old recipe books are still there too, gathering dust, somehow having evaded the garage boxes that have long since swallowed the rest of the things she never came back for, but Mallory only ever uses the *100*. Jed looks up at the week's meal plan, tacked neatly to the yellow tiles above the basin. They work it out together every Friday night, ready for Mallory to buy at the store after her Saturday shift.

'Red meat yesterday,' he says, meticulously washing his hands twice – soap, water, soap, water – scrubbing under the nails, just like she'd showed him. 'That means veggie today.'

Mallory nods. That's what Ms Pardy recommends. It's tofu stir fry this evening, a quick one, thankfully. She thinks of the new files, just sitting, waiting for her, upstairs...

Shouldn't take too long...

She flicks to page forty-six without needing to look up the recipe number and Jed starts getting the ingredients out of the fridge. Mallory isn't the best cook. Things often seem to burn, even when she follows the instructions to the letter – and she does follow the instructions to the letter – and the phrase 'season to taste' is like her nemesis, but Jed never complains. Roger certainly doesn't. The important thing about it, though, the *important* thing, is that she makes sure Jed eats healthily. Jeanie was a good cook. Mallory had loved her lasagna and the banana bread she used to make on Sundays, but her food wasn't good for you – for all her talk about them staying slim. Mallory had found that out when she'd had to start cooking for them instead. Roger had tried, at first, but his concentration was shot and he dropped whatever he was

holding every time the oven timer went off. She'd banned him from the kitchen after he'd given Jed chicken that was still pink in the middle and made him sick for a week. She'd looked up how to cook online. That was when she'd realized how bad for them all the things Jeanie had made had been, seeing all the stats by the recipes. She had found the *100* on Amazon, buying it for \$5.78 after spending four hours reading reviews for cookbooks with the word 'healthy' in the title. Now, Jed gets a varied diet, a better diet. That's what matters.

She looks down at the sink and slowly eases the black gloves off of her hands, placing them on the window sill beneath the gauzy net curtains that let you spy on your neighbors, but not them on you. Her skin feels cold and naked without them, all tingly out in the air, and the whiteness of the backs of her hands and fingers stands out starkly against the summer tan on their tips and her arms. She's worn some variance of them almost every day since her parents realized they helped to calm the panic attacks she got when she was little. Sometimes noticing so much, her brain cataloguing every single detail around her whether she asks it to or not, it could be overwhelming, make her feel vulnerable – and touch has always been the *loudest* sense for her. It is intrusive and unpredictable, and the sensation of it can light up her mind like a blinding flare. When she was five, the gloves had felt like armor. Now, she's better at dealing with it all herself, but... well, she keeps wearing them.

She turns on the tap and starts washing like Jed – soap, water, soap, water. Under the nails. Thorough. Beside her, he has already started to chop vegetables. It still makes her slightly uncomfortable, him using a knife that sharp, but he's good at it now, each cut considered. She picks up a pepper and begins to do the same, its silky texture not as bad as the onion he is working on. He knows she doesn't like doing those. She imagines it on her skin then, fingers sticking together...

Stop.

She checks the clock on the wall, making herself think about the Forum instead, and wonders who's online yet. She hates waiting between doing a hack and sharing it. It feels unfinished, somehow precarious.

It won't be long, she tells herself. Not long.

She works out the timings in her head; eight minutes to prepare the vegetables, seventeen to cook, fifteen to eat, then another seven for clear up. Then she can log in – her door shut, her curtains shut – and she can talk to Warden and show The Asker just what she found for him...

Not long, she repeats.