

❖ flawed

Lockheed Martin's twenty-nine district. Montana region—North America.

Three hours of troubleshooting have led Imogen to an impossible conclusion.

"Call Lewing," she tells the PDA, leaning back from her work station to stretch.

Above it, Lewing Enright appears in his own window, hair disheveled.

"Imogen...?"

"Sorry if I woke you."

"It's fine, what's wrong?"

"I'm at home auditing the Longhorn sims. There's something you need to look at."

"Simulations? This can't wait until morning?"

She glances at the clock. "Not really. I found a potentially fatal flaw in the BD-77's navigation code."

He takes a moment to sit up in bed, putting on lenses.

"Your audit's wrong."

"I assumed that too. So I booked some time on MIT-12 and ran it again. Same anomaly."

"Q-mail me everything you have, I'll be there in fifteen."

❖ midnight oil

On Imogen's feed display, a simulated BD-77 Longhorn bomber maneuvers to break orbit around a digital planet.

"The simulated planet's mass," Imogen tells Lewing, "is the same as Mars. I give it a flight-plan..."

She feeds the sim-ship a set of co-ordinates, its nose beginning to shift away from the Mars-like body.

"Then revise those almost immediately..."

She punches in new co-ordinates. On display, thrusters along the port side fire, making the big ship groan as it struggles to correct its vector while pulling away from the planet, unable to maintain the plotted course.

"You can already see orbital integrity beginning to break down here... grav lensing forces navigation to correct, then overcorrect, buckling strong points nineteen through twenty-seven momentarily, losing its exit trajectory."

Lewing shakes his head, watching the display. "It happens. The nav kernel has multiple failsafes. You should see it swing main engines toward the planet and fire in about eight seconds."

"Yeah, that part works out great. It's the aftermath you wanna watch for here."

As described, its aft section falls toward the planet while the big engines light, ramping up to full thrust, halting the fall entirely before slowly, the Longhorn begins lifting into space again, gathering momentum. Stress alerts appear on display as its hull warps along the backbone, almost at fracture point.

Leaning over the lightpad, she inputs a final dataset.

"This... is a momentary loss of power to the forward stabilizers." The ship shudders, beginning to swerve. "Enough to throw it off course by four degrees."

Onscreen, the back end swings out as the big ship begins to roll, doing three big loops on its nose before spiraling tighter, beyond its ability to compensate.

The huge bomber suddenly twists itself in half, the front section falling back toward the planet on a rainbow of debris while its rear shoots off into orbit, disintegrating.

"Thrust and gravity rip it apart."

Lewing blinks. "This can't be right..."

"I've run it fifty-seven times."

"But then why hasn't it happened already? They've been in service more than three years."

"A long string of events need to line up for something like this to occur. But the point is that it can. And we didn't find it until now."

He sighs, massaging his jaw.

 flagged

Agent Eli Lylo receives the greenlight via q-mail at 03:44.

In nine minutes a helo will take him from nondescript office buildings inside McPherson Group's administrative district, across company lines onto Lockheed Martin soil.

The briefing doesn't explain why an affiliate employee is scheduled for retirement. It doesn't need to.

His team enter the cage one at a time to collect weapons, each meeting Eli's gaze as they pass.

He pockets his PDA and shoulders a rifle, checking the charge on its sights before leaving with the others.

♻️ waking up tired

Imogen sleeps on the couch, her back to Lewing, who sits up at her feed station still agonizing over data from MIT-12's physics engine.

He turns at the sound of Imogen's front door unlocking, aware that she lives alone.

"Uh, Imogen?"

The door slides open before five faceless men in body armor enter the townhouse single file, taking up firing positions around the living room—each aiming a compact rifle at Lewing.

He raises his hands, uncertain.

The gunmen only stare back.

Eli enters last, removing his faceplate and helmet. He taps the fifth man in, taking his place as the troop lowers his rifle to begin searching other rooms.

"It's okay," he says to Lewing, "we're Enforcement."

"You guys aren't Lockheed Martin."

"Right."

His eyes dart to Imogen. "I thought they only use foreigners when someone needs to go away."

"Sounds like a conspiracy theory."

"So... you're going to kill us, or... can I go back to work here?"

"She must trust you," says Eli, "to fall asleep with her boss in the house."

"It's not like that. She has a condition called chronic fatigue."

"I guess that means she'll sleep through just about anything." Eli nods to one of the others.

"Please—" says Lewing, interrupted by the silenced headshot. His limp body sprawls forward onto the rug, blood pooling beneath Imogen's couch.

The troop aims his weapon at her, waiting for Lilo to speak.

Eli walks away, stopping at the front door. The troops exit as they came in, quick and quiet

Outside, the helo's stealth mutes crickets and frogs, casting an eery silence over the block as it lifts off from a communal parking lot.