

BY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
**BECKY BANKS**

*Cyberpunk meets  
smoldering billionaire  
in this high-stakes  
game of defense and  
one-upmanship.*



# FLUX

by award-winning author

Becky /HEALANI/ Banks



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*For Maui.*



## AUTHOR ' S NOTE\_

Regarding the technical jargon in this book, I'd like to note that I've been heavy-handed with the fiction. Some of what I've written is real and achievable, and others are "total sci-fi," as my husband, computer engineer, high-performance computing expert, and haxor-lite, has informed me. The knowledgeable will know which is which, and the rest? Enjoy the story.

### 'ŌLELO HAWAI ' I

In the rear of the novel, you will find a glossary of Hawaiian language used in the book. I drew on the work of the well-respected duo Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert (*Hawaiian Dictionary*, University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), as well as terms I learned in school and grew up hearing in our home. Our family on the islands spans generations, and the Hawaiian that was spoken by our friends and family is colloquial and sometimes grammatically different from what is in textbooks. I give my humble thanks to my family, Hawaiian language educators, and the generations that came before me; any grammatical errors within this book are all my own.

The last name of our main character, Hoyt Kaho'okalakupua is

derived from the word *ho'okalakupua*, which is a dynamic word with supernatural and magical meanings, including “extraordinary fisherman.” Because Hoyt’s family are fishers and their family ‘aumakua is manō, my humble intention was to create a fictional last name that honored those connections—and that helped to create a fictional atmosphere that my Hawai‘i community can enjoy.

Midway through the final edit of this novel, tragedy struck my home island of Maui. I’ve written and rewritten this section several times over the last few weeks since the wildfire. At first, I let out my grief. Then, knowing my family would be reading this, I dialed it back to just the facts of the event. And now, months later, I’m still struggling with the right words. Today, my message is to my friends and family: As we go through this, me ke aloha pumehana. I give you my strength and my aloha and am holding you tight in my arms. Together, as a community, hand in hand, we are getting through this. We will get through this.

For ways to help or get help, please visit any one of these sites:

- [beckybanksbooks.com/Maui](http://beckybanksbooks.com/Maui)
- [haiku-press.com/Maui](http://haiku-press.com/Maui)
- Maui County’s [mauiNuiStrong.info](http://mauiNuiStrong.info)







## PROLOGUE\_

*ONE YEAR AGO.*

Standing in the abandoned scrapyards warehouse, Vega blew out a breath. It had been a long time since she'd been in her hometown. It was both a relief to be closer to her little sister and also a bitter pill to be back in the place that had caused so much pain.

"Fists up, kid," Vega remembered her foster father, Junior, coaching her in the boxing gym in a repurposed warehouse not much different from this one and not far from where she currently stood on the southeast side of the city. She'd been light on her feet with him.

Ms. Maggie, Junior's wife, a kind woman with a short bob of gray hair, had taken to Vega and Scout, bringing them treats when she'd stop by the gym to give Junior his dinners when he stayed for evening sessions. Vega liked to watch the bodies in the ring, fists up, feet shuffling. She liked the idea of getting in the ring. There were rules to follow, and they were strictly enforced. Junior had invited her in more than once, and Ms. Maggie had encouraged her too, her gaze lightly touching the bruises on a young Vega's arms before handing her a crisp package of a Franz hand pie, but trust was still a hard thing for Vega to do, even back then. Vega took the treats she brought but shook her head; she wasn't going in. Plus, she usually had her kid

sister in tow, and a boxing gym didn't sound like the place for Scout, even though it was exactly what had saved them, one desperate day.

That day, the day Vega and Junior had gone from circling each other to being family, hadn't been great, and at twelve, Vega had already lived a string of days that weren't great. Her identification numbers, with associated personal information—the golden ticket of ID theft, originally taken and sold by her dick stepdad—had manifested two knee-breakers outside her middle school, looking for the actual human attached to the digital disaster named Melanie Alexander, the birth name she once identified with. A digital Melanie Alexander had hustled the wrong drug dealer, and the knee-breakers were keen on getting that money back. Even if the dimwits thought it could be a scrappy twelve-year-old girl.

She was thankful, on that parched September day, that Scout, formerly known as Harmony, was still at after-school care. Her scuffed Converse slapped the asphalt as she ran through the parking lots and alleyways, unthinkingly moving toward Junior's gym, the men just behind her. Sweat made her arms sticky as she sailed down the last alley, only to find she was being flushed out. A dark-blue sedan halted at the end of the alley, its tires chirping on the sidewalk. Her exit was blocked.

Torn shorts, a boy's tank, and long legs were all she had to work with, but it was enough. She tossed bins of garbage, recycling, and towers of cardboard behind her. Glass shattered. Fermenting food waste spewed into the narrow space. Shouts erupted from behind her as the two on her tail hit her chaos.

Ahead, the car doors opened. Vega saw the greased hair and flashing gold watch of the catcher as he got out.

She was lanky. Thin. *Easy to grab* was likely their thought. But Vega knew even then that lanky meant light, and light was fast. She had one shot to not get grabbed. She was back to sprinting as she aimed for the hood of the car. Then leaped.

Knees up, her ass hit the hood, and she slid. Middle fingers up, she sailed past the windshield, giving the driver a piece of her mind before she careened off the other side.

“Goddammit!” the driver yelled at her as she ran across the then-empty street.

Down the block, Junior, the man she’d only known in motion behind the ropes, was standing on the sidewalk talking with a client in front of the gym’s open garage doors. If he hadn’t been outside in that moment, if his eyes hadn’t been kind that day, she would have run in another direction. He was a tall and imposing man with a salt-and-pepper buzz cut and built as if he were made to move mountains. His warm brown gaze matched the color of his skin, and when that gaze lighted on hers, he smiled. Then he looked behind her, and his smile vanished.

He waved her into the garage, understanding enough of the situation without having to be told what he was witnessing. “Come. Get inside.”

Then he reached through the open warehouse door and picked up a bat.

After that, Vega and her little cub of a sister knew why people like them would go to Junior’s gym. If they weren’t at school or with Cindy and Peace, Vega’s best friends and the only two who knew what Vega and Scout’s home was really like, they were at the gym, high on practice jabs and chocolate chip cookies. It was at the gym that she overheard Maggie talking to Junior about adding Vega and Scout to their home. They had raised up what they thought would be their last bunch of foster kids and were now in their early retirement years. But when her gaze traveled over Junior’s shoulder and landed on Vega, who was running through the ropes with Scout, Vega had the first inclination that Maggie would do it again for two girls she and Junior had come to care about.

“We can’t,” Vega heard Junior remind his wife gently. “Her stepfather still has custody.”

That was the first time Vega had a clear idea of what a future without her stepfather, Lloyd, would look like, and the idea nestled like a golden seed in her abdomen and sprouted hope. Over the next month, it grew with a vigor that had Vega breathless with the possibilities when she thought about it too long.

Curled into Scout's bed, tucked into her little sister's pink sheets and fluffy unicorn comforter, Vega watched the glow of her never-sleeping computer over her sleeping sister's shoulder. Lloyd had quietly taught Vega how to use SFTP to hack into websites, and eventually, a shady friend taught him the dark art of rooting the box. That full control of another system meant opening the digital back door and gleaning what was there. Even young Vega knew they were doing something wrong, but Lloyd had told her they had to, that she and Scout were expensive. Only that too had been a lie, like everything else Vega had witnessed in her young life. Except now, she had a plan, fueled by hope acting as the accelerant. A plan to send Lloyd to prison that she perfected with the help of Cindy and Peace, who had enough desire to pull Vega and Scout out of their world and into Cindy and Peace's and the naiveté to pursue such a complicated and dangerous plan with gusto. A plan to clear the way for Junior and Maggie to step in, that saw them in the school and county libraries every chance they had, perfecting it within an inch of the law.

All Vega had to do was capture information about Lloyd's activities, the names of the people he was working with, the things they were doing—digitally washing money, defrauding the unsuspecting, writing checks that held new names that came with fresh identities like her's, Melanie Alexander's—and report it to the authorities. She figured they just had to survive another week while she worked.

It would turn out that they didn't have seven days to spare. They didn't even have a night.

Of all the information she was hiding that week, it was the oldest piece of info, the piece she was protecting and was not part of the plan, Vega mused now, walking the inside perimeter of the warehouse, her warehouse, that had nearly ended them. She and Scout had arrived home that night the way they always crept to avoid running into Lloyd. Through the dried grass and weeds of the backyard to their bedroom window they went. Vega slid the glass to the side, but before she could lift Scout in, her stomach dropped. The bedroom was in disarray; Scout's unicorn lamp lay on the floor, no longer prancing to new heights. Every drawer was open, its contents

spewed, and the manila envelope of Scout's papers containing her personal information that had been taped to the underside of Vega's desk was on her tossed bed. Torn open and now empty.

Vega helped Scout into the room and followed her in. Anger of a thousand bees swarmed through her veins. The envelope had contained the last virgin item of the Scout and Vega duo. It had been the pristine identity of Harmony Alexander tucked safely away from the monster who would take it from them, be it Lloyd or, even young Vega had guessed, the people he owed. If her stepfather had been up against a wall with what Lloyd called "clients," he'd take from his dead wife's kids yet again.

Carefully opening the door, Vega looked down the hall, with Scout holding on to her back pocket. She, it seemed, even for so young a person, could feel the tension that was erupting out of her sister.

The short hall down to the open kitchen and living area was clear and quiet save for the sound of keystrokes coming from the kitchen table.

Vega's heart raced, and pulling out her small phone, she clicked in messages to Peace and Cindy. And another to Junior and Maggie, asking if she could come by later. She didn't want to spend another night in that house.

Vega undid Scout's hands from her pockets, and crouching, she whispered, "Stay here, bug. I'll be right back." She put her finger to her lips. Then, considering something, she added, "And remember, if I tell you to run, you go back out the window to the neighbor and tell them, what?"

Scout's soft voice squeaked out the answer: "Help. Nine. One. One."

Vega kissed her cheek and smiled, trying to keep the worry off her face. "That's right. Nine-one-one. And you keep on telling until they do it. Now, wait here."

Scout let out a soft whimper, not wanting to be left alone, but did as she was asked and stayed in the doorway.

Vega moved down the hall until she could see Lloyd at the

kitchen table. He was in the same thing he wore every day, a worn black graphic tee with jeans. His strawberry-blond hair was thinning at the top. He was squinting at his laptop screen when Vega's pocket buzzed.

Cindy had finished softball practice, got her friend's message, and convinced her mom to drive by Vega's place. Another followed: Peace was coming by on bike.

Vega kept her body language casual—aggression had gotten her punched before—and came into the kitchen. Lloyd, deep in his “work,” didn't look up when she said, “Hey.”

He grunted in response.

“What's up, Lloyd.”

“Father, to you” was his automatic answer.

Vega looked down at the scarred and stained wood top of their kitchen table and felt the last of her good mortal soul leave her body and dark venom fill its place. She'd been right. On the table was Scout's identification. The number she would need to enter school, higher education, drive, get a job that paid more than the minimum wage and have a 401K. Her path out of that world that Lloyd had trapped them in was being digitally sold to pay off a debt he owed. Scout's tiny digital life was about to become saturated with dark and thirsty hands that would use her information and then discard it like an orange rind after the sweet flesh had all been consumed. All before she knew how to spell *fraud* or say *misdemeanor*.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

He gave her an angry glance. “Getting us clear. That's what.”

“The fuck you are!” Vega knew no one was getting clear of anything if Scout had to pay the price. Vega snatched the papers off the table.

She was suddenly being slammed against the kitchen counter, Lloyd's hand at her throat, squeezing.

“You don't talk to your *father* that way. Now, give it back.”

The papers were scrunched in her hand. Blood pooled in her head under the squeeze of his hand, but she kept the papers out of reach. Then she kneed “father” in the nuts.

His hand slipped off her throat, and she screamed.

“RUN, SCOUT, RUN!”

“You fucking cunt.”

She didn’t get in another hit.

He had her on the ground with a single strike of his fist.

The room spun as she remembered too late Junior’s counsel to keep her hands up.

Papers clenched in her fist, as if they were the actual body of her sister she kept from him, she put up her arms as he hit her again. He was on his knees straddling her when the nightmare got worse.

Scout hadn’t run. She came to Vega’s “rescue” and jumped on Lloyd’s back, pounding it with her small fists. Lloyd tossed her off and into the table. Her head hit the table leg, and after she lay stunned, her screams filled the room.

Vega tried to get up. Scout’s screams were like tethers to her body, and after each hit Vega took, she made for her sister. Lloyd was too focused on Vega to notice the front door opening and Scout’s screams ceasing.

Everything was happening fast: Vega watching Peace rush in, Cindy on her heels, ignoring her mother’s cries, and grab Scout; Cindy’s mother calling the police. Cindy had her bat from practice and entered the kitchen swinging. She connected with Lloyd’s temple with a crack, sending him backward off Vega. But not before she, her mother, and Peace, who held Scout in her arms with a hand over her eyes, witnessed Lloyd’s fist hit Vega’s face one last time, smashing her septum and loosening her front teeth.

Junior told her later that if Lloyd hadn’t gone to prison, he would have sent him to hell in a pine box. Vega grimaced now at the memory and scuffed her black thick-soled boot in the dust on the concrete floor of her warehouse.

Beauty flows precariously, but it had flowed for at least a moment then. Lloyd lost custody of his charges. Junior and Maggie were already in the foster care system as well-qualified guardians and picked up the girls from the care of child protective services in the emergency room the night Lloyd was arrested. Lloyd argued later in



court that his daughters, Melanie and Harmony Alexander, were his and that prison wasn't for the likes of a single father with girls to protect. Only the records the court was given showed him having two charges, from his last wife, named Vega and Scout Flux. With his poor representation in the face of provable serious allegations, and on top of that his seeming to be a fool of a man who didn't know the names of the children, he was removed as their guardian and awarded twenty-five years in prison on multiple charges of fraud and child endangerment.

Vega smiled now in the dark of her new warehouse. Being in her home city was bittersweet and tinged with the dark unknown, but she, Cindy, and Peace were older now. The project they started at twelve had blossomed, and it was only fitting that she be back where it all started. Vega's road to get there had been rough, but she was ready now. Ready to be closer to the women she loved. Ready to settle down, stop betting big, and put her past to bed.





## WHAT DO YOU DESIRE?\_

RAIN STRUCK THE KITCHEN WINDOW OF THE SPRAWLING HOME NESTLED deep in the forest of the West Hills, the pot on the stove mimicking the plunk of rain as the popcorn kernels hit its sides.

“You’re kidding, right?” Lei asked her older brother as they sat at the long wood-topped kitchen island.

“Not kidding,” Hoyt replied. He had hoped it could be a nice, peaceful night in, but his younger sister was out to prove a point as they tossed back handfuls of popcorn their father was making in batches at the stove.

“Ho’o,” she pressed, using the nickname he had gotten his first year playing college football over fifteen years ago. “This time last year you were loving single life and being on that *Forbes* tech billionaires list, and that local one—what’s it called?”

He didn’t want to answer, but unanswered questions gave him heartburn. “*Rose City*—”

“Yes! *Rose City Review*’s top ten bachelors list. Now, you’re all grump-tastic, saying, ‘It’s time for me to settle down,’ and, ‘Marriage is serious.’ What you and Londyn have is none of that—”

“It is.” He hoped his curtness would get his sister to drop it. But she was too much like him—and not just in their shared black hair,

hers long and always in a top knot, brown skin, and weird eyes that didn't know if they were brown or hazel and usually ended up looking a disarming gold—to let him off the hook. He may have even known she was right about the woman he had asked to marry him a month ago.

Londyn was the third in a string of bad time-investments and from an elite marriage broker who had promised him results. Instead, she'd said he was difficult and particularly discerning. But the thought of spending the rest of his life with someone should mean he could ask for the best. He shouldn't have to settle for mediocrity. Then again, he wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for. Just that he'd know her when he saw her. Thinking of Londyn now, however, made his stomach ache, as if he'd had ahi poke that had been left out for a few days.

“Admit it, Londyn isn't your type. Even Amy could see it in your face the other day, and if she can see it over a video call, that's not good. The marriage broker was wrong. Again. She pushed Londyn on you because her daddy is a shipping magnate who paid tons of money for the match. And she was the perfect angel when you two were under contract. Now? She's a party girl, booze and Ecstasy at the clubs. She's like a younger version of you—”

“I never did Ecstasy.”

“Right, like, that is my point. Let's face it—she's a different person. You and the matchmaker got hustled.” When he said nothing, she repeated, “Admit it.”

“Not doing that.” He reached for the fresh bowl their father had just set down, wondering if HR would allow him to fire Lei as his director of engineering at Hoyt Securities. It was *his* company after all.

“Fine, then, I will. Londyn 2.0 isn't the one. Let me tell your marriage broker what you really need. You totally have a soft spot for anti-heroes. And Londyn is so far from being an antihero she's an actual hero. Hero of social media selfies to make young girls feel inadequate.”

Their father chimed in from the stove. “Lei, that was unkind.”

Curtis was a tall, soft-spoken man whose hair had gone gray at the temples. His tan skin was the deep color of his plain morning coffee, evidence that he spent his days fishing, and now that he and his wife, Ginny, were both retired, golfing. Ginny would say she would never retire, as she continued to manage the Kaho‘okalakupua estate and trust. Curtis pressed his youngest child, “Londyn is going to be family. She’s ‘ohana—treat her with more respect.”

“Fine.”

“Come, Hoyt, bring her around more. So we can stop this nonsense, ya?” He pointedly glanced at Lei to tell her to quit her Londyn bashing.

Hoyt mumbled, “Yeah, sure.” Thinking the opposite was what he was going to do.

“Or,” Lei said, tossing her father’s advice to the side, “you can forget this matchmaker business and bring someone you actually like. Someone like the anti-heroes from your comics you worshipped when we were kids.”

Their father tsked from the stove.

“I’m too old for comics, Lei. And Londyn and I are fine.” He heard the lie in his voice, his monotone as dry as his unbuttered popcorn.

Their father shook the large stainless-steel pot as the oily pings of the kernels struck the sides.

“I can hear that Marvel show, *Jennifer Jones*—”

“*Jessica*—”

“On your phone while you poop.”

“I don’t do that here.”

“Why does it take you an hour in there? Are you hiding?”

He threw his arm out at her. “And you wonder why? What’s with the interrogation?”

The pot on the stove gained steam once more until the covered pot sounded like it contained firecrackers. The mini explosions mimicked the rapidity of the thoughts in Hoyt’s brain.

Lei shrugged. “Tomorrow you go to Festival for Zane’s thing at the club, and I’m just saying, maybe you should let loose. Find someone new and have a good time. I’m giving you permission to let her go.

Why you proposed, I dunno. Are you desperate? You got a three-for-one: the first two sucked, but if you marry the third, the match cost is free?”

“That’s insulting and makes no sense.” He was definitely firing his sister.

“Lei,” came from their father, “mai hana kuli.”

“Sorry, Dad, I know. I’ll be quiet. It’s just that, Hoyt, you just don’t seem happy, and you’re here all the time, and I’m guessing it’s because you don’t like being at your place. And I wanna help.”

“Lei...” Curtis pressed. “Leave him be.”

“Yeah, leave me alone,” he grumbled, standing.

“I’m just saying that a month is long enough. No more marriage broker. You should be honest about what you really want, not what you think you need. Having a wife should be more like what Amy and I have, a partnership, not whatever it is that you told the marriage broker. You have two eyes, and you need to trust your gut. And take down that wall you have around your heart. I swear you built Titan’s Wall then made a second one around your emotions.”

“I’ll meet you in the movie room.” Standing, Hoyt ended the conversation with finality. As he left, he caught a glimpse of his father giving Lei a stern look.

Hoyt didn’t need the haranguing from his sister about his choice of fiancée—he was doing enough of that all by himself. Had he noticed he rarely went home these days? Yeah. Had he noticed that Londyn was happy in her wing of the penthouse and gave him only an air kiss if their paths did cross? Yeah. Had he noticed that she didn’t want to talk with him since moving in? Had he noticed that since the ring hit her finger, they had zero intimacy?

He could use a hug.

And he definitely didn’t want one from Londyn. He was convinced Londyn didn’t want one from him either. She’d already made it clear that the things that defined him she wanted removed. The talisman around his neck she wanted put in a drawer, and the ink on his body she wanted covered, and then one morning, she didn’t want him all together.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to see his marriage choice was a bad one. Their relationship, despite what he'd thought when he put a ring on her finger, was barely social, much less civil. Somehow Londyn had skated through the matchmaking with promise, and the marriage broker's notes matched Hoyt's own: Londyn was engaging and interesting. She had him convinced that she was a sure bet. It turned out he was her sure bet. He needed to make the call to end it and start another round of dating, and he would. The only problem was that he was tired. This was his third serious attempt at finding a life companion, and it felt like doomsday. And if he made the call, ended things, and started over, the engagement announcement the broker had already sent and the social media posts that congratulated him would make everyone think they had permission to ask questions. Questions he could give a shit about, but they were exhausting. He had an international, high-level-security company to run. And this was the pilikia he'd hired a marriage broker to avoid. Now he had to find another broker. Or say fuck it to the whole thing. The only silver lining was that while he figured out what to do, he would enjoy the quiet. Date requests from others had all but vanished now that he was thought to have a fiancée, and that, he thought, was close to priceless.

Lei followed her brother only a few minutes later. The movie room was on the house's lowest level, where it tucked into the hillside. The décor mimicked the underground atmosphere with walls and furnishings in deep earth tones that absorbed light. The plush, velvety couches made a large *U*-shape that blended into the shadows and invited a person to snuggle into the pillows and luxurious throws. Hoyt was already stretched out on the far leg of the *U*, making his side of the couch seem small under his six-foot-plus frame.

Lei plopped down next to him, wedging between them a large bowl of popcorn now sprinkled with dark flakes of furikake seaweed and toasted amber nuggets of mochi crunch to make it island style.

"Look," she said, taking off right where he'd physically left, "I



want you to be happy, and I think you need to find your Jessica Jones or Selina Kyle or—”

“Those were fantasies of an adolescent, Lei. I’m running a multi-billion-dollar company with thousands of lives dependent on me.” He fed her the excuse he told himself: “I need someone who has her own life, so when I’m not around, she’s not heartbroken. I need someone who won’t be corrupted by all the money either. It’s a lot.”

“And you think that matchmaker was right—Londyn is the one?”

“It’s a marriage broker, and sure. Londyn comes from money, Lei—”

“But she spends it like she’s never had a dollar in her whole life.”

“Lei...”

“Look, I’m just saying, I want to see you happy or at least pursuing more of that proclaimed bachelor life you wanted until a year ago until you woke up and decided forty was coming up on you fast and you wanted a bride on your arm before then.”

“Lei, fuck off.”

“Fine,” she said. “You guys settle on a wedding date yet?”

“What movie are we watching?”

“Dunno, something Dad will like.”

“Superhero then.” He picked up the remote and got things started.

“Londyn would have a date locked down— Oh.”

“What do you think of this one?”

Lei looked at the screen where the hero stood in a solid stance, ten rings on his arm, then to her brother. “Ho’o...I’m sorry. You *are* thinking of breaking up with her?”

“It’s a new idea. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I know how much you hate quitting things.” For a minute, his sister thoughtful before she snapped back to her original purpose: “But think of it as another game that didn’t go well: learn from it and move on—”

He pointed the remote at her. “Lei...just because Amy, your perfect wife, is stationed overseas so you have extra time to dive into other people’s shit doesn’t mean I want you in mine.”

Lei grabbed the remote from him and switched streaming services. “Here, let’s watch your girlfriend, vigilante and all-around—”

“Alcoholic.”

“Badass.”

“Fine,” he said giving in. He tossed a blanket over his legs and tucked his hands under his crossed arms. His personal life was shit, but he could dream.

It was ridiculous to crave a fantasy superhero type, but he definitely wanted a woman with powerful confidence who wouldn’t shy away from him. He wanted someone to look at him and see *him*. Not his career stats or titles: MVP and legendary tight end for the Seattle Seahawks. Nor his second-career stats as tech-security billionaire.

His dad caught up with them then, coming into the room with a tray of fruit punch for himself and Lei and a glass of ice water for Hoyt.

He passed them out before settling in his movie-watching seat. “Oh, good, this show. That’s the one we were just talking about. Let’s do it.”

Lei grinned at Hoyt and got it started.

Their father added, pointing at the raven-haired woman on the screen, “It’s a good thing she doesn’t exist, or Hoyt would follow her everywhere she went.”

“Not true,” Hoyt mumbled. But he couldn’t hide the smile that broke out inside. It was completely true. He wouldn’t mind getting obsessed with someone as strong as him, someone who didn’t want to ride his money train and didn’t feed him false narratives she thought he wanted to hear. And yeah, she had to have that save-the-underdog thing going.

He sighed at his own reality, watching the stomping combat boots and snarling red lips of the actor who played the dark vigilante on screen. He was going to be alone for the rest of his fucking life.

## LET'S PARTY\_

“VEGA, VEGA, VEG-ASS!!!” A SECOND BEFORE THE CHANTING STARTED, the door to Vega Flux’s apartment had burst open, shocking her fingers up off her keyboard. Into her low-lit space swept her childhood friends Cindy and Peace like models showcasing the latest in glittering nightclub attire. They were still shouting her name as they kicked her door shut.

“Ugh!” Vega feigned disgust, rolling back in her chair and taking in her beautiful friends. “What are you guys wearing? Are those tube tops supposed to be dresses? And no! I don’t want whatever you’re up to,” she hollered, although she already knew why her gazelles were there.

Vega smothered her grin as they lit up her dark industrial apartment that was as classy as a second-story defunct-scrapyard office space could get. Once a maze of cubicles, it was now one cavernous room. Brick walls and single-paned windows were nods to its Prohibition-era construction, when the view to the river was decent. Now she had to look around the concrete footings of the I-84/I-5 interchange.

“Aw! Come on, Vega!” Peace Scott trained her cornflower-blue eyes on Vega. Her fine blond hair was pulled into a braid that danced down her back. She turned toward Cindy, who was already elbow

deep in Vega's snack pantry. The cabinet had once held parts that made bombs during the WWII. Now it just held sugar bombs.

Cindy tossed back a mini chocolate chip cookie before saying, "Come on, you have to come to this one! It's literally two blocks away." Giacinta Merino-Perez went by Cindy off the clock and liked rum, chocolate, and chocolate-drenched rum parties. And handcuffs. On and off the clock. On the clock, she was Special Agent Merino-Perez. A job both Peace, who was a corporate attorney, and Vega, a haxor, found useful in their passion project, Project Valkyrie.

Cindy dropped the cookie bag on the counter and bent to see in Vega's antiquated fridge, exposing the lower curve of her bum as she dug through like a big sister inspecting how her little sis lived. "You know, one day these leftovers will kill you." Vega heard the clang of the kitchen trash lid pop open and objects dumped into it.

"I'm busy!" Vega said before sliding even lower behind her wall of monitors. She popped back up for a moment to holler at Cindy, who had more takeout boxes in hand at the garbage bin. "And those weren't that old!"

As Cindy looked over her shoulder at Vega, her bossy black curls slid out of the way of her glare. "You're busy? With what? We closed all the Project Valkyrie cases for this week. Or are you breaking the rules and fucking someone up?"

Vega slid low again. Being good for a year sucked, and it made her want to shout at happy people. "For the record, no, I'm not breaking the rules. And, two, I *could* be busy with something else!"

Peace sauntered over, her unfastened breasts lightly bouncing under the thin fuchsia fabric of her dress. She and Cindy were glittering spotlights among Vega's dark and brooding things, from the dark stain of the linseed-oiled old timber floors to the black desk and the dimmed semicircle of monitors that made up Vega's command center.

Peace's voice was soft and soothing. "Are you, though? Busy?"

"Yeah. I totally am."

Peace scrunched her nose and watched Vega pick at the corner of her thumbnail. She squeezed her shoulders up in a

shrug as if she really wanted to believe Vega, but it was a stretch even for her, and she had the tenderest heart of them all.

“Peace,” Vega said, “I’m pretty sure I just saw your vag. Don’t shrug while you’re wearing that sparkle-bandana.”

“It’s a dress.”

“Exactly. And I don’t wear tube tops that pretend to be dresses.”

Peace’s countenance warmed as she knew that arguing was just stage one of getting Vega ready to party.

“Yeah, you only wear knee-high combat boots, a hoodie in scathing black, and pants that look like they’ve been through razor wire, twice.”

Vega poked at her skin peeking out from between the frayed threads at her knees. “Yup.” She winked at Peace. “And that means I’m not going wherever you are going.”

“You might change your mind...”

“We’re meeting some guys—”

Vega’s scoff interrupted Peace. “Oh, some *guys*? Then even harder pass.”

“You haven’t heard who they are. Their portfolios and physiques are to be admired, Vee. Be open-minded.”

“They’re next-level hot,” Cindy decoded.

“And one in particular has a profile that we think you especially will appreciate. Appreciate so much you’ll leave your computers behind.”

“No one’s worth leaving my command center for. And a woman needs a man—”

“Like a fish needs a bicycle, we know. But this one’s different.”

“Yes, Cin and I are in agreement—this is someone you could actually get distracted with,” Peace encouraged.

Vega felt her lip curl at her friend’s implication that someone in a group of “hot” guys was anywhere near what she considered distraction-worthy. In Vega’s experience, stereotypically hot men were a couple bricks short of a full load. It wasn’t their fault—she assumed that happened when people cooed at your face your whole life—but

she didn't need someone in her life who never had to apply themselves.

"For being my best friends, you sure—"

Cindy held up a hand. "Your *only* friends, but yes, do go on."

"That's even worse—my only friends have no idea what motivates me. Hot guys are fun for a nanosecond; then they open their mouths, and dumb shit falls out. Do you remember the last time you said I had to meet a hot guy?"

They collectively groaned. "That was once, Vee." Cindy held up a finger. "One time."

"All it takes is once."

"This is different."

"Different? I'm not flying wingman, then?"

"Technically..." Peace started.

"And if he asks me if all bitches are feminists?"

"I believe we remember vividly, Vee. That *one* time."

"And the lawsuit that I had to help you dodge," Peace added.

Cindy dogpiled: "And the relocation we all helped with."

"There was that." She beamed her charming I-couldn't-have-done-it-without-you smile. "I appreciated the help. I know you were worried that he would expose our operations, but he had no idea it was me..." Her grin changed into a grimace. "Until I asked what he thought of feminists now, and told him who I was, and what I could do to him. That was a false move, I see that now. But seriously, before that was fun." Her grin was back.

"You're an adrenaline junkie," Cindy chastised. "And need to start going to Gamblers Anonymous meetings again."

"Sure, I'll get around to it. One day. Look," Vega said, back to Mr. One Time, "he gave me a come-on I couldn't refuse. 'One night I'd never forget.' And he was right—I've never forgotten it."

"And neither has he," Peace said.

Cindy was as unimpressed by the memory as she had been by her friend's actions in the moment and now folded her arms under her ample bosom. "So, instead of excusing yourself, you took a bet you shouldn't have with money that wasn't yours and slipped a bot in his

phone...all before getting banned for life from the casino for counting cards.”

“When you put it like that...” Vega stretched out on her black rolling chair that looked as if it could double as a Formula 1 driver’s seat. “Remember, I was just giving him what he wanted—he got to fuck me earlier that night, and in return, I got to fuck him. A win-win, and let’s be real—he got to witness one of my finer products after I lost his life savings at blackjack. He got a good little Bunny bot that was just having some fun until we saw who Hot Guy really was when the chips were down: a suddenly broke bro who—surprise, surprise—downloaded free porn like it was water in a wasteland and fat-shamed women online.”

Cindy and Peace let out a collective sigh. That had been the moment they knew they’d lost the fight to get Vega’s bot off his phone. When his actions put him squarely into the Project Valkyrie zone of noncompliance. Their silence at the time had been their unspoken agreement that it was OK to remove Vega’s limitations and let her do what she did best. Up until that point, she’d just been having fun, like a cat with a mouse, but then the mouse turned out to be a feminist-phobic prick with a god complex.

“That was fun. Or at least it was until he got freaked out and got the cops involved.”

“Making you have to move yet again.” Cindy raised her brows to drive home her point.

“Which—silver lining—brought me home to Scout.” She thought of her little sister then added with a sad face at her frowning friends. “Just out of curiosity, why do you keep asking me to these things? *No one* is 100 percent aboveboard.”

“Because you work too hard, and you need to have time to focus on yourself and let go. It keeps the darkness away.”

“You spiral when you work too hard, and that makes you reckless.”

They knew why Vega punished herself to achieve the things she did for other women online. If she could protect one, she would. Only, right behind that one, was another, and behind her was just

one more. Every one was important, and every one she identified with. And because of that, she'd gladly lose herself in trying to protect them all.

"One night," Cindy reiterated. She glanced at Peace. "This one is different."

Peace, glee coloring her tone, launched into the details. "It's a launch party. I was invited by the CEO, and he's got a friend..." Incredibly, from inside her tiny dress, Peace pulled out a playing card-sized invite and handed it to Vega.

Vega analyzed the body-warmed cardstock and its gold-embossed text. "Printed invites. I hate them already." She picked up one of the six phones sitting on her desk and using the camera pulled the invite data into her main terminal's search bar. The party sponsor's website came up on her monitor, and then there were the executives.

Cindy and Peace, giddy with something they both seemed to think was exciting, vibrated, waiting for her to see it too. Vega looked at the group of twelve men and women standing like dopes in front of the fresh-faced façade of a place called Big Friends Bigger Hearts in downtown and did not think, *Hell yes! Let's party!* The one labeled CEO of Big Friends Bigger Hearts looked like an actual athlete. "What is he, like, a pro football player or something? Why is his jaw so wide? Why is he so hot?"

Peace was humble. "His heart is a magnificent thing to behold. I really like him. And yes, he's retired from the NFL for a few years now, and he is friends with—"

"Are. You. *Fucking*. Kidding me?!" Vega had been giving Peace a mental high-five on her new guy friend while using her facial recognition overlay to review the names and data dumps for every other person in the photo. "Your date, Peace, is friends with the man known as Ho'o Kaho'okalakupua?" Hoyt "Ho'o" Kaho'okalakupua. Tech billionaire. Founder of Hoyt Security. And egotistical maniac.

Peace clapped, her expression simultaneously hopeful and optimistic. Wringing her hands as if squeezing her excess excitement out of them, she said, "He's a major investor and close friend of Zane's



from their football days. They, the two of them, go all the way back to college.”

Vega breathed out and looked back to the screen. Hoyt was built like he could step back onto the field at a moment's notice. The sharp cut of his open-collared white shirt beneath a gray linen suit jacket, the kind that financiers preferred, would have left an average white tech nerd looking simultaneously wan and sickly and trying too hard, but the broad-chested, 253-pound former All-American tight end from Maui, so said the stats that were still rolling by on her monitor, still looked like a champ. Tan, proud, and smart as fuck, Hoyt had earned a reputation for creating an unhackable security system, which he kept unhackable with the double team of tech brainiacs he employed. One team to break it in-house, another to fix it.

Their constant stress testing had proved out its name: Titan's Wall.

The tech security community knew that Titan's Wall cost a mint to even attempt a breach. As in, enough money to buy an army of bots, a team of university experts, and somewhere to store the million-dollar cash prize that that egotistical maniac put on any person who could hack it. Hence why that amber-eyed towering giant had a billion dollars of net worth. Add that to his reputation as a powerhouse on the NFL field, and he was handshaking every pharma and energy bro from here to Brussels.

“Fuck,” Vega whispered, taking in his gaze that said he was amused, even though his mouth wasn't smiling. He seemed genuinely happy in the photo, but she'd bet her tech that when it was game on, that gaze went sharp and calculating. She shouldn't bet; she was trying not to do that anymore.

Cindy brought her back to the apartment. “So, will you come?”

Vega had the itch to have a go at it. Titan's never came up as a wall she had to scale—her clients weren't that high up. The prospect of going up against him... Vega knew it would be delicious. In person? It could be mind-bending. So many technology bros graduated with a BS, sometimes figuratively too, in business finance. They may, *may*, know the ins and outs of revenue and sustained growth on a spread-

sheet, but they left the in-the-trenches engineering to their top dogs. They knew fuck-all about the minutia of their own tech. Or the ones who had been young-pup developers too often got sloppy as the years passed. Sure, this football god looked like he was better at the fifty-yard dash than C++, but his work was supposedly legit. That he kept his code as tight as Peace's dress by still having a steady hand in the game. Vega wanted to find out more about those rumors and those hands. Did he keep his skills as a developer as tight as he obviously did his body?

"I tell you what," Vega said to her friends, "if I can't hack into just one of his personal devices, I'll go. If I can, he's just another pretty face." Vega knew Titan's Wall would have all business phones locked down tight. But the odds that his personal cell did? His first cell? Hell yes. Second? Maybe, but new phones required updates to Titan's Wall to be compatible with the new firmware, and she was sure by phone five, he had said fuck it trying to make his kit compatible. Titan's Wall was geared for corporate data centers, and he had better things to do.

"No, wait, Vee, that sounds like a bet." Cindy called her out.

"Think of it more like a litmus test."

She started three of her homemade programs to find his devices: Hunter, Seek n Find, and Sing. Hunter was as it was titled, a hunting application that combed through social media and communications from the IP address of Hoyt Securities. Seek n Find was the program she used to get stats on the board of directors, and Sing was the app baby Vega was most proud of. Another stellar program that used the cell phone tower data of every smart device in use to triangulate where someone in particular was located using voice recognition. She'd track him using voice prints taken off his voicemail and YouTube TED Talks.

From next to her, Peace asked, "Is any of what you're doing legal, Vee?"

"Legal in what sense?" Vega asked absently as her heart rate kicked up at the potential of engaging a man like Hoyt Kaho'okalakupua. For the first time in a year she began to feel genuine excitement glow deep inside.

Cindy looked worried at the green code flying up on the three programming windows Vega had open. “Instead of walking up to him digitally, come with us and talk to him in person. Let’s keep it light, Vee. Don’t go deep.”

Vega swatted at Cindy’s hands as they tried to grab her arm, a bit of a trick in her overlarge hoodie. “Nope, if he’s a dunce, I don’t wanna go. It’s too much work to get pissed off over nothing.”

“But what if you have fun anyway? You’ll have a good conversation with someone, some dancing, with us at least, and maybe even some anonymous make-out session—then back to work tomorrow all refreshed.”

“I just want to know if he’s gone soft— Got him,” she said, and both women leaned in.

“Where? There’s only all that coding stuff.”

“He’s at Festivál already, which, let’s face it, I probably didn’t need Hunter and Seek n Find for that. Now, let’s watch what happens when you get to be a billionaire: you lose focus on the little things.” From within that glow that had begun, Vega hoped she was wrong.

Cindy, voice low in agent mode and full of confidence, said, “How about I hit your closet and get you something to wear.”

Vega didn’t hear her as she plowed through the three app’s results. She found his personal device and its firewall, like any good tech, but this one wasn’t strictly Titan’s Wall. It was, and it wasn’t. It was dynamic, not just an impenetrable surface like classic Titan’s Wall, but rather, fail to guess the riddles three, the application’s programming interface protection key triggered a defense she’d never seen before. It went on the offensive, collecting user data.

“Shit,” Vega muttered as she started a slew of her own defenses, allowing her to stay at his wall anonymously. Then under the barrage of thousands of bot-bees, she fired up a basic hack of coming at the firewall in an attempt to force his device to route her to a denial-of-service error path. Then she hoped the engineers were lazy and didn’t lock the error path door, leaving her uninhibited access to his device. Only, it wasn’t some random device; this was Hoyt of Hoyt Security, and her defense programs were logging data hitting *her* fire-

wall. They were holding; he'd have no idea who attempted the breach as long as she could hold him off long enough for her secondary systems to boot. She swallowed a tickle of apprehension at the out-of-the-gate aggression. Then smiled. "He's good."

Cindy was back in front of her, something glittering in her hands. "Excellent. Time to get dressed."

## TAKEN TO TASK\_

HOYT TOOK UP HALF OF THE CORNER BOOTH. EVEN THERE ON THE lower floor, away from the main party upstairs, the place was as it always was: packed with the energy and opportunity of a promised good time.

Only it was the land of opportunity for everyone but him. When he saw Londyn next, he'd break things off with her, and he'd do so with the marriage broker too. He might not know what he wanted, making him "particularly discerning," as the broker had said, but he did know he didn't have the energy to put himself out there any longer. His sister's random quip about having Titan's Wall around his emotions was probably true. And he had no idea how to take it down or even if he should.

That night, however, wasn't about him. It was his buddy Zane Winter's first venture, and the future of Big Friends Bigger Hearts was something Hoyt also personally believed in and would dump every cent of his personal capital into if Zane needed it. This was the only reason he was physically there at the club their mutual friend Nate Vellanova owned. He loved Nate like a brother, but their tastes were opposites. The club was as successful as it was because Nate had a pulse on what humanity found stimulating. Hoyt preferred to not

have hundreds of bodies colliding against him; he'd rather leave that for game day.

Just when he thought it was time to say his goodbyes and leave, his watch vibrated, alerting him that there had been an attempted breach of one or more of his personal devices.

Curious, Hoyt took out his phone and checked the status of the intrusion detection. He corrected himself, the *ongoing* attempt. The beta software installed on his personal devices was doing as he wanted, going on the offensive, the legality of which was still being debated by Congress and the FCC. He had no taste for breaking the law but knew that his legal team was ecstatic to be attempting to create legal precedent. He just wanted internet trolls to stop feeling like they were invincible, and for now, his personal devices could do just that.

The denial-of-service hack attempt seemed to be coming from five hundred thousand different IP addresses, all attempting to connect to his device at once. His system was holding. What were they attempting? To have his firewall crash with just a half-million bots? If he were a junior coder with half a brain cell, he'd know that wouldn't work to access *his* devices. Who was this group?

He checked the logs on the IP address trace and watched as his beta software Titan 2.0 attempted a capture but instead was being sent on a wild goose chase all over the world.

OUTSIDE IN THE COOL DAMP OF THE NIGHT AIR, VEGA MARCHED WITH Cindy and Peace over water-filled dips and breaks in the sidewalk to Festivál. She felt it then—opportunity and exhilaration smoked her nerve endings, setting her skin alight. She felt that thrill of potential electrify her bones; it was party time; it was chaos-creation time. Peace squealed as a passing car splashed water up onto the sidewalk. Vega didn't notice her boots get wet nor that her fishnet stockings had muddy droplets on them now, like dark crystals. Her eyes were on the horizon, toward which they strode in their glittering dresses, to the thump and thunder of Festivál.

The line to enter Festivál was, as it always was, down the block. Vega let the towering soles of her black boots take her past the line as if she were the owner of all the world's shit and this line, like any other, was only for those who followed the rules. *Oh yes, this night, just this night, she'd break the rules. Just a little.*

Peace, satisfied with the back of the line, stopped and hollered at the other two that the end was back where she was. Cindy doubled back and grabbed Peace's arm with a laugh, dragging her after Vega, who was headed for the warehouse's neon lights and double-door entrance. Sticking to her back, they stumbled in after her as she pushed past the line manager and those waiting behind the velvet rope at the door. Inside she blew a kiss to the bouncer on his stool; happy to see them, he waved back and pointed to where the VIP party was upstairs. He'd gotten Vega's message.

A team of women at the door were incensed and hollered for them to "get to the back of the fucking line." Peace hid her face as Cindy laughed at the chaos that Vega had already conjured. Vega heard the cussing from the doorway and turned, blowing the girls behind the rope a kiss too, against her middle finger.

"Once I break his phone," Vega shouted over the thump of the club, "I'm out."

Cindy rolled her eyes. "And remember, keep it light, have some fun!"

"Come, he's over here!" Peace grabbed Cindy and made for the crowd and the man she'd come for.

Vega paused to watch her friends dive into the crush of bodies, skin to skin moving with the grind of the DJ's playlist. It'd been a year since she'd been out, and the bodies, the music, the flashing lights were intoxicating. She'd told Cindy that she'd break him and leave, but Cindy had read her right. She was there to play.

Nervous, excited energy rushed through her body. Hoyt's system was the perfect playground for a specific scientific test she was quietly collaborating on. She hadn't told the girls since it was just a pet project with a university professor who hadn't given her specific permission for that night, nor had it worked properly in the last

hundred attempts. But that night—she had a feeling—it would work. It had to. Everything was too perfectly aligned for it not to.

The neon rainbow of the strobe lights bounced off sequins, glitter, and black-light nails. Cindy's dark curls disappeared into the shadows while only the very top of Peace's blond hair was visible, reflecting the changing colors. Vega watched as Peace zeroed in on a man in a sport suit moving as if he needed a week of hot yoga to loosen up his body for Festivál's dance floor.

Vega turned. Her target was not there. She had to find him, and quickly. Her little bots could create only so much chaos until the master of Titan's Wall caught up with them, closing the window she had to work her magic in and ultimately revealing to him who she was. Billionaires tended to be the protective and vindictive sort. The kind that made perfect targets...for the foolish. Vega felt herself smile for the first time in a long time—that was her kind of odds.

She moved through the club and up the frosted-glass stairs, the boom and cascade of the music rattling through her skeleton and down into her boots. In the VIP section, Vega took in the few investors sipping water or dirty martinis, but none of them were six feet four and built like SEAL Team 6. Combined.

It was as she was coming back down the stairs, through the clear glass treads, that she glimpsed him. There, below her, separate from the rest, his arm wide over the back of the curved booth cushion as if an invisible date was nuzzled in next to him, was Titan's master. She wanted him to look up right then, to meet her gaze, so he'd know she found him. He was looking at her, but from a totally different angle, through his device. Her handiwork was currently being analyzed in his wide hand.

This knowledge sent another thrill down her spine. He was not a couch performer; he was very much still in the game, and the thing her bots were coming up against was what she had assumed—it was some of his own personal handiwork. The average chief technology officer didn't track breach attempts on his own phone.

She whispered down to him, "No time like the present, my friend." Her voice drowned in the music.



. . .

HOYT LOOKED UP, FEELING EYES ON HIM. THE CROWD PULSED JUST beyond his table; bodies crowded the stairs as a set of laces-and-leather punk-style black platform boots worked their way down. An odd feeling struck him like déjà vu, a pleasant feeling of recognition, that somehow this moment was important or had happened before in another life. He shook off the feeling and let his attention go back down to his phone. He was looking at the progress his system was making against the invasion when that feeling of eyes on him made him look up once more. The boots had worked their way along the edge of the club and were now stopped as their owner, hip cocked one way, head cocked the other way, watched him from her dark corner. He saw the chunky cuts of black hair sweep around her shoulders and touch her jaw, a rockstar's style. Or that of a scraggly cat eyeing him from atop a fence.

Having gained his gaze, she moved out of the dark and into the dim light surrounding his table. He amended his earlier thought; *she is no scraggly cat*. As the sequined curves of the woman stepped into the low light of his booth, he felt his insides swoop. Maybe coming to the club had been a good idea after all.

Her eyes were dark, smoky in black, and her dress, one handshake away from being a napkin, sparked and glittered over her tight, lean body. She approached with the kind of familiarity that he was once accustomed to. Only the fans from his time in the NFL had been one of two kinds. Fans of his stats and fans wanting to fuck. With this woman, he had the odd sensation that she was coming *for him*.

Her lips twisted wryly as she bumped his table with her hip before sliding her hand over the black marble. She looked like a porcelain statue, bored and ready for a nap. Only her heavy-lidded gaze was like lightning aiming for him. He felt his skin go warm and his shirt too tight. She looked as if she was ready to play, play at what, he had no idea, but her eyes beckoned, both playfully and dangerously, to him.

Her lips, a dark red that reminded him of blood on jerseys, parted. “Are we having fun yet?”

He wasn’t sure he’d heard her right over the club music. “Are we what?”

“Having fun,” and in the next second, she plucked his phone from his hand and spun it across the table.

“Hey” was all he managed before she caught it and slid into the other side of his booth. In what felt like a practiced move, she opened a small clutch at her waist and pulled out her own old-school cell and a connection cord. Alarm bells went off in his mind.

She connected the phones and popped the screen up on hers before using her thumbs on the keypad and starting what looked like a physical attempt to crack open his device. The screen of his phone went black as his own special protections went into place.

He was definitely *not* prepared for what just sat down at his booth.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asked as he stood. He wanted her to see his height and think twice about what she was attempting. It wouldn’t be the first time someone felt confident to flex on him when he was sitting.

Instead of startling, she put her boot to the booth seat and pushed herself farther in, taking the phones with her. When she answered him, her voice was sultry, almost indistinguishable under the music. “Why,” she said, “I’m playing with you. What else would I be doing in a thundering club on a Saturday when I could be at home with snacks? But to be honest, this is starting to feel a lot like that.” She winked in a way he didn’t know how to interpret.

The woman was some kind of agent connected with the ongoing attack. Her bot team weren’t so much trying to break in as they were being a distraction. He wasn’t sure what kind of beautiful psycho she was, but he did know that he didn’t want to underestimate what a direct port into his phone could do. He didn’t want his proprietary beta program breached by a hottie at a night club. There was a lot there he couldn’t defend to his engineering and legal team.

“Nope,” he said and reached for his phone.

## INVADERS\_

HOYT'S REACH FOR HIS PHONE ONLY MADE THE WOMAN SLIDE FARTHER away, forcing him to get back into the booth. With every move he made to get closer, she used the wide-topped table as a center point, moving around it like hands on a clock. Every time she paused, she leaned on the table like it was a bar, her cleavage rounded up where it rested on her forearm, reminding him of the length of time it had been since he'd had a hug, let alone more. Despite her allure, he wished then that Nate hadn't bolted the tables to the floor. He had the urge to flip it out from between them. Her fingers were like the wind over her mini keyboard.

"Enough." He stood again, and when she tucked back into the booth, he followed and reached to grab her, any part of her, but she put her boot to his chest.

Braced against the back of the booth to keep him firmly back, she said, "I'll be just a moment more, darling. I know you desperately want your phone, and I'll get it back to you, in just a second. I am so close to winning this bet, you see, and setting precedent. Meanwhile, let's chat. This tech is"—she took a deep, appreciative breath as if sampling his defenses was like tasting a fine wine—"nuanced,

layered, and complex, with a defense wall that's...dynamic. Who wrote it?"

Looking down at the thick sole of her boot on his pale-blue dress shirt, he was surprised. He should have been pissed, and he'd get there, no doubt, but she was unconventional, and he had to admit there was a part of him that was liking the flex that she was bringing. Nothing so dangerously beautiful had taken him on like this before. He was disturbed to find that he liked that she was impressed with his beta tech, and it made him curious to see how far she'd get.

"I did," he answered her.

"Ah, yes, I thought so. You've still got it, my friend."

"You know who I am," he stated the obvious. "Who are you?"

"Just a friend who's taking your trick ride for a spin."

"And if I say no?"

Her eyes left the screen for just a moment to light on his, making him feel as if she were looking past everything that was superficial about him and like his phone was putting a direct tether into him. "Are you? Saying no?"

He should definitely say no. He should absolutely say it. *Say no*, he thought.

When he was silent another beat, she smiled. "That's what I thought."

His phone now on her chest, she'd gotten the phone to reboot without Titan 2.0. His mind tripped over itself. No matter if it had been a direct port or a wireless request to connect his system; on that device, it should have stayed locked down. The woman was breaching encryptions that should take an experienced team of hackers months, even years, to break. And by then his key would have digitally changed over a thousand times.

She was doing something that shouldn't be possible, no matter how much time someone had. She was doing something he'd never seen before.

"Who do you work for?" He should not look down at her long fishnet-covered leg and into the spread V of her thighs as her other leg, hooked over the booth seat, ticked that foot in time to the beat of

the music. Nor should he take a longer glance at that strip of dark lace that rested at the apex of her thighs like a present for his eyes only.

“No one,” she answered. “You’re just an experiment, a friendly bet, like I said. Or did you think that this woman in a minidress and tats was joking, Hoyt of Hoyt Security?” She looked up, giving him a lip lift that was a threat and a grin rolled into one.

He noticed her tats then, tiny, on her fingers and forearms. They looked to be mathematical symbols; he could see the infinity symbol and a triangle that he interpreted to be the Greek symbol delta, for change. Then he spied one under her arm, behind the generous curve of her breast; the part of the black-and-gray design that he could see was of the rear of a car, a time-traveling Delorian. He memorized each as clues to who she was.

Just as he took his eyes off her arm, she had his phone rebooted. His stomach churned. He put his hand gently on the leather and laces of her ankle and easily lifted her foot off his chest. She stayed focused on the phone, but he felt her watching him in her periphery.

He pulled her in. “Do you want a job? Are you trying to break my software? If you’re taking the Titan’s Wall challenge seriously, then you’ll know it has rules, and my personal devices are off the table.” She was dragged a few inches before her other boot was against his chest. It landed with a gentle thump, stopping her movement. It was an odd game they were playing. It was as if they both knew that he had the physical capability to yank her out of that booth and get his phone back at any time and that it was a risk she was willing to take. Fuck the consequences.

He took her other boot off his chest, and with both ankles in his hands, he pulled her gently but purposefully across the seat to him. He tucked her ankles behind him, trapping her legs between him and the back of the booth.

“Nope.” She twisted, her dress riding up, as she reached overhead, taking both cells with her. He saw she’d gotten down to the administrator screen. The lower crescents of her fishnet-covered buttocks popped out from under the glittering hem of her dress as she tried to

wriggle away. The administrator screen was a kind of atomic bomb they both were racing toward. Him against, her for it.

Hand across the backs of her thighs, he pinned her. His pinkie may have brushed against the warm curve of her butt, and he registered that the lace beneath the fishnets formed a thong. He pressed down just hard enough and reached over her body for his phone. She wriggled harder to keep his phone out of reach. While he was focused and intent on retrieving his phone, his love-starved body welcomed her uninhibited push back against him; the curves of her that pressed against his abdomen felt like foreplay, and his heart responded with a jolt of joy. With his body against her back, he bent his head and told her against the shell of her ear, “A’ole, I don’t think so.”

He shot his hand out and grabbed the cord, and with a flick of his wrist, he freed his phone.

She slumped under him, the game over.

She turned over then, and he was close enough to see the lightning in the storm clouds of her irises before they lightened in a sunburst. “Damn,” she whispered.

He tried to keep his gaze casual as he reached over her and plucked his device off the cushion. Like a cat, she stretched out under him as if they were lovers in bed and not strangers in a club, before cushioning her head on her arms, and said, “So close.”

He should raise his voice at her for taking advantage. He should get her name. He should not unscrew the dim light bulb of that already darkened booth and adjust her into a better position up onto his lap.

Reading his thoughts as if they were closed-captioned, she grinned, her lips twisting devilishly, and she slowly pulled one leg then the other out from behind him before sitting up and adjusting her dress back down. Her eyes scoured his form, studying him as she wound up the cord attached to her own device and returned it to her pouch.

“Who are you?” he asked, gaining brain space in the physical space between them. “Tell me who you are.” He hoped she couldn’t

hear the pleading in his voice.

“It’s been fun” was her only answer before she popped open the back of her cell and removed the battery, then cracked the SIM card. He didn’t give a shit about her phone; he only cared about who *she* was. One more clue: she had the paranoid feel of someone who had hacked hackers before. No one else bricked their devices like that.

Her long look was both warm and keen. “You win. Good game. But we both know that I was one second away from popping open your phone like a digital library and having Hoyt Security all to myself.”

“What is it that you want with Hoyt Securities?”

The woman shrugged. “Not today, big man.”

“You need to tell me who you are and who you work for, *now*.” He didn’t want to let her leave. As she pushed to leave the booth, he thought about physically grabbing her.

“I wouldn’t, big guy,” she said, properly reading his expression. “And I wonder, why so demanding now? You had ages to get me to stop, but you wanted to know, didn’t you? You were curious, weren’t you? How far would I get? And now you know. So, say thank you, and I’ll say you’re welcome and, now, goodbye.”

VEGA EYED THE MAN NAMED HOYT KAHO’OKALAKUPUA. HE WAS clearly incensed but still hadn’t started screaming or yelling for bodyguards or calling her a crazy bitch. All of which she expected from a tech billionaire at a club. It made her want to stay a while beneath his bracing arm, his warm, hard body pinning her in the booth. It made her want to ask him questions, like, how far could she push him to get him to react? What emotion would it be? Would it be more of what he had now, a fire in his eyes that said he’d track her down? Just that thought alone made her shiver with excitement.

But *now* was the proper time to leave. She had to get home, check the test logs to her project, clean up her digital trail, and pray to the tech gods he wasn’t as vengeful as his own security defenses made him out to be.

He slid out of the booth too, and her pulse kicked up at all six-plus feet of him. “Let me walk you to your car.”

Vega took in his towering form. He filled out his suit nicely, and it was broad-shouldered with hard edges, tailor-made. She wanted to know if he could pick her up. She knew his offer was more about him wanting a license plate, more time under the security camera for a facial recognition, anything to start digging into her. Something she both wanted and was afraid to have happen.

With one last smile, she said, “I’m good. Bye,” and not for the first time, since her year of restraint started, she did the opposite of what she really wanted to do, which was to stay and chat, to dive into the minutia of his system and dig into his mind. He was the first man she’d met whose aggressive intellect matched his aggressive gym skills. And his face, purposeful jaw, neck as wide as her thigh, and black brows and lashes that were like brushstrokes on his tan skin were definitely going to be on her mind when she let her asshole boyfriend, Jax, get hip deep with her again.

She took a deep breath to keep from diving back into the booth. She had to walk away. Not straddle his lap there in the club and pop a couple of his shirt buttons and taste his skin. Or let him pin her to the booth cushion once more—only that time she’d invite his hands up her dress.

He stepped closer to her, and with a thrill up her spine, she spun to leave, and plowed headfirst into Peace and Cindy.

“Umph,” Cindy grunted.

“Where are you going?” Peace asked then looked over Vega’s shoulder. “Oh, that’s him.” Then to Vega: “You didn’t.”

Vega’s stern look silently told her loose lips sink ships. “I might have. I have to go now.” She felt the reality and complication of friends and a man like Hoyt. They’d have to lie through their teeth to their dates about their relationship with Vega. She cursed; things were getting complicated fast.

Cindy looked to the towering Hoyt as his friends joined them, also looking to Hoyt, who was wearing a pleasant smile, a boot print



on his shirt, and a threat in his eyes. *You can run, but you cannot hide from me.*

Peace's date, a leaner male still well over six feet tall with the jawbone a carpenter's square would be proud of, put something together.

To Peace, he said, "This is your friend who's into computers, right?" He looked to Vega then to Hoyt as if it were Christmas and the present that had been given was a good one. Glee coloring his tone as it had Peace's earlier that evening in Vega's apartment, he said, "Damn, did she do it? She hacked you?"

Hoyt's gaze sizzled onto Vega's. "No. And she's lucky I'm polite."

Vega couldn't resist stepping back into the fray. "Polite? My, my, my. You sound like you want to tangle again, Titan. How about this time you can use those hands more judiciously. You can hold me while I take you, and what's yours."

Cindy grabbed the back of her arm in warning. "Cool it down," she said under her breath then, "You go; we've got this."

But Vega loved the Titan's murderous gaze and desperately wanted that next round despite the alarm bells going off all around her. "I had your kit in my hot little hands, and I would have broken it if you didn't physically interfere."

Cindy tightened up on her arm. "Time to go, *Joan.*" Joan of Arc as her code name had been her idea.

Vega said to Hoyt, "I take that as suitable evidence that I breached your phone's defenses adequately, and now," she said to her friends, "I've earned that wager, er, litmus test, and get to go home. With another notch in my belt."

With one last look over her shoulder at Hoyt, who was giving her a stare that said they were far from over, she smiled. She'd had fun, but now she had to run like hell.

"You won't hear from me again, no hard feelings. See you later, big guy." And blew him a three-fingered kiss.

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END SAMPLE