

ALL HE WANTED
WAS TO SELL BURRITOS.

LANDO CRUZ

AND THE COUP CONSPIRACY

ALL HE GOT
WAS A CHANCE
TO SAVE THE WORLD.

GEORGE DONNELLY

Lando Cruz and The Coup Conspiracy

A libertarian dystopian science fiction thriller

George Donnelly

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To Grandpa Joe, the one who watched out for me.

To the liberty community, the people who get me.

To my son: be relentless.

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My Corner

“What do you think you are doing?” Lando Cruz glared at the boy.

The boy turned to look at Lando, his eyes dim. He wore a tattered red t-shirt and a South Philly swagger. “What does it fucking look like?” He turned away. “Get your hot dogs here,” he yelled, “red hot, hot dogs, fresh red hots, all the fixings, none of the tricksings!” He shot a sly glance at Lando.

Men and women in suits crossed the street in front of the boy’s hot dog stand. They stared at the ground. The early morning sky was gray. Rain clouds moved in above the blue, angular skyscrapers of Center City Philadelphia.

“Nobody wants hot dogs for breakfast, kid. Now get off of my corner,” Lando said.

The kid ignored him. “Hot dogs, delicious hot dogs! Get your—”

Lando pedaled his burrito cart around the upstart’s. He parked next to it and engaged the brakes. He swiveled a small ball camera on the cart to point at the kid. In one swift motion, he disengaged the parking brake on the hot dog stand and turned it. He sent it rolling down the cross street sidewalk.

“You piece of shit spic!” the kid yelled. He raised a fist to Lando.

Lando stood his ground, his arms crossed and a thin grin on his face. He raised his eyebrows and chin toward the escaping hot dog cart.

The kid ran down the cross street. The cart took a soft left turn and kissed the red granite side of the building. Hot water splashed out of the cart. It dripped down the discolored metal plaque that read “Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.”

The kid turned around and stomped towards Lando.

“I thought I was clear with you yesterday,” said Lando. “This is my corner. I’ve been working it day and night for three years.”

“I am gonna stun you,” the kid said. He reached into his pocket.

“I bought it fair and square from the previous owner, Mr. Antonas —“

“The sidewalk is public property! You can’t buy fucking public property!” yelled the kid.

“Mr. Gianakos homesteaded it more than sixty years ago. I bought the exclusive right to operate food carts within a half-block of this corner. It’s mine.” Lando took a step back and held his fists at his sides.

The kid shook his head. “You fucking agorists think you can just take whatever you want. Well, I gotta take care of mine.” He lowered his head and shifted his body right. He came back and threw a punch at Lando’s head.

Lando stepped to the side. The kid came with another fist and clipped Lando in the shoulder. Lando whipped around and walked back towards the building, a grin on his face. Another punch hit Lando in the chest.

The kid backed Lando up against the building. He sneered. “I am going to teach you —“

Lando kicked at his feet. The kid threw his fist at Lando’s face. Lando moved out of the way and the kid connected with the building’s red granite.

His face flushed and he screamed, “Ahhhh!” He pulled out a switchblade, locked the blade in place and came at Lando.

An insect drone dove from the sky and stopped between the pair. “Cease your conflict, now,” said a male voice. Something clicked on it and two sharp metal prods appeared at the bottom of the donut-shaped device. A light wind from the four rotors blew Lando’s hair back.

The kid looked up at the device. He pointed at Lando with the switchblade. “He started it! He thinks —“

“Hostile intent detected.” The two prods shot out and lodged in the kid’s chest. A buzz sounded. He shook and then went down on the sidewalk.

The drone hung in the air a moment, then ascended and disappeared into the sky.

Lando sighed. “That’s a hard way to learn.” He dragged the unconscious kid by the arms around the corner and sat him down next to his hot dog cart. He folded up the switchblade and set it in a drawer of the cart.

Lando moved his own cart into its normal spot on the corner.

Manny

“Breakfast burritos here, delicious low-carb breakfast burritos!” Lando yelled. His wrist communicator read 7:28 AM. “They’ll fill you up, or you get a second one on the house! Made with authentic refried beans —“

“Beans are not low-carb, young man,” said a man in a business suit.

“Sixteen point four net carbs per cup, sir!” Lando threw down a tortilla and opened the still-bubbling pot of refried beans. A spicy, earthy smell rose from the cart and tickled Lando’s nose.

The man turned and walked back to Lando’s cart. “Now, wait, what about the wrap? That can’t be low-carb. And I don’t eat gluten.” The man frowned. He twitched his mustache.

“Not a problem, sir!” Lando smiled. “It’s a coconut flour wrap.” Lando dished the pork strips, lettuce, tomatoes and avocado onto the beans. He folded the wrap around the fillings and encased it in wax-paper-backed aluminum foil. “Enjoy your breakfast, sir. That’s \$50 and if it doesn’t fill you up, just come on out for another one before noon. I’m here for lunch and dinner, as well.”

The man stared at him. “It used to be \$50 bought you a steak dinner for a family of four.” He pulled out a \$50 bill, handed it to Lando and received his food. “What happened?” He took a bite.

Lando jerked his thumb behind him and cocked an eyebrow.

The man swallowed and straightened his neck. “Oh! You’re one of those types that blames the Fed for the economy — or lack thereof.”

“Among other things,” Lando said. *Don’t get into an argument. Just let it go.* Lando kept his head down and prepared another burrito. He dispensed coffee into a small plastic cup and placed a lid on it. He passed it to the man and gestured towards the cream and sugar.

The man took a step forward and spoke in a hushed tone. “You’re not licensed, are you?” The corners of his mouth crept upwards as he chewed.

“Mouth-watering breakfast burritos with all-natural ingredients!” Lando yelled. “Don’t just gawk! Survive the corporate chopping block, with all-natural energy, around the clock!” Lando winked at the man. “Thanks again,” he whispered.

A line formed in front of Lando’s cart. He wrapped up a burrito, then another. The money came in from all sides, faster than he could process it, or the food.

Lando felt a tap on his shoulder. He held up a finger. The tap came again, harder. “Sir, please get in line like everyone else. Thank you,” Lando said. But the tap came harder again, this time on his skull. Lando whipped around. “I told —“ Lando jerked his head back.

“You’re making a scene, Mr. Cruz.” A black-shirted police officer stood nose-to-nose with Lando. He took a step back and scratched his graying hair. “You don’t pay me enough for this kind of scene.”

“I’m trying to make rent here, Manny.” Lando shrugged.

Manny put his hands on his hips. “Manny pays rent, too, you know.”

“Does Manny eat breakfast?” Lando reached around for two burritos. “How about these for a down payment?” Lando held them out in front of him and smiled, showing his teeth.

Manny snatched the burritos with a look of irritation on his face. He held them up to his nose and sniffed. He grunted. “They’re changing the assignments again. My replacement is going to want more. And he definitely won’t tolerate fights on his turf.”

Lando turned and got back to the breakfast rush. “I’ll worry about it when I worry about it!”

Henry

“Give me all your bitcoins.”

Lando relaxed on his cart’s fold-out stool after the lunch rush. He looked up from his tablet and laughed. “Hey there. Sorry, what’s your name again?”

“Better I stay anonymous, Lando.” Dreadlocks and a bedraggled brown hoodie obscured the man’s face. “Make it two.”

“Two bitcoin? Nice. Business must be booming!” Lando switched apps on his tablet to his bitcoin wallet. “Code.”

“Tell you what, call me Henry.” Henry beamed his bitcoin address to Lando’s tablet.

Lando tapped his tablet. “\$20,792,” he whispered. “Two lunch burritos with everything then, sir?” he said in a louder voice. “Coming right up.” Lando took two burritos out and handed them to Henry. Henry passed him a heavy envelope of cash under the burritos. Lando stowed it in his pants and hit return on his tablet.

“There’s something rattling around in there,” Lando said.

Henry took a bite of burrito and passed it from cheek to cheek. “Hmm. Don’t quit your day job.” He grinned and took another bite. “Yeah, a customer paid me some silver this week. You don’t mind, right? I used the exchange rate you have on your site. Hey, I almost forgot. You need some product?”

Lando grunted. He made himself busy cleaning his cart’s counter. “An ounce of the high-CBD stuff will —”

“Hey Lando! Can I get two large burritos and I want to pay in bitcoin.” A chubby teenager bounded up to Lando’s cart from the other side.

Lando jumped. "David! Don't sneak up on me like that." Lando took a deep breath and looked at Henry. He had the package of medical marijuana in his outstretched hand. Lando could see the buds. He jerked his hand forward to receive it — and dropped it.

"Is this gonna take a while, Lando? Cause I've got to run some errands for my mom," yelled David.

Lando dropped a dish towel on the package and swiped them both up.

Two shiny black shoes appeared where the package had been.

Lando stood up. "Hello, officer. We're running a two-for-none special today on my famous burritos. Free drink, too. How —"

The police officer studied him through narrowed eyes. "It's Sergeant. Now move along! This is a public walkway. I don't give second warnings!"

"Not hungry, Sarge? I also have cash."

Sarge showed no expression.

Henry turned to go. "Thanks for the food, buddy," he said to Lando.

"Hold it right there. I have some questions for you," said Sarge.

Henry stayed still. "Can I get that free drink while I'm waiting?"

Sarge did not move. He motioned to the dish rag covering the marijuana. "What you got under there?"

"Under here?" repeated Lando. "Well, it's a solar system, actually, no propane or anything. I cook everything at home. No cooking here. I just keep it warm with the solar panels. Lots of insulation, too." He smiled. "Oh, and a camera. I record everything."

"Propane?" Sarge asked.

"No! No way, no sir. Nope. That would be too dangerous for a crowded urban area." Lando gave a toothy grin.

“How much did old Manny charge you?” he asked.

“Around — I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about, off—, uh, Sergeant. Manny …?” Lando shrugged with an exaggerated frown.

“Good man.” Sarge smiled. “One large per day, in bitcoin.” He passed Lando a small piece of plastic.

Lando studied the plastic card.

“Stop eyeballing it and pay up. And I operate a clean sector here. No drugs, no boozing. This …” Sarge squinted in the late afternoon sun at the front of Lando’s cart, “… Agora Business Alliance sticker comes off. I don’t tolerate that agorism crap on my beat. Everybody pays, no exceptions.”

Lando cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, sir.” He executed the payment on his tablet.

Sarge ripped the card from Lando’s hand and grabbed the back of his neck. “The money better be there. No tricks. Don’t fuck with my money.” He turned to Henry. “As for you, this one is a freebie but I expect a cut of your profits, too, champ.”

Henry’s dreadlocks rose and fell. He waved a hand to Lando and took off at a brisk pace.

Sarge grabbed a cup of coffee from Lando’s cart and walked off.

Lando tapped his wrist. “Reminders,” he said. “Bring laxative tomorrow.” Lando covered his wry grin with his hand and coughed.

“Wow, what a pig. Hey, Lando, I’m still waiting on my burritos.” David scanned Lando’s bitcoin address from the front of his cart. “I’m sending you a little extra to cover your ‘cost of doing business.’” David rolled his eyes. “Hey, don’t forget extra jalapeños on mine.”

Lando handed him his burritos and a cold, red can. “If they could just do business like regular people, without all the threats and violence, I could probably tolerate them.”

David dug into the burritos and laughed with his mouth open. “It’s no wonder people can’t get ahead anymore. Sixty percent unofficial unemployment and these pigs are shaking down an honest entrepreneur like you.”

“You found a job, yet?” Lando asked.

“No,” David said with his mouth full. “There’s nothing out there that’s right for me right now.”

“Maybe you should leave the US,” Lando said.

“Leave the US? What about the rebellion? I’m needed here.”

“What rebellion? We’re all just treading water.” Lando sighed. “And the sharks are circling beneath us.”

David’s smile went stiff.

“Your parents have money, David. You’re under-age,” said Lando. “You don’t know what it’s like to be out here on the street all day, hustling to pay the bills.” Lando slammed his hand down on the cart.

“Hey, my dad has got four years left in the camps on a total thinkcrime setup, okay, Lando? Just because you’re Hispanic and I’m white doesn’t mean I’ve got a silver spoon in my mouth and you’re Cesar Chavez.” David turned to go. Then he turned around again. “Hey, are you okay?”

Lando pursed his lips. “I’ll be fine. Just a long day. I’ve been on my feet for eleven hours now.” He looked up. “Sorry.”

“Did you get any silver today?” David dug in his pocket. “I could go for a round.”

“A couple.” Lando dug out one of the silver rounds Henry gave him earlier. “Liberty Dollar,” “2005” and “one ounce” appeared in relief on the back of the coin next to a worn-down torch. “This one has changed a lot of hands.” He dug out a different one, palmed it and

shook David's hand. He grasped for the obligatory \$500 bill but didn't find it.

"Um, sorry, Lando. I didn't have the cash ready yet." David's face went red. He extended his hand once more.

Lando groaned and shook David's hand again. He slipped the note into his front pocket.

Lando looked across the street. Cars poured out of the Fed parking garage. Commuters marched towards the Market Street train station. A deep orange sun blinded him as it passed between two buildings.

"Do you make anything on silver?" David asked.

Lando studied him for a second. "Nope. I need to be a better agorist." Lando grinned.

David laughed. "It's one hell of a rebellion where the more profit you make the better rebel soldier you are. Am I right or what?" He slurped some soda.

"Soldier? We're not soldiers," Lando frowned.

David gritted his teeth. "You know what I mean."

A man in a long, black leather trench coat and a black fedora appeared in Lando's field of vision. Lando kept his head low but watched him out of the corner of his eye. The man studied him through sunglasses.

"What is it?" David asked. He turned around.

"Don't turn around!" Lando hissed.

The man made a beeline for Lando and David. "Damnit!" Lando whispered.

Ryan

“Who’s in charge here?” asked the man in the black leather trench coat. The sun dipped below the skyline behind him.

Lando sighed. “What’ll it be? I’m about to close up.” *Nervous, dark clothes and asking who’s in charge: either a fed or a snitch.*

Trench coat man rubbed his chin. “What do you have?” His face was angular and his small, dark eyes looked through Lando.

Lando looked away and pointed to the orange awning above his cart. “Burritos,” he said. “How about extra jalapeños?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Lando prepared the food. He added one, then two scoops of jalapeños. *I really have to get that laxative.* “That’ll be \$50.”

“Oh, right.” The man pulled out his wallet and handed Lando a collection of rumpled small bills. “So, who’s in charge here?”

David and Lando rolled their eyes at each other.

He leaned in and raised his eyebrows. “You guys got any of the good stuff?”

David and Lando facepalmed.

Trench coat man turned to David. “Was that silver I saw?”

David took a step back.

“Listen, snitch,” Lando said. “I think it’s pretty clear who’s in charge here. And all I’m selling is refried beans. No, you did not see any silver. Go find someone else to snitch on!” He turned to David and said, “It’s time for me to close up.”

Trench coat man pushed his fedora back from his face. “You guys are part of the rebellion — the agora — aren’t you?” He smiled.

“Hey, uh,” David said. “I’ve got to meet my mom. I’ll see you later, man.” He walked backwards for a moment, then turned and hustled around the corner.

Lando grimaced and watched him walk away.

Trench coat man studied Lando’s cart. “Fake license. Reasonable prices. Yep! You’re an agorist!” He looked up and smiled. “Hey, what happens if I steal from you? Vigilante justice, am I right?” He turned his head sideways and smiled at Lando.

“We don’t use violence,” Lando said. *Well, only in self-defense.*

Trench coat man’s shoulders fell. “What? That’s no fun. Of course you do. Like if some kid steals your corner and you deck him, am I right?” He crossed his arm and raised his eyebrows.

“This is bullshit. That was defense of my property. You got something to charge me with, undercover man, you do it. Otherwise I am out of here.” Lando packed up his supplies, folded his stool into the cart and started to retract the awning.

Trench coat man outstretched his arms and inched his hands forward. “No, hold on. Don’t take off yet. I’m not a cop and I’m not a CI.” He stuck his hand across the cart. “I’m Ryan. I’m one of you. And I just might have a job for you.”

Lando narrowed his eyes at him. He refused the handshake. He pulled his stool out again, sat down and crossed his arms. “If you’re one of us, then tell me about the roads.”

Ryan looked to the left and guffawed. “Oh, that’s easy. ‘Who will build the roads?’”

Lando frowned. “So, who will build the roads?”

“Private corporations! And whoever wants to, of course.” Ryan gave Lando a sly smile.

Lando grunted. “Why do I have a fake license?”

Ryan closed his eyes and tilted his head to one side. “Because you’re an anarchist, and you think government is immoral and you’re participating in an alternative economy.” Ryan smiled. “Like a black market.”

“And profit is evil,” Lando deadpanned.

Ryan scoffed. “Profit is good!”

Lando grunted. “And —? “

“How many strikes you got, Lando?” Ryan’s face took on a mercenary look.

Lando gritted his teeth and looked away.

Ryan cupped his hand around his ear. “Was that two I heard? Yeah, I hear that, loud and clear. Nobody wants to admit to two strikes. The third one comes way too easy. And then ... ” Ryan drew his finger across his neck.

Lando growled, “What do you know about it?”

“I have family in the camps. Don’t we all?” Ryan paused. “The Three Strikes Act is slavery, pure and simple. All they need is some trumped up thinkcrime and boom. We finally have them on the run and so they put us in the camps to do slave labor for them. And what do we do about it? We sell burritos and pot and trade bitcoins back and forth.”

Lando cleared his throat and looked down. “That’s agorism 101. Don’t knock it,” he muttered.

“How much school did you do?” Ryan opened up his burrito and took a bite. His eyes went big. “Wow, I made a bad first impression, huh?” He fanned his mouth and reached for his drink. “Was it the trench coat or the fedora?”

“No! Don’t drink anything.” Lando handed him an empty wrap. “Try this. It’ll take the sting out.”

“Damn! So, getting back to our conversation —“

“Interrogation?” Lando cocked an eyebrow.

Ryan picked the excess peppers out of his burrito. “No school, then. How about —“

Lando’s tablet rung. He held his hand up to Ryan and tapped his earbud. “Yes.”

“Lando,” Mariana cried, “Lizzy left early today and I can’t find my dinner.”

Lando put his hand to his forehead. “You can’t open the fridge, Mari?”

“Wife?” Ryan asked with a grin.

Lando waited for Mariana to search the refrigerator. “Sister,” he whispered to Ryan.

“Oh, really?” Ryan covered his mouth with his hand and turned away.

“It’s not in here, Lando!” Mariana yelled.

“Hey, Lando, give me the usual.” A man with long dirty hair, his clothes ripped and pushing a shopping cart approached Lando.

“Sure, Snowball, just stand back.” Lando pulled two burritos out of the warmer and walked them over to Snowball. “Send the coin to the same address.” Lando held his nose.

“Did you look on the top shelf, Mari? You know, the one that’s right in front of your face?”

Snowball laughed. “Sister nagging you again, huh?” He slapped his knee. Dust particles flew out towards Lando’s cart. Lando grimaced.

“Oh, I found it!” she said. “I’m so silly, it was right here in front of my face! Gee, where is your head, Mariana?” She giggled.

Lando smiled. “Good. I’ll be home soon.”

“Hey, the landlord came by after you left this morning.” Mariana asked.

“I gotta go.”

“Love you big brother!”

“Okay,” Lando whispered.

“Let’s hear it.”

Lando growled. “I, uh, —“

Mariana giggled.

“Oh, you.” Lando hung up. “Tell you what, Snowball. Keep that bitcoin and spend it on a shower. Jesus Christ, man. You have to bathe if you want to integrate back into society!”

“Ha! Integrate into society. These clowns won’t let me,” Snowball said. He pointed to a group of black-shirted police officers bearing down on Lando’s position.

“Well, guys, I can see I have overstayed my welcome.” He folded in the stool, collapsed the awning and got on his bike. “I will see you gentlemen tomorrow.” Lando started to pedal but it refused to move.

“You forgot to disengage the brake. Good luck,” said Ryan. He turned to leave.

Lando got off the bike and disengaged the brake on the back wheel.

He stood up fast and met a black wall.

Lando reached to open the warmer. “Has the dinner bell rung, gentlemen? Here let me get you —“

A nightstick smacked Lando’s wrist.

Lando retracted his arm and nursed it. He frowned and stood up. Sarge slammed his hand down on Lando’s shoulder and dug his thumb in under his collarbone. Lando collapsed in pain.

“I am videotaping everything,” said Lando.

Sarge laughed with his mouth open. “You got drones in the sky or something, kid? Stay down.” Three cops now surrounded Lando. The tallest one picked up a red soda can off of the cart. He popped the tab and drank deep. “Ahh. Now, that hits the spot.” He examined the can. “Kowalski, is this real Coke or a knockoff you think?” He looked at the smallest cop.

“No way to tell, Sarge,” said the redhead cop.

Lando spoke up. “Have they got you guys on anti-piracy duty now? You join IPEC?” Lando laughed.

The tallest one licked his lips, set the can down and smacked Lando across the face with the back of his hand. “Don’t you ever compare me to those fuckups. Every time they run through here, all my merchants get shut down.”

“Surely, gentlemen, we can resolve this without getting your handsome uniforms dirty. How about a nice \$500?” Lando rotated his shoulder and grimaced.

Ryan took a step back and put his hand to his chin.

“Hey Jaffari, \$500. Did you hear that?” said Kowalski to the tall cop.

“No,” said Jaffari. “I heard \$5,000. A prosperous businessman can spare \$5,000 for the policemen’s ball.”

The three cops laughed.

Sarge spoke up. He pushed his hat back on his head. “No, fellows, I’ve been watching this one all day. He’s up to some funny business. He’s got two strikes. And I know for a fact that the Secret Service is after him.”

The other two cops said, in unison, “Oooo, nice!”

“Yep, he’s a ripe one. Been profiting off our streets for God knows how long. His license is fake. His menu isn’t on file with the city. No tax stickers or nothing. This is a wild cherry tomato and it’s time for harvest.”

“You can shove your bullshit taxes up — !“ started Lando.

Kowalski laughed with his mouth open. “A wild cherry. That’s good Sarge.”

“Shut up, Kowalski.” Sarge looked down at Lando and sneered. He tapped him on the head with his nightstick. “Now look here, boy. You are going to empty your pock—“

Lando’s voice cracked. “I’ve got a family to —“

“Shut up!” He grabbed Lando’s collar and cracked him on the back of his head with the nightstick. Lando yelped. “You are going to empty your pockets. You are going to open the lock box. You are going to strip down so I know you aren’t hiding anything on your person, motherfucker, and then you are going to enter the password for your bitcoin wallet.” He hauled him up by the back of his collar and took Lando’s tablet out of his back pocket. “Stand up. And you are going to do this without any guff, wisecracking or bitching about your family. We all got families to feed. We all got jobs to do. Got it?”

Lando stared at him. *I will get you. The agora will get you.*

Kowalski slapped Lando across the face. “The Sarge asked you a question, spic!”

Something black caught the corner of Lando’s eye. He glanced. Ryan leaned against the Fed building at the other end of the block and watched with his arms crossed.

Lando fixed Kowalski with a glare and stepped toward him.

In one fluid motion, Kowalski drew his taser and stung Lando in the neck. Lando screamed and crumpled to the ground. “Burn, baby, burn!” yelled Kowalski.

Sarge pushed Kowalski and the taser turned off. “He can’t pay us if he’s charbroiled, idiot!” He turned to Lando. “Enough s—“

Kowalski’s radio crackled. “All units. High-speed chase, heading north on 7th Street between Market and Filbert. Armed and dangerous. Suspected narcotics.”

The tall cop spoke up. “Sarge, that’s right down the block. And he’s got something or —“

A car came racing down the street. Jaffari pulled out his sidearm and fired three shots at it. He started running toward the street but stopped and looked at Sarge. “You know he’s got something! It’s now or never.” He gestured toward Lando. “He’ll be here tomorrow!”

Sarge looked at Lando. “Go, Kowalski, start the car.” He kicked Lando in the gut and punched him in the face. “Expect us tomorrow, kid.” The three cops ran to their car and screeched off north.

Lando wiped his nose. It was bleeding. He pulled some napkins out of the cart and held them to his face. He sat down on the cement. It started to rain. *Bastards. What did I do to deserve this?* He slammed his fist down on the sidewalk.

Ryan walked over and picked Lando up off the ground. “We need to get you home.” Ryan helped him over to his bike. “Ride home. Your sister will fix you up.”

He stared at Ryan. “There are still some decent people in this world, I guess. Come get a burrito tomorrow. No jalapeños this time.” He mounted the bike and put a foot on a pedal. He looked up at Ryan. “This job you mentioned, does it involve dealing with cops at all?”

Ryan grinned and rubbed his hands together. “It involves outsmarting cops.”

Dad

“You should try yoga dad, it has really helped a lot of people.” Lando carried his dad’s weight on his shoulders as he hobbled to the toilet. *And it might get a load off of my back!*

Lando’s wrist communicator showed 3:15 AM. He flipped on the bathroom light and closed his eyes. *I might just make the breakfast rush.*

“Hurry up!” said Dad.

“The light just blinded —“ started Lando.

“I don’t care! Just get me on the toilet!” Dad yelled.

Lando sat him down. Dad grimaced. Lando lingered at the white porcelain sink.

“Get out! I don’t want you to remember me like this,” Dad said.

Lando sighed. He leaned against the wall right outside of the bathroom. *So tired.*

“Don’t worry, Lando, I’m almost done. I won’t be a burden on you much longer.”

Lando put his mouth to the door jamb. He knocked a paint flake to the floor with his finger. “Dad, come on. I just want you to be better again. I need you.”

Dad grunted. “That’s a load of bullshit just like the one coming out ... right now.” A wry grin spread over his face before the grimace returned. “If you need me, then you’re fucked, and so is Mariana. Don’t need me!” A low whimper escaped him.

Lando covered his nose and looked away. “Maybe a stationary bike, dad. They say that the leg movement helps your digestion.”

“A stationary bike? How about the rent. The bills, now that would be a luxury. A stationary bike! Ha! That’s a dream you can’t afford,” said Dad.

“I just want you to be well —“

“And to not have to wipe my ass. I understand. I wouldn’t have enjoyed wiping my dad’s ass, either. Like I said, I’ll shove off soon. And then you will need to care for your sister.” Dad looked up at Lando, his eyes narrowed. “She’s a princess and you will treat her as such. I want the same legal citizenship papers for her that your mom and I got for you. Remember the deal we made.”

Lando rolled his eyes. *How could I forget? You only remind me about it daily.*

“Okay, go ahead.”

Lando took care of the dirty work and settled his father back into bed.

“Now get out there, son, and make some money,” said Dad. He covered himself up and started to snore.

Mariana

Lando stirred, in turn, each of the four tall, bubbling pots on the tiny but spotless propane stoves. He glanced out of the second-story kitchen window to the old, windowless walkup across the street. Inside, that squatter was pissing out the back window. The man smoked a cigarette laced with something Lando didn't want to think about. *Fuck this place.* Lando felt dirty.

Lando's tablet vibrated in his pocket. He grabbed a threadbare towel and pulled a small tray out of the toaster oven. *Dad's special brownies.* Lando smiled. *What he would do to me if he knew.*

Lando opened the tiny kitchen window and stuck his head out. The organic farm market at the corner was open and already doing business.

He checked the clock. 4:30 AM. *Time for Princess Mariana to wake from her slumber.* Lando laid out two large coconut flour tortillas on a dented metal plate. He dropped some refried bean paste, a long chunk of mozzarella cheese, bacon, scrambled eggs and a crescent lump of spring green avocado on top. He rolled it all up and walked to his sister's room. *Some princess. She eats like a horse.*

He banged on the door, then opened it. "Mari, time for breakfast." He let the plate drop from a modest height onto her scratched plastic side table.

She snored.

Lando clapped his hands twice. "Mari, I'm trying to catch the breakfast rush here!"

The body on the bed did not move.

Lando grabbed her shoulder and shook.

Mariana rolled over.

“Mari, now! Your food is here. Get up. You’ve got studying to do.”

“Can I take today off?” She looked out at him from underneath the covers, her sleepy eyes arching downwards at the extremes, pleading with him.

“Get yourself up. I can’t miss the breakfast rush today. Rent is due!” Lando said.

Mariana sniffed her breakfast. “Oh my God, that smells great. Can I have some coffee, too?” She tucked in, sucking down Lando’s breakfast burritos in slurps and gulps.

“No coffee. It will stunt your growth. And you need every inch.” Lando snickered.

Mariana whimpered, then made a pleading sound through her full mouth.

“I’m out of here. Get serious with your studying, little girl. Lazy won’t get you into Harvard.”

“Wait,” Mariana said. “I need lunch money.”

“I packed you a lunch. It’s next to the stove. Like always.”

Her mouth full of breakfast burrito, she held out her hands and cocked her head sideways. She frowned.

Lando crossed his arms. “My food still embarrasses you?”

She nodded her head and swallowed. “Dara and Avery always buy the nice lunch and —”

“You always get stuck eating beans.” Lando finished her sentence.

“They make me fart, Lando! I need to network with the right people to get into Harvard. You understand? Right?” She made the cute smile.

Lando sighed. *Oh she's going to be a terror.* He pulled \$50 out of his wallet and left it on the table. “Don’t spend it all in one place. It’s all we’ve got right now.”

Mariana shook her head from side to side and moved her arms in a dance. She outstretched her left arm and stuck out her index and pinky fingers — sign language for “I love you.”

You are so spoiled! Lando pointed his index finger at her. “Stay away from the boys!”

Mariana ripped off another chunk, and saluted. Her face contorted. She rushed to him and held his face. “What happened to your nose, your eye?” She caressed his face.

Lando turned away. “You just focus on studying, little girl.”

“What happened! Tell me!”

Lando glared at her and turned away.

“You tell me what happened right now or I’ll wake Dad.” Mariana slammed her foot into the floor. It buckled, causing the room to shake.

Lando grimaced. *You don’t want to know because if I told you everything you would be ashamed of how hard I work for you and you would give up your dreams.*

Mariana sat down with her two hands cupping her cheeks.

“Take a guess,” Lando started. “Greedy cops. What did you expect? I can always handle or pay off everyone else.”

“Everyone? That’s not true. You can’t go back out there today. You just can’t.” Mariana furrowed her brow.

Lando sighed. “Have a seat. Let me teach you a couple things about life, little girl. Bills —“

“You have two strikes, Lando. You can’t just go out there without thinking of the consequences. One more and I’m here all alone, just me and Dad. What happens when, you know ...?” said Mariana.

Lando looked up. *Just think positive, just think positive.* “Bills must be paid, food must be put on the table. Princesses must be clothed and supplied with books. Dad’s disability checks are a joke. They cover Lizzy and a couple plantains from the organic market. That’s it. And that’s why I have to keep going out there.”

Mariana stood up. “Okay, I am going to get a job or start a business, or something!”

Lando grabbed her elbow. *Why did I have to open my big mouth?* “Sit down. Eat your breakfast. Study your books. Your job is to get into Harvard or University of Chicago. Not sell hot dogs on a street corner.”

“But —”

“What job would you do anyway? There are no jobs for teenagers left.” Lando held up his index finger. “Nothing more about this!”

Mariana started to sob. “Don’t go back out there! They could kill you!”

Lando put his index finger to his lips and shushed her. “You’re being melodramatic! I’m completely fine!” He closed the door behind him, then reopened it and stuck his head in the room. “Just remember, if it all goes wrong, you know where my silver stash is.” He laughed at himself.

Tears ran down Mariana’s soft cheeks.

Illegal

“Dad, get some more sleep.” Lando said. *Oh boy, here it comes again.*

Dad rolled into the kitchen, the nurse pushing him. “You know I can’t sleep past five anymore.” Dad scowled. “How come you’re not out yet?”

“I’m leaving now, Dad, just finished loading the food on the cart. Mari is up and eating. I left yours and Lizzy’s breakfast next to the —“

Dad jerked his head. “Why don’t you just get a corporate job, son? Breaking your back for pennies a day, selling burritos on the street!” Dad turned up his nose and frowned. “Not even in Colombia did our family have to stoop that low. It’s not even Colombian food! And how will you ever put Mari through college on that?”

“I gotta go if I’m going to catch the breakfast rush,” Lando muttered. *God, I hate this!*

“You realize when I die that my disability checks won’t come anymore, right?”

“Yes, Dad, of course. Now—“

“What will you do then? We’re already losing this place.”

Why must he start now, when I’m about to head out the door? “You know I have my agorist business. Currency exchanges really rake it in, dad. We’ve talked about this.” Lando let out a long sigh and rolled his eyes upwards.

Dad reached out and grabbed Lando’s collar. “Don’t you roll your eyes at me, boy! This is serious! I’m already three months past my expiration date. But I can still kick your ass.” He let Lando go and hung his head. He strained to be still.

Lando put his hand on Dad's shoulder.

Dad sighed. "I want—"

"About that exp—" Lando started.

Dad threw his head up and raised his voice. "I want you to go out and get a corporate job. And keep it. It's that simple. You need to build a future, not risk your neck for a crazy cause no one understands. You listen to that Raven too much."

Lando was silent. *You might understand it if you tried.*

"You are going to give me what I want." He contemplated Lando.
"You owe it to me."

Lando opened his mouth but looked down at the floor. His stomach fell.

"And don't tell me about your business. Your currency exchange is illegal. Selling those ridiculous burritos without a permit is illegal."

"That's the point, Dad! In a world —"

"You are illegal!" yelled Dad.

Lando threw his hands out in front of him and grabbed the hair at the back of his head. "Dad," he whispered, "keep your voice down. Look, I gotta —"

"Why are you even involved in this political stuff, Lando? What is the point of these risks you take? One more strike and it's all over. What happens to Mari then? Have you thought about that? Imagine for a minute what these animals will do with her." He firmed his jaw.

Lando glanced at the kitchen clock. "I'm officially late! Goodbye!" Lando walked out the front door, closing the flimsy slice of particle board gently behind him.

Lando mounted his food cart and started peddling up the hill toward Center City. *Another day, another —*

A man in a polo shirt and a police officer stepped out in front of Lando. “Landon J. Cruz?” asked the police officer.

Rent

“Yeah, that’s him,” said the man in the polo shirt.

“Mr. Johansson —“ Lando started.

“Don’t start with me, kid.” Mr. Johansson looked up the street. “Just pay me what you owe me right now.”

“Can you just —“

Mr. Johansson looked Lando in the eye. “Six months back rent now, or our friendly policeman here evicts you. Right now. That’ll be \$72,000, Mr. Cruz.”

“I’m pretty sure city law says you have to give us thirty days notice and then we can appeal, and that can take a while, and then you can’t evict a senior suffering with a terminal illness —“

“Listen,” Mr. Johansson put his face an inch from Lando’s nose. “This is Officer Mc— What’s your name?” He glanced to his left.

“Hernandez,” said the cop.

“Officer Hernandez. I’ve got him all day. Once we move your stuff out, including your practically-dead dad, you’ve got nothing. You ‘voluntarily vacated,’ right, Hernandez?”

“That’s right, sir.” The cop pulled out his nightstick and bounced its heavy side on the palm of his hand.

Lando narrowed his eyes and took a step back. “Have you gentlemen had breakfast yet?”

Fault

Lando wheeled his cart up to the corner of 7th and Arch, in front of the Fed. *No sign of cops. They're probably on at night.* “Breakfast burritos here, delicious low-carb breakfast burritos!” Lando yelled. “They’ll fill —“

A hand slammed down on Lando’s shoulder. “You got your video camera running, Juan Valdez?”

The three cops broke out into laughter.

“Well, good morning, gentlemen!” Lando said. *Please, please, don’t get out of hand.*

The three cops immediately quieted. Kowalski licked his lips. Sarge scowled. The tall cop wiped his nose.

“Dry mouth, bad breath, bloody nose, yes, I see you fellows have been up all night enjoying some product. You must be starving. How about some nice breakfast burritos and coffee?” *With some laxative on the side.* Lando suppressed a chuckle.

Sarge punched Lando in the nose.

Lando bent down. “Not the fucking nose again!” Lando danced in pain. He touched his nose. *No blood but damn that hurts!* “Before we start,” Lando said, “I need your names and badge numbers.”

Kowalski kicked him in the shin. Lando hit the ground.

“That was Kowalski. You’re Sarge. And—“

The tall cop pulled a piece of paper out of his front shirt pocket and threw it down at Lando. “Jaffari: J-A-F-F-A-R-I. 7345. Now, hand over the tablet.”

Lando struggled to get to his feet. “Afraid I can’t do that gentlemen. You see, I donated all my bitcoin to Our Lady of Mercy Hospital early this morning.”

Kowalski’s radio crackled. “All units, all units. Code 4413, high-speed chase. Feds requesting assistance. 5th and Arch. All units, a federal request for assistance.”

Jaffari looked at Sarge. “4413?”

“IPEC. That’s pharma.” Sarge thought for a moment. “Let’s move our meeting around the corner.”

Kowalski’s radio crackled again. “Sergeant Johnson, the Intellectual Property Enforcement Commission requests your assistance at 6th and Arch. Code 2. Sergeant Johnson?”

“Shit,” Sarge said. “Okay, you two, grab his —“

Lando bolted. In one clean motion, he disabled his cart’s brake, separated the food cart from the bicycle and peddled across the street. Lando looked back to see the food cart rolling toward the street. *My cart.*

Jaffari ransacked the food cart. Kowalski and Sarge ran after Lando, holding their hats tight to their heads and their sidearms to their hips. An old Volkswagen Beetle with huge wheels and a roaring engine came flying up the street. They stopped short to avoid getting hit by it. The Beetle swerved to miss a parked car, almost hitting Lando.

“Sarge, there ain’t shit in this cart!” Jaffari said. He kicked Lando’s food cart into the street.

Kowalski and Sarge took a step into the street again. A police car, sirens whining, flew up the street. They stepped back. Lando’s food cart rolled into the street.

Lando stopped to watch and outstretched a hand. “No!”

The police car slammed into Lando’s food cart. The sun-beaten plastic walls disintegrated into shards. The refried beans splashed

onto the windshield and top of the car. A wheel got stuck in the police car's wheel well, causing it to swerve to the right. The awning collapsed onto the windshield. The car careened into the lobby of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia and came to a stop. Glass tinkled to the cement.

Lando sniffed the spicy tang of crushed jalapeños in the air. *I always wanted to get my beans into the Fed building.*

A black helicopter approached the scene. Sarge, Jaffari and Kowalski ran around the corner, then ran back. Sarge grabbed his shoulder mic. "Charles ninety-six arriving on scene with backup. Patrol officers down. We've got this covered. Call off the chopper."

The reply came back, "Negative Charles ninety-six. IPEC chopper. Render assistance. Over and out." Sarge punched the air. "Go pull those guys out of the car. We're about to have the world fall on us. I'll handle the kid."

Two black SUVs rolled down the street. An angry eagle with a red sash in its claws adorned the vehicles' front doors. Four men in sunglasses and suits got out and strode straight for the crashed police car.

Jaffari ran to catch up with them. He got in front of them and put out his hands. "Hold on guys. Philly PD. We gotta get our guys out of the car, first, then you can wipe your asses in triplicate and seize any pirated merchandise."

The shortest man in the group whipped off his sunglasses and took a wallet out of his breast pocket. "Federal Intellectual Property Enforcement Commission agents. We're taking control of this scene. You may secure your officers. Then set a perimeter. We will be conducting interviews."

The black chopper hovered above the street. A man dressed in black combat gear observed the scene through a rifle scope.

Jaffari pointed up. "Is that really necessary?"

Lando came running up to agents. "Hey, your guys destroyed my
—"

An IPEC agent broke off from the pack and pushed Lando into a parked car. "Back off!"

Lando pushed the agent back. "Don't you push me. You're going to take my report. I can't get paid by insurance without it."

Kowalski ran over. "Hey, IP man, I got this. Go interview some bootleg vegetables or impound some raw milk." Kowalski grabbed Lando's shoulder and pushed him to the ground. "By the way, Mr. Federal Agent, did you get that guy?"

"Yeah." He turned to go.

"And what did you get him on?" asked Kowalski.

"Unlicensed penicillin manufacture without a permit."

Kowalski took his hat off and scratched his head.

Lando groaned. "Penicillin was supposed to be free for everyone to use and manufacture as they like."

Kowalski slapped handcuffs on him and pushed him onto his knees. "Stay down," he said.

"I demand you fill out a report for this. The city has got to pay for my cart!" *Or at least the insurance.*

Sarge walked up to Lando. "Empty his pockets."

Kowalski pulled an envelope of small bills out of Lando's front pocket, his keys, wallet and his tablet.

Jaffari and Sarge high-fived. "The mother lode," Jaffari said.

"Leave him ten grand in cash, so he can get another cart," said Sarge. "We're not these bastards," he said jerking his finger towards the IPEC agents. "We don't put people out of business. We just 'tax' 'em a little."

Kowalski laughed.

Jaffari opened Lando's tablet. It demanded a passphrase. Jaffari looked at Sarge.

Sarge opened Lando's wallet. "Lando J. Cruz. 717 South Hutchison Street, Phila PA 19147." Sarge bent the plastic card back until it turned white from stress. "How much you pay for this, Cruz? I know you're not legal." He turned to Kowalski. "Run him."

Kowalski pulled a thin rectangle out of his pocket and unfolded it to four times its original size. It beeped. He read Lando's details into the device. The reply printed out immediately on the screen. "Address confirmed, Sarge. Born February 18, 2011. Dropped out in the tenth grade."

"Too cool for school, huh?" Sarge snickered.

"Mother deceased. Father receiving disability payments, diagnosed with terminal colorectal cancer. He has a doctor's appointment next week. Sister, 14 years old, still in school." Kowalski licked his lips. "Two strikes." He looked up at Sarge. "One, standard printed material. One 3D. Both copyright-related."

"I already got that part. What's in the extended file?" Sarge asked.

"Citizenship granted February 26, 2028. Known agorist. Suspected of tax evasion, financial terrorism. No other indications of violent tendencies. That's it, Sarge."

Sarge massaged his chin. "Okay, Cruz, here's how it's gonna go. You enter your password. You pay your taxes. We accept bitcoin, for your convenience." Sarge smirked. "You go back to work tomorrow with a new cart and you pay us forty per cent of what you make every day at 4 PM on the dot." He grabbed Lando's collar and yanked him off the ground. "In return, we keep the Secret Service off your back, we don't look too closely at your citizenship, your dad's disability checks or your little sister. What's her name?"

"Mariana Andrea Cruz," said Kowalski.

“We leave your little sister alone — for now. Deal?” Sarge picked Lando up onto his feet and dusted him off. “There you go. I think that’s more than fair, don’t you guys?”

“Oh, yeah, Sarge. No doubts,” said Jaffari. He pushed Lando in the back. “Right, Cruz? Now what’s your password?”

Lando glared at them, each in turn. *These bastards will take everything and come back tomorrow for more.*

Sarge put his arm around Lando. “It’s simple, my friend. What’s more important to you? Your money and your cause? Or your family?” Sarge studied him. “Just make your choice, and we will live with it, either way. No skin off our teeth, right, boys?”

Lando hung his head. “How am I supposed to support my family, with you guys bleeding me dry, huh?”

“Your family? ‘Your family,’” Jaffari whined, mocking Lando. “I don’t give a fuck about your family.” He backhanded Lando across the face.

“It’s a dog-eat-dog world, Cruz,” said Sarge. “And we’re throwing you a bone. Now take the nice bone and be a good little doggie.” Sarge wrapped his arm around Lando’s neck and dragged him behind a parked car. He pulled out his sidearm, released the safety and pointed it at Lando’s head.

Lando squirmed. “Fuck you!”

“Put him out of his misery, Sarge,” said Jaffari.

“Won’t be the first time we had to put down a rabid dog.” Sarge cocked the hammer. He pushed the barrel of the gun into Lando’s forehead and inched his finger towards the trigger.

“Kid, I wouldn’t stall if I were you. Sarge doesn’t play games,” said Kowalski.

Lando’s mind shut down. *Just resist.* His breathing accelerated. *Mari. What will happen to Mari?*

Sarge squeezed the trigger. The firing pin clicked. “Oh, gee, forgot to rack the round,” he said. He whipped Lando with the gun on the side of his head.

Lando hit the blacktop. He closed his eyes and held his breath a second. A trembling coursed through his body. A trickle of blood ran down his ear.

Sarge racked the slide to a metallic, grating sound. “Yep, you heard that. There’s one in there now.” He put the gun to Lando’s forehead again.

“If you do it, you’ll never get my password,” said Lando. *Is this how I go?*

Sarge frowned. “He has a point there, boys.” He put the gun to the back of Lando’s knee.

“Don’t find fault, find remedy,” Lando yelled.

“What the hell?” said Kowalski.

“Type it in,” said Sarge.

“Bingo,” said Kowalski. “Transferring —.”

“To my account,” said Sarge.

Kowalski looked at Jaffari. “We’re gonna get our cut though, right Sarge?” Kowalski held up a plastic card to the tablet. He typed a number, then hit enter. Lando’s balance went to zero.

“Don’t question me,” Sarge said. “Is it done?”

Kowalski nodded.

“Get him up,” Sarge said. “Take off the cuffs. Give him his tablet back.” Sarge picked Lando up and threw his arm around his shoulder. “Now that we’re partners, old buddy, I know you’re not going to run off to your agora organization thing —“

Kowalski grunted. “They won’t be around much longer anyway.”

Jaffari snickered and high-fived Kowalski.

Sarge shot him a look. “Like I was saying —“

“What do you mean they won’t be around much longer?” asked Lando.

“Listen, kid, partners gotta stick together.” Sarge grabbed Lando’s arm and shook him. “And it would be a real shame if I had to send you to the camps. Your sister out here, all alone. Anything can happen to you in there. Stays can be extended. Illegals can get deported. You could get killed in a fight. Am I right or what?” Sarge pushed him away. “Now run off. You work for me now. So, I expect you back on this corner tomorrow morning at 5 AM sharp selling tacos.”

Lando trudged towards his bike. He saw the remains of his food cart and dug through the shards for the serial number strip. He found it and stuffed it in his pocket. There was no sign of his camera. He turned the corner and continued south on foot.

Kowalski looked down at the ground. He bent down and picked up an oversized shiny coin. He held it up to the sun in his fingers. Then he dropped it — and listened. “Sarge, check this out!”

Broke

“Lando, is that you in there? I didn’t know you were home,” said Mariana. She knocked on the bathroom door.

Lando lay in the bathtub. *God, I wish I had my own room already.* He wiped the tears from his face. He raised his voice. “Yeah, totally fine. Out in a minute.”

Mariana waited outside the bathroom. After a couple minutes, she said, “I’m kinda hungry big —”

Lando stepped out of the bathroom dressed in a towel. “Dinner will be ready in —”

Mariana drew her breath in fast. She laid her soft hand on Lando’s face. “What happened to you? Again? Today?”

Lando studied her face for a moment. *She’s so scared.* “Mari, they took everything.”

Mariana ran to the kitchen. “Where is your cart, Lando?” She swiveled her head from side to side. She looked out the window. “Where is your cart!” She ran back to Lando and kissed the top of his head. “Okay, calm down. Now, where is your cart?” She pulled her fingers away and stared at the blood.

“Cops destroyed it. Ripped to pieces.” Lando looked up at her. “And,” he cleared his throat, “they took my coin. All of it.”

“But you have a backup,” she said, her eyes big.

“They put a gun to my head, Mari. I had to give up the passphrase. They know where we live. They’ve got the coin already. There’s nothing I could do.”

Mari sat down hard on the floor. “But you have a backup! Why would you carry it all with you?”

“The backup’s useless if they already transferred it to their wallet, Mari! And I have to carry it. You never know when a big deal might come up.”

“We’re broke,” she said. Mariana sobbed. “What are we going to do now? I need that new computer for school next week. And we’re out of groceries. And Dad’s medicine. And —”

“It’s going to be okay,” Lando said.

“Why did they destroy your cart? Why did they have to do that?” She sobbed.

“I wouldn’t give them what they wanted. I only gave them my coin because they had a gun to my head,” said Lando.

She snapped her head up to look at him. “Well, why didn’t you just give it to them! Then we would still have the cart! Then we could eat!”

“Because I won’t live under anyone’s thumb.”

She sighed. “What about your silver stash?”

Lando hardened his face. “That belongs to my customers, Mari. You know that. I’m just holding it for them.”

Mariana furrowed her brow. She walked to her room and slammed the door.

Advice

Lando sat down at the kitchen table. He logged into the server and examined the video recordings made by his cart. He fast-forwarded to the moment when the police car destroyed his cart. He skipped backwards and played it again. Then again. *Here. Gone. Here. Gone.* He laid his head on the table. *Move. Move. I have to do something.*

He selected the choicest footage from yesterday and today and uploaded it to his website along with a summary of events. “I’m especially concerned,” he added at the end, “because one of the cops told me that the agora was going to be shut down.”

He waited a minute for comments. There were none. He set the tablet aside. *Nobody will care. Why should they? This stuff happens daily.*

A comment appeared. It was from Snowball. “Lay low for a little while, then start over on another corner. These guys are all about a quick fix. They’ll forget about you in a week. I sent you that coin from yesterday to help you rebuild. Good luck, Lando.”

“I paid for that spot,” wrote Lando. “And I like the statement I’m making: an agorist bank right next to the Federal Reserve Bank.”

“Maybe that’s why they targeted you, you idiot! All you agorists are idiots and terrorists. You’re destroying this great country by ripping off other people’s inventions and hard work. You all belong in the camps, where you can do something useful for the country for once. Fuck off back to Somalia!” posted an anonymous commenter.

Lando put his tablet away. He closed his eyes for a moment. His shoulders sagged. *Alright, then.*

He pulled Dad’s medical marijuana stash out of its cubbyhole in the living room and rolled a joint. He entered the hallway and looked

both ways. *They must be watching a screen.* He snuck into the bathroom, lit it at the window and took a long toke. He held the delicious burning feeling in for several beats before letting it out. He did it again. And again.

Agorazon

Lando laid down on the couch. A pleasant feeling of peace washed over him. *It's gonna work out.* He unfolded his tablet and searched Agorazon for food carts. *Maybe Snowball is right. Maybe I can start over on another corner.*

He brought up the best-seller. “Solar-assist engine and warmer. Four warming stations. Awning.” *Looks good so — \$115,000? Are you for real?*

Lando pulled out the envelope Sarge left him. He counted the cash. *Ten grand? What am I going to do with that? Maybe I should sell the silver and pay the depositors back later.* He steeled himself against the idea. *I'd be selling my reputation.*

Lando brought up Craigslist. His ear buzzed. It was David. “Hey are you okay? I saw the video and I’m really sorry about your cart,” boomed David’s voice in his ear. Lando turned down his earbud volume by adjusting a slider on his tablet.

“Eh, not really,” Lando replied. “Hey I —“

“I know a guy. He’s got an old cart. It’s not in bad shape but you’d have to do some cleanup work. He says \$25,000 is the minimum.”

Lando sat up. “Does it work? How many warming stations does it have? Can I get an installment plan?”

“I’m sending over pics,” David said. “Take a look. I can show it to you tomorrow if you want.”

Give it Up!

Lando got up off the couch and stretched. *I must have another fifteen grand around here somewhere.* He headed for the bathroom closet.

Dad blocked the hallway.

“Did you eat the brow—“

“Your sister told me what happened.” He rubbed his hands together in front of him, circling them again and again. “The landlord came by today, Lando.”

Lando smacked his forehead.

“You missed your appointment with him. He canceled the deal you two worked out and he wants the back rent again. He wants it now. And these Secret Service men came by today. They want to talk to you.”

Lando slumped against the wall. “Dad, I lost everything.”

“The silver, too?” he asked.

“Dad! The silver belongs to my customers. I’m just holding it for them, like a safe deposit box. I can’t use it.”

“I know, son. I know.” Dad was quiet. “How much is there?”

Lando looked at him. “You can’t ask me that.”

Dad sighed and spread his hands. “Son, look, the place next door is abandoned. We’ll squat there for now.”

“Dad! No!” yelled Mariana from behind him.

He quieted her with his hand. “We’ll fix it up the best we can. We may have to go without some luxuries — like running water, but at

least we'll have a roof over our heads. We'll figure out the electricity hookup. Maybe we can recover before winter."

Lando hung his head. "I failed you, Dad. I failed you." He began to sob. He put his head on Dad's shoulder and hugged his neck. "I promise you. I will fix this." *I swear.*

Dad laid his hand on Lando's shoulder. "This is the perfect opportunity to get your life in order. You're still —" He grimaced in pain and hunched over. "You're still young enough to make a full comeback from this. But you need to get a government —"

"I won't work for the government!" Lando said.

"A government job, son, pays well. It is not too demanding, they give you good healthcare, a good pension and they will never fire you. We have had enough ups and downs. You tried being a street hustler —"

Lando stood up straight. "Street hustler? I operate the longest-running agorist bank in Philadelphia, maybe in the world! I'm working towards a cause. I'm an activist —"

"For what? What is this grand cause of yours?" Dad asked.

"Liberty, Dad. Freedom. Self-determination. Letting people do what they want as long as they don't hurt others," Lando said. "That's what we —"

"Be that as it may be son, you and I have an agreement. You can't —" He let out a grunt of pain.

"Dad, are you okay?" Mariana asked. She wiped tears from her cheeks.

He waved her off and collapsed to a seated position on the floor.

"Do you see, Lando? Look at the pain he is in and still you insist with this business! Why? Why? Why?"

Lando's cheeks flushed with anger. He guarded his mouth. He sat down on the floor, too.

“Son,” he said through the pain, “you and I have an agreement and I am calling in my option. I’m vetoing anything but a government or corporate job. Give up this crazy dream of yours, son. Give it up!”

Lando 2.0

“Alright,” David said with a beaming smile. “Time to relaunch. It’s Lando 2.0!”

“Let’s just take a look at it first, before we get excited,” said Lando.

David led him down an abandoned street. The houses were charred ruins. The street was full of holes and it was black with burnt carbon in other spots.

“What happened here?” asked Lando.

“I think this is the neighborhood,” said David, “where those guys created that squatter community.”

“Occupy?” asked Lando.

“Yeah. You remember. They filled like ten blocks. Then the cops bombed it,” said David.

“I didn’t know it was this bad. It’s a good thing we are all spread out.”

A pack of six stray dogs approached them.

“Don’t worry,” said David. “They’re probably trained just to attack cops.”

They got to the end of the burned out houses, turned left to avoid a block of obvious drug houses and hopped three fences. A jagged broken glass fence top slashed Lando’s right calf.

“Okay, if we don’t arrive in the next five minutes, I am going to call for a helicopter taxi to get me out of this maze,” Lando said. He fingered the gash in his leg. It stung.

David laughed. “Relax. It’s right here!”

David's friend was waiting for them. "I'm Freak. What took you guys so long?"

Lando nursed the hole in his pants where the fence slashed him. "Let's just see this food cart."

Freak led them into a detached garage. He pulled a canvas cover off of the food cart and sent dust flying everywhere. Lando sneezed.

"Can you turn on a light in here?" Lando asked.

"Sorry, chief, no electricity until 8 o'clock."

Lando eyed the cart. It was an old trailer type. *I can't pull this one on my bike.* "Does it at least work?"

"You bet it works. I just fired it up last winter for the Eagles tailgate party. Works like a charm," said Freak.

"Fuel?" Lando asked.

"Propane," said Freak.

"I'll give you fifteen grand," Lando said.

Freak covered it up. "I ain't letting it go for less than \$25,000." He turned to David. "I thought I told you that."

"Twenty large. Cash," said Lando.

Freak studied him. "I'd rather have bitcoin."

Cadre Mutual

Lando passed a tiny supermarket and pulled open the creaky doors of Cadre Mutual. *These guys are never going to pay out without a police report but I need that fifteen grand.*

Under a faded Bank of America sign, an agent sat in a teller's booth behind bulletproof glass. The two were alone.

“Good morning. I purchased —“

The agent held up a finger and continued typing on his workstation. Lando turned around and observed the bums cooking their lunch over a makeshift grill across the street.

“Next.”

“Yeah, I have a policy for —“

The agent raised his finger again. “Cadre Mutual, the agora’s first real insurance company. Get a piece of the agora. What would you like to get coverage for?” He listened.

Lando grimaced. He turned towards the street again. A bum chopped a chair into pieces and stuffed them between some bricks. Another bum threw vegetables into a large metal pot.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“The waiting period is currently around three months.”

“Yes, we’re suffering, too, sir. Thank you.”

The agent turned to Lando and cocked an eyebrow.

Lando looked down. “I purchased insurance for my food cart and a police cruiser destroyed it yesterday. I need to file my claim and get paid so I can start working again. I’ve got the cart picked out and ready, so I need the money now.”

The agent cracked a thin smile and shook his head from side to side. “Police report.”

Lando frowned. “The cops destroyed it. They rammed it with a cruiser while they were shaking me down. They won’t give me a report.”

“It seems like if they really wanted to shake you down, they would have given you a report so they could take your insurance payment.”

“Here is the VIN plate. I picked it out of the wreckage. Can I get the payment today?”

The agent stared at him. “Fill this out.” He passed him a tablet and a stylus.

Stupid forms. “This is three pages long!”

The agent did not look up.

Lando wrote out a detailed description of the destruction of his cart. “Here you go. How much can I get?”

The agent set the tablet aside. “It’s going to be three weeks to study your claim, since there is no police report. Payouts are currently running three months.” The agent set to typing on his computer. He looked up. “Thank you very much and have a nice day.”

Lando rolled his eyes. “Three months? You can’t do any better than that? I’ve been paying premiums here for three years! I was one of your first customers! I expect agorist businesses to provide better service, not the same or worse service than the corporate ones.” Lando leaned forward. “You need to do better than that!”

The agent blushed. He studied Lando for a moment. “I’m sorry, Mr. ... Cruz but IPEC keeps hitting us with injunctions and fines. They shut down three branches in the last three weeks. I’ve had to change location four times already this month. They’ve frozen my accounts. There isn’t much I can do.”

“At least tell me how much the payout will be,” Lando said.

The agent typed. "It says here you insured it in 2028 for \$7,500."

"That sounds right, but inflation has gone way up since —"

"We have a hard time keeping up with inflation. With depreciation, the maximum Cadre Mutual can pay out on your claim, if it is approved, is," the agent paused, "\$2,500."

Lando waved his arms in the air. "I can't buy another cart for that! That's barely enough for a couple days of raw materials."

Silver

Lando sat down on the curb across the street from Cadre Mutual and pulled out his tablet. The bums argued over portion sizes from the street soup they prepared. He brought up his website and opened the chat.

“Lando, did you lose any of our bitcoin?” said one comment.

“No,” he replied. “I don’t hold bitcoin for customers.”

“What’s the status on our silver? Can we make withdrawals?” someone asked.

Lando ignored that one. *You should know better than to ask about silver openly.* “How are your businesses coming along, guys?” he typed.

“You’re an idiot, Cruz. You can’t beat the man. You’ll never change anything. You’ll never make it,” posted one commenter.

“Thanks, officer Dimwitted from the FBI. Does trolling for the state still pay big bucks? Any chance you have a job opening? I’m admittedly getting quite desperate,” wrote Lando.

“Hang in there, Lando. We’re behind you. I know you can come back from this. There’s always some ass out there waiting to drag you down. Don’t let them get to you,” said another commenter.

Lando folded up his tablet and put it in his back pocket. He pulled an old burrito out of his front pocket and went to town.

Agora Business Alliance

Lando opened the door to the Agora Business Alliance. There were people everywhere. A robotic greeter approached him. “Welcome to the Ag... uh ...” The machine made a whirring noise and stopped.

Lando approached a desk. “Excuse me, but I —”

The lady didn’t look up. “Speak with Samuel, the greeter, please, sir.”

“Its batteries seem to have run out.”

The lady looked up and smiled. “I am so sorry.” She covered her mouth and twisted her body. “That happens from time to time.” She picked up the phone. “Sammy is out again! Can you recharge him? I know we need — You know what our situation is.” She snuck a glance at Lando before hanging up the phone. “So, what can I help you with, sir?”

Lando smiled without showing any teeth. “I’m applying for a micro-loan?”

“Oh, sure. Just head over there to the last line against the wall and they will be right with you.”

“Got it.” Lando took a step towards the other side of the room.

“Oh, uh, sir?” said the front desk lady. “The end of the line is right here.”

Lando looked at the end of the line. He looked at the front of the line all the way across the room. *Is that the same line? I am going to be here all day.* He fell into line.

“Hey!” A fat finger tapped him on the back of the neck. “I was here first. I just went to get a drink of water,” said a woman.

Lando looked at her. Then he looked at the line. He took a step back.
“Whatever.”

Takoda

“Alright, Mr. Cruz, your application for a microloan has been received and we will respond to you within twelve weeks,” said the male clerk with a mechanical smile. “Have a great day and thanks for visiting the Agora Business Alliance. Next!”

“Hold on now,” Lando said. He extended his open palm behind him to stop the next person in line.

“Come on buddy, everybody gets their shot. Move along,” said the man behind him.

“Now, listen,” said Lando to the clerk. “I’ve been paying my dues —“

“Yes, sir,” said the clerk. “For thirty-eight consecutive months. Thank you for being a long-time member, sir. Next!”

Lando extended his hand behind him again.

“I can’t wait twelve weeks. The cops —“

“Mr. Cruz —“

Lando shot his index finger into the air. His eyes went big.

The clerk rolled his eyes and slumped. “Popcorn, anybody?” he mumbled.

Lando continued, lowering his voice. “The cops destroyed my food cart yesterday. That’s how I earn my living. That’s how I keep my family fed, housed, clothed and drugged.”

“Have —“ started the clerk.

Lando waved his index finger and glared. “They also stole my bitcoin. I’m about to be evicted and the only thing keeping my dad alive is cannabis.” Lando laid his head on the counter. “Come on, you can do better than this for me.”

The clerk studied him. He typed into his workstation. “It says in your file, Mr. Cruz, that you owe \$197,000 and change in medical expenses, you’re being evicted and,” he typed some more, “you still have a pending loan balance of \$7,567.39 with the Alliance.” He leaned forward. “And you want to go deeper into debt?”

The man behind him put his hand on his shoulder. “Buddy,” he said, “we all got it bad. My wife just died, my sister got fired, my baby daughter is sick and the cops raided my place last night. They killed my dog. Just put in your request and try something else.” The man smiled at him. “It’s gonna be alright.”

Lando stared at the man for a moment, his mind quiet. He turned around to the clerk. “Well?”

“Next!” yelled the clerk.

Lando frowned at him, then stomped away towards the front door. He sat down in a row of seats at the back of the office, next to a large picture window. He leaned back and looked at the ceiling. *I would do just about anything right now. I just need a path.*

“Hey, buddy.” It was the man behind him in line. He sat down next to Lando. “You okay?”

Lando made two fists and put them to his forehead. “I just feel like I’ve done everything right, you know. And when I need something, nobody’s there.”

The man nodded.

“And, now, just to survive I might have to sell out and take a government job.”

The man laughed. “If you can even get one.”

Lando sighed. “I just can’t work for those bastards. They killed my mom. I can’t support them with one ounce of my energy. I won’t do it,” Lando said. “But I have people who depend on me.”

“They killed your mom?” asked the man.

“Cops,” said Lando.

The man nodded. “Listen, the ABA is under assault from the feds just like you and I are. There’s no sense in hanging around here. It could be years before they’re able to recapitalize.”

Lando did not look up. He wiped his eyes. “I —” His voice squeaked. He cleared his throat. “I understand.” Lando stood up. “Thanks for the 411.” He turned to leave.

“Hey, let’s get a cup of coffee. There’s a great place next door,” the man said.

Lando narrowed his eyes at him. *What does he want?*

The man rubbed his hands on his pants. “How rude of me. My name is Takoda. Come on!” He smiled and led the way.

“I can’t,” Lando said. “I’ve got to keep looking for some way to raise fifteen grand.”

“That’s exactly what I want to talk about,” said Takoda. “Money!”

Run!

“IPEC has been on the ABA’s ass for months now,” said Takoda. He paused to take a swig of coffee. “Those guys are relentless and the corporations fund them beyond their official government budget. They seize the ABA’s capital investments. They sue their customers into bankruptcy — especially the ones that owe them a lot of money!”

“Bastards.” Lando emptied the tiny diner coffee cup and swirled the grounds in the bottom. *That was like one mouthful.* They sat at the back of the diner, far from the front door. Next to them, a floor-to-ceiling picture window showed a dark alley.

Takoda looked at Lando and laughed. “If you’re nice enough and give her a tip, you can get endless refills here.” He winked at the waitress and got them both refills. “One hand washes the other.” He took a long swig.

“I serve my customers big cups of coffee every day but I never drink any myself.” Lando took a sip. “That is good!”

“Anyway,” Takoda continued, “our little agora is too big for its britches, according to IPEC. The Fed announced that the underground economy is now fifteen per cent of national production. These guys are paperwork stormtroopers. We do business, as you probably know, without licenses, permits, patents or royalty agreements.”

The waitress appeared and refilled their cups. Lando smiled at her but her craggy face offered no reaction.

“They hate that shit! It’s like they took all of the third-rate anal-retentive tax collectors from all over the world and put them into the Department of Commerce, Intellectual Property Enforcement Commission, Washington, DC!” Takoda guffawed.

Yeah, hilarious. Lando frowned.

“Anyway,” said Takoda, “my point is to forget about the ABA. They can’t do anything for you. They probably won’t make it themselves.”

Lando leaned forward. “What do you do?”

“I clean up crime scenes. Business is booming,” he whispered.

Lando’s eyebrows shot up. “Can you get me in?”

“Sorry, the Feds are taking it over. They say they have to ‘standardize’ it across the country. Make sure everybody cleans up the blood and guts the same way and disposes of it in accordance with environmental regulations X, Y and Z. Psssh.” Takoda waved his hand toward Lando.

“You gonna get a job with the government then?” Lando asked

“No!” Takoda said. “According to them, since I haven’t taken their bullshit tests, I know zip all about cleaning up crime scenes.” He took another gulp of coffee. “I’d have to pay for three months of training. And then I’d only get one-fourth of what I earn now. That’s before taxes.”

“What are you going to do?”

“There’s always the corporate job office.” Takoda looked away.

“That pays worse than the government, it’s easier to get fired and they make you work longer hours,” Lando said. “That’s what I hear.”

“The agorist job office has a few jobs sometimes.”

“If you know how to handle a gun!” Lando laughed.

“Loan shark in a pinch, I guess,” said Takoda.

Lando turned up his nose.

“There’s always organ donation.”

Lando rolled his eyes. “I need my kidney, thank you very much.”

Takoda nursed his side. “I know how —”

The glass double doors of the diner burst open and shattered. Philadelphia police in black body armor and face masks poured into the diner. A small, round drone came in after them. Its cameras rotated under a translucent dome that hung underneath the rotors.

“This is a routine terrorism inspection,” said a recorded announcement from the drone. “Remain calm. Do not move. Cooperate and answer our questions without hesitation. Get your wallets out.”

A waitress grabbed a rag and started to clean broken glass off of the countertop. A cop smacked the butt of his rifle into her hand and she screamed out in pain. “Sarge said not to move!” the cop yelled. The waitress fell to the floor.

Takoda tensed. “I can’t be here.” He looked to his left. The police inspection approached him. He looked to his right at the big, glass picture window.

Lando’s legs started to shake. *It can’t be him.* “I think I know that cop but I can’t tell with the mask on.”

Takoda eyed him. “If you know him, then we’re in the same boat. Sarge?”

Lando’s eyes got big. “Yeah.”

“Follow my lead,” Takoda whispered. He pulled a pistol out of his waistband and chambered a round.

Lando grabbed his hand. “What are you going do? I’m not ready to go out in a blaze of glory yet,” he whispered.

Takoda chuckled. “I’m just —“

“You two, over there,” yelled one of the cops, “quiet!”

“Get ready,” Takoda whispered. He pointed the gun at the picture window and pulled the trigger. Tiny bits of safety glass rained everywhere. He flipped the table and was out and into the alley.

Lando froze. His ears rang.

The cops opened fire.

Takoda reached in, grabbed Lando by the collar and pulled him.
“Run!”

The Core

“I think,” Lando wheezed, “we lost them.”

Takoda pulled him into an alley. “We should split up now.”

“Right.” Lando smiled. “Hey, it’s been an adventure.” Lando shook his hand but Takoda wouldn’t let go.

“There’s something else.” Takoda walked to the edge of the alley and stuck his head out. A cop car flew through the intersection, sirens whirring, going the other way. “It’s just a rumor. I don’t have confirmation on this. But I’ve heard it from three reputable sources now.”

Lando crossed his arms. *Here it comes.*

“It’s called The Core. Word on the street is that the top agorists are ponying up big money to take the fight to them, kind of like an agorist CIA.”

Lando snickered. “What, to carry out assassinations? Seriously?”

“Seriously. We’re fighting back and in a big way. The story is that they have veterans from the Egypt War and some ex-Mossad training them.”

“I hope they can do something fast. I’m about to lose my house.”

Takoda rolled his eyes. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to tell you, Lando!” He grabbed him by the shoulder. “They’re hiring.”

A beat cop came around the corner and into the alley. “Hey, you two!”

Connection

“Hi, uh, is this — is this ... The Core?” Lando asked. He stood down the street from his corner and watched the traffic pass. The hot dog cart occupied his usual spot. He pulled his extra-long-bill baseball cap down tighter over his forehead.

There was a pause. “Wrong number.” The line died.

Lando furrowed his brow. He dialed again. He heard the line open on the other side. No one spoke. “I was told you were hiring.”

The call disconnected.

I must need a connection. Lando opened the ABA website. *Maybe he does business under the same name.* He searched the business directory but there was no sign of Takoda.

Lando hit redial. It rang once, twice, three times. *That's enough of that.*

The call connected. “Be at the alley where Takoda told you about us, 5 PM on the dot. Do not arrive earlier than 4:58 PM.” The line went dead.

Lando’s eyes got big. *Takoda told them about me, I guess.* He stretched his hands up above his head and looked up. *Oh, this had better work out.*

He called Mariana.

“Hey, where have you been, big bro?” she asked.

“Laying low. Anything from Mr. Johansson?”

“No, but we’re thinking he could show up any minute now. Dad wants us to get started moving stuff next door. Can you be here in fifteen minutes?”

Lando frowned. “No, Mari, I’ve got a job interview.”

“Oh my God, Dad is going to be so happy! Is it corporate or government?” She paused. “Do you think you’ll get it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to get your hopes up.” Lando bit his lip.

Mariana giggled. “So is it corporate or government?”

“Um —“

“Hey, here’s Dad.”

“No —“

“Lando, you have a job interview?” Dad asked. “Corporate or government?”

“Da—“

Dad raised his voice. “Neither.”

Lando was silent.

“Is it really so hard to give a dying man what he wants? Go visit the corporate and government job listings.”

“Bu—“

“No buts!” Dad hung up.

Govcorp

“Where is everybody?” Lando whispered.

He stepped onto a dark marble floor. To his left, translucent white wall panels ran from floor to high ceiling. To his right, peeling prints of famous works of art by Picasso, Goya and Delacroix hung crooked on a glossy red brick wall.

He approached a round, black plastic bubble. *Is it a computer terminal?* The bubble rotated and a woman at a desk appeared.

“Welcome to Govcorp. We place most of our workers,” she said in a nasal tone of voice, “via an online application process.” She looked into her phone and smiled. She looked up and observed Lando from the tip of her nose. “Perhaps you’d like to try it.”

“Thanks but I’d like to get it over with.” Lando wrinkled his nose and nodded his head. *How do they keep this place so clean?*

She led him to an all-white cubicle. “Wait here a second, sir, and an associate will be right with you.” The skin above her mouth curled.

Lando pulled the chair away from the front of the desk and it slammed into the cubicle wall. He stepped one foot over the chair and sat with one leg on each side of it. His knees rubbed against the hard metal desk.

A portly man wearing glasses and a beard waddled into the cubicle. He said nothing. He moved papers around.

“I’d like —“ started Lando.

The man held up his open palm.

Lando sat back and crossed his arms. *Another superior jerk. How long is this going to take?*

“ID number, please.” The man shifted over to his keyboard. He looked at Lando over the top of his glasses.

“Lando Jeriko Cruz.”

The man sneered. “Not your name. Your number.”

Lando firmed his jaw. *I'm a person, not a number.* He pulled out his citizenship card and tossed it across the desk.

The man stared him for a moment before picking up the card.

“Lando J. Cruz, 22 years old. No college. No high school.” He turned to study Lando. “That's a manual labor profile.”

Lando sat up straight. “Give me the standardized tests. I will pass all of them.”

The corners of the man's mouth turned down. He took off his glasses. “That's against policy.”

“Forget policy.” Lando leaned forward and tapped his fingers on the desk.

Janitorial Administration

“Okay, Ace, is this some kind of joke?” the man asked.

Lando frowned at him. “What —“

Two security guards entered the cubicle. They made Lando stand up and started rifling through his pockets.

“What is this?” Lando yelled, pushing the guards away.

“You cheated on the standardized test. We’ve got you dead to rights.” The man refused to look at him. “That’s a class seven offense.”

Lando’s lips pulled back from his teeth. “I don’t cheat!”

“Sure,” the man said.

“Larry, he’s got nothing on him.” The guards left.

Larry scrutinized Lando. “I know you cheated because these tests results,” he said, pointing at his screen, “are not possible.”

Lando sat down and suppressed a grin. “Why exactly are they not possible?”

“A high school dropout does not get a perfect score on a post-undergraduate placement exam.” Larry touched his headset. “I’m calling the police now.”

“You’ve got no evidence!” Lando yelled.

“Not even real college graduates get a perfect score, sir. Next time, try to blend in a little better.” Larry looked up. “Yes, I’d like to report a crime. Level seven. Understood.”

“Just because I didn’t go to school doesn’t mean I’m not educated,” Lando said. “They still have libraries and websites.” He lifted his chin. “That’s not a strike, is it?”

“Yes. Yes, it is,” said Larry. “This is your chance to run away. They’ll take a while to get — seven hours!” Larry hung up. “You got lucky. The wait time to report —“

Lando sneered. “You’re just lazy. That’s why you’re trying to get rid of me. You don’t want to do any actual work.”

Larry breathed out. “Alright, sir, I don’t know how you cheated.” He put his hands up. “I don’t actually care. You win. But it won’t do you any good. Policy is that that high school dropouts do manual labor.”

Lando stood up. “But I passed the test! If the test doesn’t count for anything, then why do you give it?”

Larry held up a palm an inch from Lando’s face. “Now, I have one manual labor position available at this time. It’s an outsourced government job. Three shifts per day: 5 to 11 AM, 3 to 6 PM and 7 to 11 PM.”

“I could do the morning shift,” Lando said.

“No, you didn’t understand, young man. It’s all three shifts,” said Larry.

“All three shifts? When do you get to go home and relax?”

Larry shrugged. “From 11 PM to 5 AM, I guess. How would I know? I don’t work that job. It pays minimum wage, \$240 an hour.”

“What’s the job?” asked Lando.

“It says, ‘Law Enforcement - Janitorial Administration.’”

Lando scowled. “What is that?”

“Cleaning toilets at police stations,” said Larry.

Lando stood up. “Are you kidding me?”

“It’s fifteen days on, fifteen days off. That new job-sharing regulation applies to this,” said Larry.

“Job-sharing?” asked Lando.

Larry flapped his hand at Lando. “How can you claim to be well-educated if you don’t keep up with the laws? In order to stimulate employment, many classes of full-time jobs are being split into two distinct employment contracts. Now two can do the job where once it only took one. So you would work half the month and someone else would work the second half. Were you able to understand that, Mr. Cruz?”

Lando ignored Larry’s attitude. *Cleaning cop toilets? Me? Cleaning toilets for cops?* Lando stood up and leaned forward on Larry’s desk. “You must have something else.”

“Now,” said Larry, “there is quite a lot of competition for this position.”

Lando looked up and let out a loud breath.

“There are only ten slots available.” Larry typed in his computer. “Ah, bad news, sir. You have a criminal record. That automatically moves you to the bottom of the applicant pool. And I already have about seven-thousand applications for this position. Sorry, it’s policy.” Larry closed out Lando’s file and looked down at his desk.

Lando did not budge.

Larry looked up at him. “Have a nice day, sir. I have nothing else appropriate for your profile at this time.”

Lando stormed out of the cubicle. He stared at the red specks in the marble floor. *Not only is this place useless but they make me feel like shit on top of it!*

A pair of black shoes entered Lando’s field of vision. He looked up. It was Jaffari.

Sippy

Lando ducked into a cubicle. A plump older lady had her feet up and her eyes closed. Jaffari passed.

Lando tiptoed out of the Govcorp office and crossed the street to The Gallery Mall. He ran down the steps and into the underground area. *I don't know how much more of this I can take.*

He headed for a hot dog shop and grabbed a seat in the back corner. He slumped down in his seat and ordered a root beer float and a jalapeño cheesesteak. He closed his eyes. *Just for a minute.*

Someone tapped his elbow.

Lando jumped. It was a cop. His heart hit the roof of his mouth. *They found me.*

“Is this yours, sir?” the cop asked, pointing to a newspaper on Lando’s table.

Lando swallowed and sat up straight. “No, no, go ahead.”

The cop took a seat at the next table over, right next to Lando. *He's looking at me, isn't he?* Lando looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

Lando’s food arrived. *That's great. Killed my appetite.* He forced down a bite of the cheesesteak and a gulp of the rich, candy-scented float. *They don't even taste good.*

A mother dragged her screaming child into the shop. “You’re going to eat and that’s it!” she yelled. She smacked him on the bottom before ordering food for the pair.

Lando scowled at the mother. He unfolded his tablet and brought up the agorist job listings. *Slim pickings.* He scanned listings for pirate restaurant dishwashers, torrent uploaders, marijuana delivery

people, organic farm hands and daycare. *None of this is going to pay well!* He let the tablet drop on the hard plastic table.

The cop looked over at him.

Lando smiled and shrugged.

The child's food arrived but he refused to eat it.

"Eat!" his mother yelled. She smacked him across the face and the boy screamed.

Lando growled and looked at the cop.

The cop didn't move.

Can't give up yet. This Core thing could turn out to be a joke. He picked the tablet up again. *Here's one. Pharmaceutical manufacture. Strict safety environment. Intense workplace. Variable risk profile. Full-time. \$1,500 per hour to start.* "Wow," Lando mouthed.

Lando scheduled an interview for 3 PM at Malcolm X Park in West Philly. He paid for his half-eaten food and made his way out of the shop.

The child knocked his sippy cup to the floor. Lando smiled, reached down to pick it up for him and placed it back on the table. The boy smiled at him.

"Look at what you did, Billy! You soiled that man's shoes!" the mother yelled.

"My shoes are f—" Lando started.

The mother wound up to smack the boy again.

Lando caught her arm.

The woman jumped. "How dare you!" she yelled. "Mind your own business!" She stood up. "Officer, officer, this man assaulted me!"

Lando shot a glance at the cop before walking out of the shop. He opened his mouth. Lando took off running.

Voolavoo

Lando stood at the entrance to Malcolm X Park. Cars rolled down the street and pounding sounds came from their trunks. Young black and Hispanic men with mushroom hats stared him down. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.*

“Lando?” A young white man in a polo shirt walked up and offered his hand.

“Who’s asking?” Lando took a step back.

“Relax, I’m Zared and you’re here for the job, right?” Zared smiled. Lando nodded.

“Come on. We’ve got to run. It’s the only way to stay ahead of the gangs. They feel like we’re encroaching on their ‘territory.’ Hard core, man.” He winked at Lando and took off running away from the park between two brown-brick buildings.

Two blocks away, Zared looked behind them and listened. “Sometimes cops go undercover as gangbangers and try to get us that way.”

Lando’s chest heaved. “Can —?”

Zared took off again. Lando followed at a slow trot but then picked up the pace. Zared led him across junk-strewn backyards and through abandoned houses into a basement lab.

Lando caught his breath. “Are you going to show me out of here, too? Because I’m completely disoriented.”

Zared unwound a huge metal door that looked like submarine salvage. Inside was another giant door with a thick glass viewport in the middle. He closed the metal door and turned a wheel. A lock clanked into place. “That’s good,” said Zared with a grin. “It’s dangerous to know where we do business.”

Lando stopped and raised his eyebrows. “Maybe we should do the interview somewhere else?”

Zared waved a hand at him. “We take quality seriously here. Safety, too. You need to suit up.” Zared showed him a rack of white lab suits and goggles.

Zared led him through a narrow corridor lined with tall cannabis plants. In a back office, they removed their ventilators. Zared sat at a round conference table and invited Lando to join him. A tall, thin girl with blue and white hair entered the room. She laughed.

“Oh, this place is a blast,” she said to Lando. “You’re going to love working here!”

Lando inched up the corners of his mouth.

“Ooh, a serious one this is, eh, Zared?” She kissed Lando on the cheek. “I’m Sheri. And this is Voolavoo! We work hard, party hard and make good money. What’s not to like?”

Zared grinned. “So, Lando, we run a quality operation here. High standards. Strict safety. We need someone to run the MDMA machine. \$1,500 per hour and about 30 hours per week to start, mostly at night. What do you think?”

“Is it dangerous?” asked Lando. He shifted in his chair. He looked at the girl and back to Zared. *They’re too happy. Something is off.*

Sheri spoke up. “Zared, buddy, are any of those joints left? We’re all about to go on break.”

Zared pulled a clear plastic bag out of a filing cabinet. It was half-full with wrapped white cylinders. “Lando, care for some?”

“Uh, no, thanks —“

“Come on Lando!” Sheri yelled. She clapped him on the back. “It’s good stuff.” She leaned in and raised her eyebrows at him.

Lando moved his chair away from her. *This one is creeping me out.* “Is the MDMA machine dangerous at all? Isn’t that the one that that

guy blew up his —“

“Yes, it can blow up. But we have safeguards in place.” Zared put on a serious face. “Lando, we have to do a background check before hiring you. Are we going to find anything?”

Lando nodded. “Bad credit and two strikes.”

“We’ll take care of those credit problems pretty quickly. As for the strikes, are they violent?” Zared asked.

“No, just copyright stuff.”

“Bullshit, as usual. Fucking cops.” Zared shook his head. “Any questions for us, Lando?” he asked. Sheri lit up her joint and took a deep toke.

“Am I replacing someone?” Lando asked.

Sheri blew smoke into Lando’s face. She turned and smiled at him. “This one’s too uptight for MDMA, Zared! Put him on the modafinil. That’ll suit him just fine.” She cackled, stood up and headed for the door. “The modafinil!” She opened the door and stepped out then stuck her head back in. “I’m prescribing two weeks on the product, then he’ll fit right in!” She closed the door, still cackling.

Zared suppressed a chuckle. “Sorry, Lando, yes, you’re replacing Coty, an old friend of mine. Solid guy. He was here a long time.” Zared looked up at the ceiling. “He helped me launch this operation.” He frowned and looked down.

“Did he quit to start his own business?”

“Oh, no,” Zared said. “IPEC got him while making a delivery. He’s in a camp down south for unlicensed penicillin manufacture. Something about the process they think he used is patented by Pfizer Roche?” Zared shook his head. “It was a real shame, too. He was running that stuff down to the Chavez Clinic. He had two strikes, too. That damned Three Strikes Act.”

Lando folded his hands in front of him. *Scary.*

“So when can you —“ Zared’s tablet rang. “Give me a second here.” Zared listened for a minute. “Hey, as long as you get paid on time, you don’t fuck with my operation. That’s the agree— Fuck!”

Zared looked up at Lando. “I — let me get back to you, buddy. I’ll call you. Sheri will show you out.”

Interview

This had better not be an elaborate prank. Lando's wrist communicator read 4:59 PM. He entered the alley where Takoda told him about The Core. It was abandoned.

Lando glanced at his wrist. 5:03 PM. *Just a big joke on me, I guess.* Lando leaned against a brick wall painted gray and massaged his forehead. He thought about Dad and Mariana. *What if I can't get anything? How am I going to feed them? Maybe we should move to another city and start over? And how would we even pay for that?*

At 5:09 PM, Lando stood up and headed for the street. *I'm out of here.*

A black van raced around the corner. The side door slid open. A masked woman grabbed Lando's hand and pulled him in. The door slammed shut behind him. She positioned him on a plush bench.

Lando sat for a moment without speaking. He moved his head to the left. Then to the right. The interior of the van was pitch black. "So, are we —"

A male voice spoke up behind him and a strong hand grabbed the back of his neck. "Quiet. Look straight ahead."

Lando leaned forward to get the hand off of his neck. He counted the turns the van made and strained to hear any outside noise. *Did they soundproof this thing? A soundproofed van? Really? Who picks people up in vans anyway? The cops.*

Lando's stomach fell. *It's a sting.*

The sliding door opened and the van stopped. A black canvas bag fell over Lando's face. Lando reached to rip it off but strong arms caught his. Panic rode up his spine. *It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay.* "Come on, guys, there's no need for —!"

“Quiet!” said the male voice.

Heavy metal bars clanged. His knees shook and his body went cold. *Shit, a total black bag job.*

The bag came off. Lando found himself in a shiny metal and glass floor of corporate offices. It was dead silent. The whole floor appeared empty. Lando strained to see the skyline but the glass conference room walls frosted over.

Four burly, hooded men in black took up stations around the room. They crossed their hands in front of them and stared at Lando. A female voice with a British accent spoke up behind him. “Back here, Mr. Cruz.”

Lando whipped around and stared at her. She was thin, petite and had medium-length blond hair. *Wow.* Lando stared.

She smiled out of the side of her mouth. “You can call me Kelly, Mr. Cruz. We understand that you are interested in working with The Core.”

Lando ran his hands through his hair and sat up straight. He cleared his throat. “I might be. If the price is right.”

“If all you care about is money, Mr. Cruz, then you will be satisfied working here,” she said.

Lando cocked his head to one side. “Not just money. I just — Well ...” Lando smiled. “Everybody needs money!” He swallowed hard.

“Indeed, Mr. Cruz, and we pay well.” She paused to examine a tablet. “Before we proceed further, I need you to sign this non-disclosure agreement.” She passed him the document and he immediately signed his name across the screen with a stylus.

“Please note,” she said, “that this is an agorist contract. If we have a disagreement, we will quietly take you to secret arbitration. And you will end up on the O-List.”

Lando nodded. “Don’t worry. I don’t want to be ostracized. I will not speak to anyone about this.”

“I’d like to give you a little background on our organization.” She read from a prepared statement. “The Core is the intelligence arm of The Network, the leading clique of the global agorist counter-economy. The Core was formed in response to the growing power of IPEC and its allied government agencies across the globe and to meet the need for corporate agorist intelligence. The Core is at the service of all agorist enterprises. Core operatives and analysts are tasked with using all available means to defend agorist interests from the corporatocracy. Our first mission is specifically to reverse the current trend and neutralize IPEC so that agorist enterprise can operate freely and the counter-economy can grow.”

“So basically you want to kick some IPEC ass and get them to back off,” Lando said. “What about the beat cops? They’re almost as bad.”

Kelly smiled and took a deep breath. “We’ve found that we can usually work with them through the use of the obvious inducements. Whereas IPEC has a more political and purist orientation, the local police can be, shall we say, influenced.”

Lando snorted. “Their prices are going up where I do business.”

“Yes, we’ve noticed that as well. It’s market forces at work, really. People are more desperate so the police can afford to charge more.”

“So,” said Lando, “are you hiring for operatives or analysts? Because political violence is not my thing. I can throw a punch but I’m better with research.”

“Both. But, if I remember correctly, your educational profile does not include college.” She narrowed her eyes and examined him.

This again. “I’m an autodidact. School was just wasting my time. I guarantee you I am better read and a better researcher or writer than any college graduate you have here. Give me any test you like. Just this morning I took the Govcorp post-undergraduate placement test and got a perfect score.”

Kelly touched her ear. “We’re willing to consider you for a junior analyst position.”

Lando pursed his lips. “I just want to be clear that I’m not interested in violence. It’s not my thing. In fact, I think this organization should avoid it as much as possible. Violence attracts too much attention. It’s bad for business. You can’t fly under the radar when you’re busting heads.”

“You think we should be flying under the radar?” she asked.

“Absolutely. At least until we reach around thirty-five or forty per cent of the national economy.”

Kelly touched her ear. “If accepted, you will need to complete four weeks of training at our facility. Your presence is required twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week. The program is very demanding.”

Lando thought about Dad and Mariana. “I have a family that needs me on a daily basis.”

“That won’t be possible,” Kelly said. Her face hardened.

Lando thought. “How much does it pay?”

“There’s a \$50,000 stipend for the training, in recognition of the risk involved. If you are able to complete it then it’s \$100,000 per month thereafter.”

Lando’s eyes got big. His face flushed and he suppressed a smile. *Oh my God, this is perfect!* He struggled to keep his voice from rising. “That would be acceptable.”

“Keep —“

“Wait a second.” Lando frowned. “Why does it pay so much?”

“As I was saying, keep in mind that The Core is effectively an illegal paramilitary organization. You’re getting in early, so it is likely you would be quickly tasked with a leadership position. Thus, you would soon be a leader in an armed rebellion that is actively attempting to weaken governments worldwide.” She contemplated him for a moment. “You would effectively be painting a —“

Lando held up a hand. “What’s your strategy for the organization? Is it about bombs and assassinations? Or is it more about spying, analyzing, researching ...?”

“We’re not looking to start a war, no,” said Kelly.

Lando nodded. “Okay, I understand the risks.” *And the rewards.* He smiled inwardly. *I can always get out after a couple months and be set for a while.*

“You would be painting a target on your back. Although we are well-funded by our partners’ wide-ranging international agorist enterprises, there is no guarantee of success. We could be shut down tomorrow by IPEC. We would be tortured as terrorists and spend the rest of our lives in cages.” She cleared her throat.

Lando furrowed his brow. *I can get out before it gets that far. I can always get out.* He pressed his lips together and nodded at Kelly.

She touched her ear. “That said, there is every chance of success. You have suffered a lot for your principles. You are a very promising candidate for The — Yes, sir.” She stood up.

The door behind Lando opened and closed before he could get a look at the skyline. A man in a black mask and black clothes, identical to the other men in the room, walked to the front of the room and took a seat next to Kelly. He eyed Lando for a moment and then removed his mask.

“Hello, Lando,” he said.

Lando’s mouth opened. He scrunched up his nose. “Ryan?” *Him? Involved in this?*

Ryan smiled. “So, you’re interested in the position.”

Lando sat up straight. “Yes, I am.”

Ryan narrowed his eyes. “Why? Why is this right for you?”

Lando’s eyes darted to the floor. *Think fast!* “Uh, it’s in alignment with my values. I want to bring about a voluntary society. I’ve

dedicated my life —“

“But why this particular opportunity?” Ryan leaned forward.

Lando looked at the ceiling, then the floor. “It pays well.”

Ryan laughed. “Understood.” He leaned back. “Lando, what’s your opinion of the current President?”

“I don’t like presidents, period. Or senators or governors or any politician or bureaucrat,” said Lando.

“Right, that goes without saying, but what’s your opinion of this one in particular?”

Lando thought for a minute. “At least he is not a friend to IPEC. And he’s directing more money to this basic income guarantee. If they insist on robbing me, I at least want it to go the poor. Then they will have capital to start agorist businesses.” Lando laughed.

Ryan started to frown, then smiled. “Right, of course. Smart thinking. So, is it fair to say you are a fan of his?”

“Not at all. He should resign and go do something productive. He’s still effectively stealing from people and he’s still commanding troops that are killing people. Screw him.”

Ryan whispered something to Kelly. “Very good. What about your family? Are they going to be able to spare you for the first month?”

Lando thought for a moment. “That’s going to be difficult for me. My dad is dying of cancer and my sister is very young. They depend on —“

“How old is your sister?” Ryan asked.

“Fourteen.”

Ryan laughed. “Surely she can handle taking care of your father for a month?”

Lando pursed his lips.

“What’s more important to you, Lando - your family or your principles?” Ryan leaned forward.

Lando looked up. *Wow, good question.* “I’d have to say my principles. I love my family. They mean everything to me. But without my principles, I am nothing. I can’t do anything for them. If I can’t live in accordance with my values, I’m not sure what value I have — literally!” He smiled.

“At the same time,” Lando continued, “my family is one way I put my values into practice. They’re both very important to me.” He pursed his lips and nodded.

“Fair enough,” he said and stood up. “I have a surprise for you!” Ryan motioned to the door.

David walked in. He made a beeline for Lando.

“Lando, I’m so glad you’re going to be working with us!” said David.

Lando stared at him. “What are you doing here?”

“I took a job with Ryan as well. Isn’t it going to be great, being in training together, working together?” He clapped Lando on the back.

Lando frowned. He turned to Ryan. “You hired —“

David spoke over him. “Lando really needs this now, Ryan. He just lost his food cart, his dad has cancer and his sister —“

Lando turned to David. “Can you please shut up! Stop talking about me!”

David’s eyebrows raised.

“David, this is dangerous. This is not right for you,” said Lando.

Ryan spoke up. “I think that is for David to decide.”

“David is not the right guy for this, Ryan.”

“Yes, I am! I can do this, Lando. Why don’t you believe in me?” David walked away. “You never believe in me. Some friend —“

“You’re too young for this, David,” said Lando.

“Perhaps,” Ryan said, “you can help us keep David safe?”

Lando glared at Ryan.

“By the way, Lando, we will need your answer by tomorrow morning 9 AM. Thank you very much for the chance to speak with you. I look forward —“

This is bald-faced manipulation. Lando balled his fists at his sides.

“I can give you my answer right now. No.”

Pigheaded

“There is no way I can leave my dad for a month, David. What if he dies while I’m in training? I would miss the funeral,” said Lando. *Why would they hire David - and first? We met Ryan at the same time.*

“You’re my best friend in the whole world. I want to do this with you,” said David.

Lando rolled his eyes.

“You can’t put your life on hold, waiting around for your dad to die. This is a good thing and we can do it together,” said David.

Lando rolled his eyes. *He’s right but that’s not the point.* “I’m going to give it to you straight. You’re sixteen. You’re fat, out-of-shape and lazy. You sit around your house all day and play video games. You are not qualified for this job. Just the fact that they hired you is a big red flag right there.”

The line was silent.

“This is not a good idea for you, David. If I participate, I’m endorsing this for you, too. And I would have to watch out for you. Why should I babysit you when my dad is dying and my sister needs me?”

“This is my chance to shine,” snarled David. “Don’t get in my way.”

Lando laughed and cut the connection. *What a tough guy.* Lando slid open the closet door and came out into Dad’s room.

Dad looked up from his newspaper. “I thought you were asleep by now,” he said. He smiled at Lando. “How is the search going?”

Lando grimaced. “Not good, Dad. Not good.” He moved towards the kitchen.

“I am reading this article about your Raven,” said Dad.

Lando turned around and waited by the door. *Here it comes.*

Dad looked at the paper. He said, “He says everybody must be free but he says nothing about responsibility.” He looked at Lando over the tops of his reading glasses. “Is this the guy you listen to, your agora spokesman? Is this the best thing your agora can say?” He hit the paper.

“He’s smart and he’s inspirational. He’s a good leader. So what?”

“Is this the best man you can find to follow? I think even you can do a better job! He just repeats the same things over and over again but he doesn’t say anything about how to keep people in line!”

“Dad, I’d really like to —“

Dad set down the newspaper. “Tomorrow, we are moving next door. I need you here early. Marianita and I can’t do it alone.”

“I need to go out all day tomorrow, Dad. I’m still looking —“

Dad sat up straight in bed and his eyes got big. “You will be here early and you will help us move! That is the final word! We’re in this problem because of your decisions and your pigheadedness!”

The Vig

“I’m interested in a loan,” Lando said. He bit his lip. *This is probably a bad idea, but what’s the alternative? Sit around and wait? How are we going to relocate with nothing? I need to restart my business now.*

A tall, thin redhead sat behind bulletproof glass. She passed him a piece of paper through a hole in the thick glass. “Dearie, fill out this form. The application fee is \$200. We gotta pull your credit report and your agorafax, just so you know. Anything up to \$20,000, the minimum vig is sixty per cent monthly.”

“That’s funny. I need exactly \$20,000.” Lando’s stomach rumbled. His throat was dry.

“Yeah, hilarious.” She twitched her nose. “Be right back, hon.” She hobbled on high heels to a back room and closed a door behind her.

Lando leaned against the counter and examined the form. *Twenty grand plus the ten grand Sarge left me ... Lando grimaced. That will cover the cart, repairs and getting-started money for food and propane. I’ll pay back —*

A man screamed. A door opened and the sound of a hard hand slapping human flesh reached Lando. A huge, bald man in a sleeveless white t-shirt plodded through the front office. There was blood on his leg.

Lando’s eyes got big. *I should sell my spot on the corner. Yes. Wait, it’s too hot right now. They’ll catch me and take the cash. Sarge. He’s looking for me.*

Lando turned. He looked out at the street through the loan shark’s floor-to-ceiling picture window. A cop car raced down the street with its sirens screaming.

“Hon, your —“

Lando jumped.

The redhead snickered. "You alright there? Someone after you or something?"

Lando put his hand to his chest. "Just scared me is all."

"Your agorafax is spotless, but your credit report ... The vig is gonna be a little higher." She grimaced. "We're required by law to show you the weekly payment schedule." She passed him a file. It read, "\$3,750 per week plus variable principal installment."

Plus principal? "So how much is my principal installment?" Lando asked.

"Whatever you can pay that week. Sign right there. And write your three closest family members' names, addresses and phone numbers here." The woman yawned.

Lando picked up the pen. He heard another scream. A door came open. "Amy, get me a rag!"

"Be right there, Big Marty!" She smiled. "What would he do without me?" she whispered.

Grumpy

Lando turned left from Broad onto South Street. Behind him, the sun dipped below the horizon. A few weak streetlights came on. The storefronts were dark. Bums assembled their cardboard sleeping capsules, both on the sidewalk and in the street.

Lando stuck his hands in his pockets. *It's getting a bit thin in here.* He passed a bearded man in new jeans but without a shirt or shoes. He shook an empty, rusted coffee can at Lando.

“Spare a dime. Spare a dime!” the man coughed and spit onto the sidewalk.

Lando stared at him. His neck muscles tightened and his upper back ached. *There but for the grace of God go I.* He accelerated his pace.

A billboard lit up the next block. “Confidential, secure organ donation for a price that just makes sense,” it said. There was a phone number to call. Lando rubbed his stomach.

Maybe I can shine shoes. A yellow taxi passed him going the other way. It stopped at the bums’ roadblock and beeped. *Too bad taxis don’t have any drivers anymore.*

Lando passed the pet shop. *That might be just the thing.* Lando stopped and grinned. *I just need an idea, or a couple of them. Just the right ideas and I can salvage this.*

He entered the shop. “I’d like to get my usual cat, Frumpy, just for one night,” he said to the clerk.

“I’m sorry, sir, but Frumpy was adopted earlier this week,” said the clerk. His face was loose and his eyelids swollen.

“No! That’s my cat! He’s such a good — Well, is it a good home?” Lando asked.

“We do have another one very similar to Frumpy and she’s available.” The clerk moved to a display case and pointed out the new cat. It was perfectly black, just like Frumpy. It was resting peacefully.

“I’ll take her.”

The clerk received his membership card and swiped it. He boxed up the cat in a cardboard carrier and handed her to Lando. “Here you go, sir. Enjoy.”

Lando turned to go, then turned back. “What’s her name, by the way?”

The clerk did not look up. “Grumpy.”

Squatters

Lando walked up the creaky stairs to his apartment. The door now had a lock. *Damn! I hope they got our stuff out.* He walked back downstairs and made his way to the house next door. He pushed on the door. It was jammed. Mariana screamed.

Lando dropped the cat and threw his shoulder into the door. Something cracked. "Mari!" he yelled.

He squeezed through the doorway. It was pitch dark inside. A dim light filtered down from upstairs. He ran toward it and cracked his shin into something hard. He fell and crashed into a pane of glass. It shattered into tiny pieces.

He got up, checked himself for cuts and limped up the stairs. "Mari!" He groped down the hallway and threw open a door. Mariana sat next to the window playing cards by candlelight with Dad.

Lando groaned.

"Wanna play?" she asked.

Lando scowled. He grabbed a candle, lit it and went back downstairs to get the cat carrier. "Sorry, Grumpy."

He shone the candle at the spot where he fell. It was a wooden coffee table and now it was split right down the middle. *Nice work, genius.*

Lando looked out the doorway of their dark home. Only one other home on the block had lights on. A low, thumping music came from it. *God knows what's going on in there.*

A shiver ran down his spine. He closed the door and braced it with a two-by-four that he found on the floor. A chilly breeze hit him. *This place sucks! I have to get us out of here.*

Lando checked the windows. He heard a creaking noise behind him and turned. A raccoon stood on his hind legs in the middle of the living room and stared at him. Lando made a throwing motion and the animal bounded out a window.

Lando picked up a plastic tray and shoved it into the void of the broken window. It almost fit. He searched some more and found a cookie tray. It covered the rest.

He stomped upstairs and released Grumpy into the candlelit bedroom. She hissed and hid in the closet.

“Is there any food?” he asked Mariana.

In the dark, he couldn’t make out her facial expression. “Some bread and cold cuts. No electricity means no fridge.” She started to sing. “It’s beautiful, a beautiful —“

“Mari, you can’t sing here,” Lando said.

She jerked her body. “Well, why not?”

“We’re squatting. Did you even check for broken windows? There’s no lock on the front door! I didn’t even check for a back door. We have to lay low.”

“Hmph,” she said. She crossed her arms.

Lando laughed. “You look so much like Mom. I see her every time I see you.”

She ignored him.

“How did the search go today?” Dad asked.

Lando sighed. “Horrible.”

“Tell me about it, *hijo*.” He laid down his cards. “Full house!”

Mariana squealed. “Oh Dad, you’re too good.”

Keep your voice down! Lando looked out the window. He saw something move in the darkness. “It’s either cleaning toilets thirteen hours per day fifteen days per month or I become James Bond.”

“I like James Bond but you have experience with toilets.” Dad sat back and laughed.

Secret Agent

“You’re in a good mood,” said Lando. “Are you feeling better?”

“I am feeling optimistic. And this secret agent job looks interesting, son. You can work for your cause and earn good money at the same time. Are you going to do it?”

“No, Dad. No way.” Lando shook his head.

Dad scowled. “Why?”

“It’s dangerous, Dad.” Lando took a deep breath. “I’d be taking up arms against the government,” he whispered.

“The first month is just training.” Dad shrugged. “Why not?”

Lando stood up. “How can you be okay with it, Dad? You said this is a crazy lost cause and we don’t know what we’re talking about and I should just —“

“Son! It is better than living like this, yes?”

Lando’s shoulders fell. *I’ve disappointed him horribly. I’m so frustrated. I just wish I could make him happy.* The space between Lando’s eyes got tight and he looked away.

“I love you, son,” said Dad. “I don’t want you to get hurt. But if this is what you want and if it will help you take care of my princess, then you should do it. I will be gone soon —“

“No you won’t, Dad! I’m not going —“

Dad blew air through his teeth. “Enough! Do a couple months and see if it works for you.”

“I still want to know why you are in favor of this job,” said Lando. “You should hate it. It’s not a corporate job. It’s definitely — Oh, you think it’s like a government job, am I right?” Lando smirked.

“Well,” Dad suppressed a grin, “Mr. Bond did work for the Queen.” He giggled.

Lando stared at him. “It pays well.”

“And, if the Feds catch you, you just snitch.”

“Dad!” Lando felt a bitter tang in his mouth.

Dad burst out laughing. “I’m kidding, son! If your agora can pay you this well, maybe, just maybe, you have a chance at something.”

Lando pursed his lips.

“Still —“

“Here it comes!” Lando said to Mariana.

“If you can get a nice corporate job, you can work your way —“

“God, no, Dad, stop already.” Lando and Mariana burst out laughing.

Dad guffawed. “I love you kids. I want to make it, to overcome this nasty disease, so I can be with you. Come over here and give me a hug.”

Lando went in for the hug. It was a strong one. Lando fought back tears. *I haven’t seen him like this in forever!*

Dad wiped his eyes. “What about my little Mari? What are her plans for the future?” Dad pinched her cheek.

“You’re really feeling better today, huh, Dad?” asked Lando.

Dad looked up to the ceiling. “It’s this new start. Or maybe it was the exercise with the move. It’s always exciting to move. Thanks for your help, big man.” He elbowed Lando in the gut. “And this place isn’t too bad.”

Dad licked his lips. “Little princess, give me that last brownie.”

There was a noise downstairs. Lando froze.

Mariana pivoted around to look at Lando, a smirk on her face. “It’s just the raccoon. Anyway, I want to be a nurse.”

“A nurse!” Lando said. “That’s ridiculous, Mari. You are meant for much greater things than that. What are you thinking? A doctor at the very least, perhaps a scientist, an astronaut, a college professor or entrepreneur, or all of the above. But a nurse!”

Mariana pouted.

Dad shot him a look. “Mari wants to help other people, that’s all. Perhaps she will be a nurse entrepreneur?” He smiled at her and patted her head.

Mariana smiled up at her dad and sniffed.

Lando sat down across the room from them. He frowned. *Why do I feel so bad?* “I visited a loan shark today.”

Dad did a double-take. He put his cards down. “What did you say?”

“I went by a loan shark today, over near Broad Street.”

Dad held his hands out flat in front of him. They trembled. “Now, listen carefully. Did you sign anything?”

Lando furrowed his brow. “No, but I’m think—“

Dad growled. “Do not, I repeat, do not! Do not go anywhere near that place. You hear me, boy?” He looked at Lando out of the tops of his eyes.

“But I was think—“

Dad raised his voice. “I don’t think you heard me. I said, ‘Do not, under any circumstances, go anywhere near that place again.’”

“But, Dad, I don’t know what else to do. These cops could come for me at any min—“

“Lando,” said Dad.

“They know where we live! Well, where we used to live,” Lando said.

“That’s why we’re keeping a low profile here. It’s just like you said,” said Dad.

“I’m not a complete —“

“These people do terrible things to their customers.” Dad held his hands out in front of him. “Just stay away.”

Lando sighed.

“Maybe you can borrow a cart?” said Mariana. “I bet Mr. Gianakos would have some ideas.”

“I’ll call him tomorrow,” said Lando.

“Hey, big bro, don’t forget. I need that computer by Monday.”

A Note

Lando awoke in pitch blackness. He stretched his ankles and wiggled his toes in the slippery sleeping bag. He smiled. *Feels good. Maybe this place will work out after all.*

A thin light came through the window above him. *Who left the shade down?*

He inched his way to the windowsill and his sleeping bag zipped open. A bitter chill hit his back and he shivered. *Damned half-broken thing. I hope I can get back to sleep after this.*

He pulled on the shade. A fence door slammed shut outside.

Lando put his nose above the windowsill. Two flashlights roamed the grass outside. There was a knock at the door.

Lando froze. Something bumped into the front door. It bumped again. Angry voices rose.

A third flashlight approached the front door below Lando.

The flashlights disappeared for a moment. They reappeared and pointed at his window from his old apartment. Lando hid below the window. *Don't let it be them, God. Please.* He watched them through the thin slit between the window frame and the edge of the blind.

They opened a window. "It stinks of beans and crap in here," said one of them.

"That sneaky bastard up and left!" said another.

"Relax, I didn't leave him much cash. He couldn't have gone far. He probably got evicted and is squatting nearby," said Sarge.

Sarge approached the window. He turned and stared at Lando. He looked at a small, shiny object in his hand.

Lando wanted to search his pockets but he steeled himself against the temptation to move. *Silver? Did they get some of my silver?* He broke out in a cold sweat. *And now they want the rest.*

“What I want to know, Sarge,” said Kowalski, approaching the window, “is how does this guy get silver? He’s not selling tacos on a street corner for silver.”

“I explained this to you!” said Sarge.

Jaffari appeared between them. “He runs an agorist bank.”

“Keep looking,” Sarge said. He smacked Kowalski on the back of the head. “Make yourself useful!”

“Sarge,” said Jaffari from the kitchen. “The girl left a note.” He held the paper up to the flashlight.

“They’re right next door, Sarge!” yelled Kowalski.

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About George Donnelly

Rebel. Troublemaker. Accused Terrorist. Idealist. When not dreaming up new rebel heroes, George hikes and bikes Colombian mountains and unschools his 8-year-old son Clark (who is named after Superman but actually likes Batman way better). George is from Pennsylvania but has lived in Chicago, Osaka, Kobe, Bogota and Medellín, too. He's a firm believer in human rights, universal fairness and abundant hugs before bedtime. He's got two rescued kittens and an aging golden retriever named Simon on the payroll as well. Connect with him at GeorgeDonnelly.com.