

Infinite Exposure

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For all of those willing to step back and see the whole board,
not just listen to what the announcer says and be spellbound.

Promotional Version

This version of “Infinite Exposure” contains only the first 18 chapters. It is being released as a free promotional version so readers can see how they like the book prior to purchasing the ending.

The full version of the book is not now, nor will it ever be released free. You can find the full version on Sony and Apple commercial eBook sites.

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Preface

This book is a work of fiction. It uses many historical events, news articles, and company names to build a time line necessary for projection forward. Without using many of these actual names and quotes, it would be difficult to build the sense of realism that gives credibility to the outcome. There is no slander or malice intended. Indeed this book is intended to be a wake-up call for both an industry and a country.

Follow the journey of this book and look for a way out, not for yourself, but for all of us.

Spine of Water Reed

It's not every morning you wake up with armed men kicking in your door and rushing into your bedroom, but that's certainly how this morning started. All because he really wanted a new computer. Not just a new computer, the best system Dell was shipping. But that want was satisfied over a decade ago. Today, he couldn't even sell that computer on eBay. Today, it was a trip with a bag over his head, wearing handcuffs to an interrogation room.

He had quite a while to think that morning. They left him alone for what seemed like hours. The stone room had no windows and must have been well below ground judging from the chill and dampness. *Best not to think about wells*, he told himself. The one overhead bulb didn't seem to give off much in the way of warmth or comfort. Of course, the worst part about all of this was what was missing. No big mirror on the wall where people could watch from the other side. He had seen that on television shows. The fact it was missing was more unnerving than anything else. Whatever was going to happen here wasn't supposed to have any witnesses. In truth, he wished the bag was still on his head.

Stop it! he screamed in his mind. *Bad enough actually being here, don't do their job for them.* Somewhere outside of the room he could faintly hear a mosque calling worshipers to prayer. *A good Muslim should be praying now*, he thought. He had no idea which wall faced Mecca, but he knew a good Muslim would rather pray in the wrong direction than miss prayer. Calmly, without a mat, he prepared himself as best he could, knelt, and began praying.

Soon into his prayers the door to the room flew open. Obviously these weren't good Muslims he was dealing with. Two different sets of hands grabbed him and slammed him down into the chair. A third man was already seated on the other side of the table. His casual attitude made it seem like he had been sitting there awhile. Odd that Nedim had not heard the door open. The other man's breathing was slow and relaxed. He must have been standing outside the door for a while, because it was a full three flights of stairs to this room. Nedim remembered that much. One of them went up and the other two down. The exact order of up and down staircases was escaping him at this moment for some reason though.

The two men who put him into the chair were still behind him. He couldn't see them, had no idea what they were wearing, but knew they hadn't left the room. Being a computer consultant helped him reason that much out. It just didn't do him much good when it came to avoiding being here in the first place.

Reason, what a fine word. The word most people who don't understand logic use. Nedim spent four years at university learning logic, programming languages, and software design. He was supposed to be good at what he did, yet here he sat. He had no illusions as to why he was here, but he had to play the fool for a while.

Across the table was a really nice gray suit with a narrow pin stripe, white shirt, and colorful tie; obviously a Yankee come home. Probably even drank beer. Nedim knew he was the only good Muslim in the room.

Sitting in front of the man was a yellow filing folder. It was stuffed to what looked like its capacity with papers. On top of the folder was a single sheet of paper. Even looking at it upside down he could read the heading of "Confession." There was a lot of typed text and a place for him to sign at the bottom. Life was not looking good.

Next to the filing folder was a half used white legal pad. Sitting on it was a silver Cross pen. This meant they (whomever "they" were at this point) wanted something. Perhaps today wasn't going to be completely horrible after all. When it came right down to it, Nedim was more than willing to let others die or go to prison for him. Actually, he admitted to himself, he kind of liked the idea. Nothing says importance like being able to order others to die. Isn't that why he really got involved with this in the first place?

Focus! he shouted in his mind. Then he looked the man across the table in the eye and asked, “Why am I here?”

“We have identified you as an al-Qaeda operative,” replied the man.

“I am a good Muslim, nothing more,” replied Nedim.

The man opened the folder and started removing printouts of Nedim's emails. There were circled items and handwritten notes all over them. Many of them were pictures that looked identical, but some had handwritten notes on the bottom of them. He remembered many of those images having been used throughout the past couple of years.

Nedim sat silent while the man continued to flip through print outs of his emails. He noticed that the man appeared to have a better color printer than he did. That, more than anything else from this morning, irritated him. This pile of Julab had a better printer than Nedim, yet Nedim was the only good Muslim in the room.

It seemed so simple when this all started. Nedim was on a flight away to university. He was seated next to a man who claimed to be a cleric and certainly could quote any section of the Holy Quran he wished. It turned out the cleric was from a mosque near the university Nedim would be attending. Because Nedim considered himself a good Muslim, he could not turn down an invitation to pray there and attend some lectures around his class schedule.

Nedim continued to sit silent, watching the man flip through the emails. Some, with a significant amount of circled words and handwritten notes, were even turned so he could read the handwriting. Nedim continued to show no expression.

After attending some prayer services at the cleric's mosque, Nedim was asked to sit in on some of the discussions about the lessons of the Quran. Quite a few of Nedim's classmates were in these discussions as well. Most found reasons to bow out eventually, but a handful who considered themselves good Muslims stayed.

One of Nedim's classmates, Sami, was not the good Muslim he claimed. His family owned a pizza restaurant. They actually handled pork! Nedim also believed they ate it. A good Muslim should not have a girlfriend and go out on dates with her. Sami did. Sami had sex with his girlfriend and would openly talk about it back at university. Sami was not a good Muslim. Nedim would point this out every chance he could during the discussions with the cleric, yet the cleric would not toss him out of the discussions.

Publicly, the cleric said it was his duty to bring all to Islam. Privately, Nedim suspected the real reason was that Sami's family had wealth. Nedim was a good Muslim and attending university by means of a scholarship. He studied hard, but the computer lab was only open to students so many hours per day. He really needed his own computer to meet the academic requirements for his scholarship, but the scholarship would not provide one.

Nedim was snapped back to the situation at hand by a stiff slap to the side of his head. The man had said something and he had missed it. One of the two he could not see snapped at him to answer the question he had not heard. He responded that he had not heard the question because he was praying as all good Muslims should be doing at this time. That answer earned him a strike on the other side of the head.

The man asked his question again. "Do you know the penalty for being a terrorist?"

"I am a good Muslim, not a terrorist," responded Nedim. Closed-fisted blow from behind this time. So fast and hard he had no idea which of the two delivered it, mainly because his nose had born the brunt of the impact with the table and sprung his head back upright. He knew he was upright because blood was running down over his mouth. Vision was not a sense he held at the moment as everything was a whirl of color and light, but it seemed things would come back into focus soon.

He tried to wipe the blood from his face and had his hands firmly pulled behind the chair, then tied.

The man asked his question again. "Do you know the penalty for being a terrorist?"

"I am a good Muslim, not a terrorist," responded Nedim. This time the blow was from a club of some kind.

“I did not ask if you were a terrorist, we have the answer to that question laying before us. I asked if you know the penalty for being a terrorist in this country?”

After a moment, Nedim responded, “Life in prison or death, depending upon how wealthy your family is and how famous you are.”

“Are you famous or from a wealthy family?” asked the man.

“No,” Nedim was forced to respond.

Before him on the table was an email that had grown to haunt him. This was the email that selected the Nairobi embassy for bombing and the date in 1998 when it was to be bombed. He had no problem with the killing of infidels. The problem with this bombing was how the Islamic reporters had covered it. Across the street from the embassy had been a secretarial training school for women, and near it a daycare center. Muslim women should not be attending school, nor should their children be in daycare. All good Muslims know this. There had been a fatwah justifying it, yet the outrage had happened. It appeared there were no good Muslims left in the land of the prophet. That bombing caused a lot of the money to dry up as well. It was the reason Nedim didn't have a better color printer at home.

“We are prepared to execute you tomorrow,” the man said.

Nedim said nothing, but his mind raced wildly. Others were supposed to die, not him! He did not believe in martyrdom, nor that there were any virgins to be had. Besides, logic told him that unless there were thousands of them, within a month or two of his arrival in paradise they would just be used and complaining wives anyway. Unless he was getting 72 beautiful virgins per month for eternity, martyrdom simply wasn't worth it.

Nedim knew the worth of things. He also knew that not all virgins were beautiful. His sister was outright ugly. He suspected that is the pool from where the virgins were drawn. He also suspected that was the very reason women were required to wear a niqab or burkha. Ugly women could have beautiful eyes.

There was one thing about martyrdom Nedim didn't know and it bothered him a great deal. Would he have a fully functional body in paradise? He had seen what was left of martyrs on the news. Logic told him that unless you got a new body in paradise, the quantity of women (virgin or otherwise) didn't matter. Then again, did you even qualify as a martyr if the police (or whatever these men were) simply beheaded you in public and you never claimed any infidel lives?

The interrogator and Nedim sat staring at one another, each waiting for the other to blink. To an onlooker, it looked like two children having a staring contest at school. The simple truth was that the other men were waiting for Nedim to crack. One of them would have certainly hit him again if they had realized his mind had left the room and become completely tangled up in the virgin problem.

When Nedim's mind finally came back to the room, he noticed the other man had picked up silver pen and been doodling on the pad. Nedim didn't take his eyes off the man, but his field of vision revealed there was now a lot of ink on the once clean white pad. None of it stood out as words, so it must be doodles.

A little voice in the back of Nedim's mind said he should be asking for a trial. The big voice of logic told him these men had never shown him badges, didn't wear uniforms, and made no claims to any government affiliation. A public trial was not going to be an option. That big voice said his body was going to be found on a street near his mosque with a proclamation pinned on it and his head a few feet away. There was only one way out of this, and that was not to blink. The first point of yielding had to come from the other side of the table, or this was over.

Without taking his eyes off him, the other man placed the confession in front of him and laid the Cross pen on top of it. A blow to the back of Nedim's head came with the words "sign it," thus ended the staring contest, with a cheat.

His hands were roughly untied. The right hand brought to the pen while the left was held behind him. "Sign it," said the man calmly from across the table.

"I am a good Muslim, nothing more," responded Nedim.

The man reached in his suit jacket and pulled out a folded newspaper page. He unfolded it and laid it before Nedim. "Good Muslims don't kill other Muslims," was the man's quiet reply. "You are not a martyr and you will not be welcomed into paradise. How could you possibly atone for this in the few short hours you have to live?"

Nedim quite honestly did not know. The sheet of newspaper before him was the front page following the day after the embassy bombings. It went on in detail about the Muslim women and children who were killed. Even though a fatwah had been issued authorizing the deaths of all who served the infidels, these deaths weren't covered by it. They were in a building across the street. Clerics from all over the world had issued fatwahs authorizing the deaths of all involved in this bombing.

That one botched bombing had sentenced everyone in his cell, and perhaps all cells, to death at the hands of other Muslims. Indeed, with the print outs they had in their possession, these men needed no official capacity whatsoever to chop off his head in the middle of a public square. They would never be prosecuted. They would receive medals and money from infidels around the world.

"You did not bring me here for atonement," Nedim responded.

"True," the man responded. "We would much prefer to execute you in front of the local mosque as soon as morning prayer completes."

"Why don't you?" responded Nedim. His mind raced to slap his mouth shut, but it was too late. The words were out.

The man sat silently for a moment while one of the brutes behind Nedim began forcing the pen in his hand to sign. Apparently the brute had not been burdened with an over abundance of education, for he was squeezing Nedim's wrist so hard the fingers couldn't grip the pen even if he wanted them to.

"Others would prefer for us to execute all of you," spoke the man.

The forcing, struggling, indeed, even time, seemed to stop after he spoke those words. Nedim now knew the way out of this. He might still die, but it would not be for weeks or months. He might even avoid prison.

“All of who?” responded Nedim. He did not want to appear to be a drowning man clutching at any reed to stay alive. He didn't even care about the fist that found his skull almost as soon as he asked the question. There was a way out of this, but he had to play the game to the bitter end to be given it.

The man tapped the pile of print outs in the folder and said, “All of them. Not one of them is to be left alive when we are finished.”

Nedim began to shiver. He told himself it was the cold stone of the floor taking its toll on his feet and the chill of the room taking its toll on his bare legs, but he knew it was a lie. The reality of what was about to happen was sinking in. For him to stay alive, these men would have to kill all of those he had worked with, all of those who had known he worked with the others, and every person any of them had trained or spoken with. He seriously doubted the men in this room had that kind of capacity. In reality, they would arrest or kill some portion of the current list, then go off to other things. At that point, he would be dead. Either these men would kill him, or one they had let live would complete the task. It was an odd feeling to be perfectly healthy and know he had less than two years to live, an even odder feeling than knowing he would die in only a couple of hours if he refused. Perhaps it was the waiting. The thought of going to bed every night wondering which side was going to kill him while he slept.

This was all so simple when it started. The cleric had arranged for a computer that was envied by all, even the rich students, to be delivered to him at the university. At first, all he had to do was study hard and graduate. Once out in the working world, all he had to do was send a few emails back and forth. Some of them simply snapshots. None of them were pornography of any kind. Perhaps that was where it all went wrong. Had they used porn to embed their messages, really good porn, nobody would have noticed there was anything embedded in the messages. They could have even set up a porn Web site and made money to fund the cause while transmitting messages around. Sad that he would never get to suggest that to his cell.

The man was still staring at Nedim. He might not have even blinked since the staring contest started a while ago. Nedim couldn't be certain of much at this point.

“Just how do you propose to find them?” asked Nedim.

“You will lead us to them,” was the man’s response.

“I know not where they are or what they look like,” responded Nedim. It was a lie. He knew where some of them were and what some of them looked like, but not enough of them to keep himself alive.

“Still, you will lead us to them,” responded the man. “We can have no further conversation about this without a signed confession. You have a choice to make now. Sign the confession and lead us to them, or we execute you in a few minutes when prayer is over.”

“You will kill me as soon as I sign.”

“No. At least not until we are done. Then it will depend upon how well you cooperated and how many of these people,” he paused to tap the print outs, “we have killed. The confession is to be placed on file along with your picture and the other evidence. Should you try to run, hide, or stop helping us track down these individuals, the information will be handed over to every news agency in the world along with a statement promising 200,000 euros for your return, dead or alive.”

Something was odd about that last statement, but Nedim didn’t have time to think it through. The man went right on.

“So. Die now, or risk dying later. Make your decision.”

“My hand has no feeling,” responded Nedim. They both looked at the hand by the pen. It was white, and the wrist was purple. A motion of some kind from the man caused the brute to release his wrist. A thousand needles rushed out to the ends of his fingers, but he could not bring his other hand around to comfort it. In an act of pure agony, both emotionally and physically, Nedim signed the confession.

Once the confession had been signed, the bag, which Nedim had not seen enter the room, was put back on his head. He was stood up and his hands were cuffed. He assumed they were going to execute him now, despite what they had said. The feeling in his hand was still reminding him of his betrayal. In truth, he was at peace about dying now. A public execution would make the news quickly and his brothers would be able to flee to safety.

The long walk up and down sets of stairs occurred again. Nedim didn't bother to count. In truth, he didn't begin to panic until they shoved him into a vehicle. His knees hit what felt like seats in front of him, so he assumed he was in the back. They didn't need a car to get him to the mosque courtyard for execution! He had heard the call to prayer in the room. It couldn't be more than a few blocks! "No!" he shouted. "The mosque is close! I heard the call to prayer!"

He heard the brutes, now on either side of him in the vehicle, begin to laugh and hold him in place. "Relax," said the voice of the man. "We are going to take your picture."

"Why couldn't you just do that here?" Nedim asked.

"The camera and fingerprinting equipment are at another location," the man responded.

When the engine started, Nedim could tell from the quiet and the air conditioning that this was a car. The seats felt like leather on his legs, not cheap vinyl or cloth. It must be one of those dark Mercedes he had seen secret police and diplomats riding around in. The smell inside was not the smell of the city he was used to, nor of sweat and fear. It smelled clean and new.

They drove for what seemed like quite a while. Many turns, stops, speedy stretches and slow crawls. There was no way to tell how far they had driven, or which direction they had ended up going.

Finally, the engine was turned off at a stop. Nedim was roughly pulled from the back of the car. He walked into a building, down a flight of stairs, and had his bag taken off inside of another windowless stone room. There was a big white sheet hanging on one wall, some lights shining on it, and a mounted camera facing it. Along another wall was a table with an ink pad and some forms. Beside all of this was a computer with a printer. The computer had a cable running over to the camera.

This room came equipped with two new people. Both of them were white, but both looked strikingly different. He judged their age to be in the late 20s to early 30s range. Nedim was taken over in front of the sheet and made to face forward. A series of front and side photos were taken, then he was drug over to the table.

While Nedim's handcuffs were being removed, he noticed something odd about this place. Silence. There were no noises coming from other parts of the building. No conversations. No mechanical devices. No sounds of people outside. *This place must be very isolated*, he thought.

The fingerprinting proceeded while the printer spat out his photograph on a page with all his personal information. The print out finished about the time his last finger impression was being taken. The camera man placed it into a folder he handed to the man in the suit. "We own ya now mate," he said when he looked at Nedim.

He's British! a voice screamed in Nedim's head, or perhaps he screamed it, he couldn't be certain. The man who had been taking Nedim's fingerprints said, "That we do," in the thickest German accent Nedim had ever heard as he handed the form over to the man in the suit.

He's German! screamed the same voice Nedim had heard only moments ago. That explains the euros! This was very bad indeed. Not only had he been captured, but he had been captured by people who weren't even on the list to be killed yet.

A Brit working with clandestine Pakistani operatives was a very bad sign. A German working with all of them was a very bad sign indeed! It was obvious to Nedim the men in this room were not under the control of any one government. Perhaps there was no government controlling them at all.

Nedim had heard stories about freelance operators like this from the days when bin Laden was throwing the Russians out of Afghanistan. They did what they pleased, always seemed to have limitless stores of weapons and funding. Sometimes they would go into a village and kill everyone there, then leave a few dead Russian soldiers and some Russian weapons for the news reporters to find. These types of men didn't fight for a cause, they fought for money and the thrill of the kill.

When Nedim's mind came back to the room he realized all of the men were laughing at him. Even the man in the suit.

Slither of Snake

Once the men had finished laughing at him, the bag and car routine were repeated. All of this time he had not been offered water or allowed to go to the bathroom. Even in this luxury ride, the bumps were starting to be excruciating. His bladder was nearly beyond its capacity. It would have been much worse had he not gone back to bed after relieving himself just before the security forces came crashing through his front door.

This time, when the car finally stopped, and the bag was removed, he realized he was in front of his own home. There were two new men waiting for him outside of the door. He noticed the door was shut and it looked like it had been replaced. The men were dressed in common clothing. One of them opened the door for him. Everybody went inside.

Pointing to one of the new men, the man in the suit said, “This is your cousin Umar from Saudi.” Pointing to the other new man he said, “This is your friend Ramesh from university. This is how you will refer to them both in public and private. One of them will be with you at all times. You can see that your computer has been returned to you. We have a complete image of the hard drive. You will explain the code contained in each message you transfer and translate it for these men. They will report back to me. You and I will not meet again unless your life is about to end.”

With that the suit and the two brutes left. Once inside of the car, the brute behind the wheel uttered, “We are just going to let him continue?”

“We have installed a Trojan horse on his computer. Each mail message he sends will contain this Trojan. When a user opens the mail message it will create a connection to a server we have running. There it will send the IP address of the connecting machine and various other pieces of data from it. We have a database of every IP address from every known university, library and Internet cafe. It will be a slow process, but we will get them all.”

The driver pulled away from the house and started the return to headquarters. From the back seat, the man in the suit continued, “What do you know about these men we intend to kill?”

“They are terrorists who will bring the wrath of all nations down upon us. If they are allowed to continue, neither we nor our country will survive,” responded the driver.

“Is that all you know?”

“It is enough.”

“It is enough to want them dead, it is not enough to make it happen. These men are creatures of habit. While they may implement variations of a theme, they will not cease a pattern they perceive to be working.”

“Do you think Nedim is the only email relay in this network?”

Silence.

“He is one of many. We know this, but until now, had not cracked it. Now we have a crack. Yes, he will lead us to the cells he communicates with and we will take them out after observing them, but that is not the real benefit. The real benefit will be the other relays he leads us to. This is a many-headed beast. Taking down a few cells responsible for one terrible bombing may make great headlines, but it will not kill the beast. To do that, you need one massive move that cuts off many heads at once. This will cause the beast to go into panic and bleed to death. We will pump this well until it runs dry, then we will decide what to do with the head of Nedim.”

Back at his home Nedim finally got to answer his most urgent call, put on some clothes and confront his keepers. One of the men, he could not remember if it was his cousin or his friend, informed him it was time to check his email. He resigned himself to doing just that. The men produced a small recording device and began taking notes in college thesis-type notebooks. At least that would lend credibility to the university friend story, if he could ever remember which was which.

There were only five emails waiting for him, yet getting through the first four took over an hour. He went through the explanation on routing. Each group wishing to receive information would send him a baseline photo. Phrases in the text that came with it would tell him who should receive the image. They also told the receivers what information the sender was looking for. Every operative in the field had access to the same editing software which would distribute the response they typed as a seemingly random set of bit errors in the image. The response itself would be short and use phrases the operatives were told to use.

No translations were ever written down. Each person gathering intelligence had to memorize this handful of phrases. These were along the same lines as the phrases they had been using in open phone calls and emails in the past — before they figured out intelligence agencies were listening in. Now they hid the information inside of the images. You had to capture the base image before you could even hope to find the message to decode.

When distributing base images, they were not sent all at once. Over the course of the week Nedim would distribute the image to everyone who should receive it. Some would have messages embedded in them and be sent to decoys. The decoy messages would be scattered in the distribution so that any agency intercepting a “new” photo could not be certain it was a base photo unless someone had already been significantly compromised. Decoy messages were sent to some suspected of being compromised as well. In short, a base image used to go out to somewhere between 20 and 400 email addresses.

“Used to?” asked one of the men.

“I came up with a better way. Now when a new image comes in I encrypt a phrase in it, then only send it out to four or five decoys along with the list. The decoys get a different phrase. Even if any of them are intercepted, they still cannot be used for decoding. All of the operatives know the phrase and remove it from the image prior to using it as a base image.”

“What is the phrase?”

“God is Great.”

“And the decoy phrase?”

“Whatever I feel like typing from the Holy Quran.”

Both men were shocked to learn the software was a simple piece of Open Source software originally done as a proof for some thesis work, then continued by a community looking to transfer sensitive data cheaply and securely over the Internet. While it had originally focused on transferring financial data, clinical trial research and the like, this group had co-opted it for their own sensitive data.

Two of the messages contained images with coded phrases in them. Once he had translated them, Nedim emailed them onto the original sender of the image.

One of the men asked Nedim how he knew where to send the responses because they had seen no indication in the message or the brief look they had gotten on his computer.

“Simple. One sender always uses images of birds, another beach scenes, another fish, etc. It has never been difficult to keep track of the destination because of this.”

The third message was interesting. It contained one phrase and an FTP address. Nedim pasted the FTP address into his browser and began a binary download of the ZIP file. After downloading the file, Nedim sent the original email onto its destination.

When an attempt to unzip the file was made, it prompted for a password. The file name had been the letter “T” followed by a series of digits and dashes with a “.zip” extension. The phrase had been “Great View.”

Both men wanted to know how Nedim had known the password. “It was obvious,” he responded. The digits in the file name were the longitude and latitude for somewhere in Chicago. All of the world heard about the great view from the Sears Sky Deck when “The World’s Tallest Building” was built.

At first, the files contained in this compressed file appeared to be nothing more than tourist snapshots. An odd number of them seemed to be focusing on the lake view, but all views seemed to be represented. When spread out, they would give you a full 360 degree view from the Sky Deck. This was followed by some shots which seemed to come from some air tour out over the lake. Odd vacation to be sure, but nothing incriminating.

Then they came to the spreadsheets. One contained detailed information about guard numbers and rotations for building security. Another contained information about police patrols and force size.

Following the spreadsheets were PDF files containing the original construction blueprints for the building. These showed the type of steel, quantity and placement of it. They showed the location and weight of the counter-balance units. A detailed discussion was also included from some architectural magazine story about how the smaller towers supported the main tower in those great Chicago winds.

Just to be complete there were also photos of the parking garage entrance, the various levels and even some of the supports running through those levels. One picture even went so far as to have a tape measure held up to the support pillar for size.

This was obviously a completed recon effort. All information had been gathered and delivered for those who make strike decisions. It was left up to the leaders to decide if, how, and when to strike the target. They had Nedim make a copy of the entire directory where he had decompressed the file.

Both men were so floored by the scope and magnitude of what was going on they almost forgot to look at the last email. It seemed innocuous enough. It looked like a form letter from a technical support company. It was announcing they had closed his ticket number and instructed him to re-open it if he had any further concerns on this issue. At the end was a fax number if he needed to fax any screen prints or service contract information to the technical support. It was signed “John.”

After what they had just seen, both men had a hard time believing this was a routine business email. Nedim showed them the email he had sent technical support regarding an issue where his computer was locking up and their response about downloading a new set of drivers. This seemed to satisfy both men. Oddly enough, they both understood that Windows was an unstable operating system.

With that complete and the CD in the men's hands, Nedim announced it was time for him to go to work. He actually was a software analyst by trade and he worked for an off-shoring company, which meant he worked nights a few days per week so he could participate in conference calls with the U.S. clients. Nedim had no qualms about taking money from infidels before killing them.

Once dressed and with lunch packed, the man who was supposed to be his friend from the university announced he would be walking with him to work. The other man would be delivering the information they had gathered to their superiors. During the walk to work, Nedim said, "I suppose you are also monitoring my work email?" There was no response from the other man. Of course their wouldn't be.

The very first thing Nedim did after sitting down at his desk and logging in was to hand write a note.

John,

Infidels at my door. Stay clear.

Ned

He then immediately faxed the note to the number from the technical support email and tossed the note into the shred bin.

John's real name was Kaliel. Nedim had met him at university and talked with him at the mosque. John now worked for a technical support company in India, another off-shore operation that required its people to use an American name when dealing with U.S. customers. John had been sent to America on an H1-B Visa for a few years. John worked with the very same team that assembled the information on the Sears Tower. The email was to let Nedim know that John was back home. He was to fax once he had pulled down the file and forwarded it on. One of the other team members, also

working in the U.S. on H1-B Visa, had been tasked with assembling the file and posting it in a blind FTP location on the Web. To keep cells isolated, each operative only knew where to put a message, not where it actually ended up.

John had been the first to see the brilliance of Nedim's email relay system. He had also been the one to convince Nedim to embed the messages inside of images for security. The leaders of al-Qaeda had simply smiled and nodded when he informed them of this plan. They were used to hiding in caves, making videos, and communicating by satellite phone. It was only after September 11, 2001, when every phone was monitored, that suddenly his relay system was pressed into service. The leaders learned about the compromised phones when several of the training camps they had been talking with were bombed. Their location could have only been discovered by triangulating the signals.

Nedim knew the relay network John handled was even larger than his own. Today's most important recruits weren't from the impoverished parts of the Muslim world. They were the technology students, training for jobs that would put them in the belly of the beast, able to walk freely, and assemble files like the one Nedim had downloaded today.

The infidels were only too happy to bring them over by the plane load paying their employers U.S. \$30 per hour. The workers got only \$10 of that, some only got \$10 per day. It was more than most of them had ever made and well below the prevailing wage in the U.S. The new recruits were good Muslims, one and all. They were only too happy to send the bulk of that money home to help the cause. While the big donations still came from within Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, both cash and intelligence were coming via these new recruits. Some of them would even be martyrs eventually.

Both John and Nedim had tried to convince the al-Qaeda leaders to start their own off-shoring companies in India and Pakistan: Keep them looking legitimate to the outside world and generate tens of millions of dollars for the cause annually. Each man knew the margins being made by off-shore companies. Those companies were able to obtain visas in quantity, usually with the help of their clients. Instead of getting half of some wages, they would get most of all wages even if the employee didn't support the cause.

Some of the people John had been working with got themselves into projects for the financial districts. These members developed a system of moving large amounts of money around in untraceable manners. The infidels may find a few accounts here and there, but they could not possibly find them all. Al-Qaeda now had accounts in all countries and all currencies. There was nowhere they could not finance an operation. The only problem was getting suicide bombers into America, but thankfully, corporate greed solved that problem. The martyrs only had to learn enough English to work a help desk. Not only were the martyrs being paid to come into the country and kill Americans, they were putting Americans out of jobs from day one. God is Great.

The infidel leaders were so stupid. Rallying in the press about terrorists using the drug cartel's to import them. Planting stories about terrorists walking across the Mexican border or the Canadian border. Terrorists didn't walk into the belly of the beast, they flew business class. The only connection al-Qaeda had to the drug cartels was now they both used the same methods to launder money. To keep the infidels confused, some of the money still went through the charity organizations they had been using for years, but the large transactions all flowed through the drug cartel's money laundering systems in the financial district. God is Great.

Umar, the man playing the cousin from Saudi Arabia, returned to headquarters. He set down his notes and quickly loaded the CD into a laptop computer for his superiors to see. They were both impressed and skeptical that such a find could be nabbed on the first day. The laptop was handed over to another team for further analysis while Umar went through his notes to his superiors and the rest of the team. He explained the meaning of phrases as Nedim had explained them. There were many questions, it took hours.

After a short break, they regrouped and Umar began explaining how the baseline images were distributed. He told them about the Open Source software used to embed messages in them and how all baseline images now had "God is Great" embedded in them before being distributed. The corrupted decoy messages brought up quite a bit of discussion. When asked how they kept track of which images to use, he informed them that each cell communicator chose a specific family of images, beach scenes, birds, fish,

etc. This ensured they never needed to keep a list of what went where.

Skeptics in the room could take no more. They decided to put these theories to a test. A snooping program had been installed on Nedim's email account for months. They all gathered around a computer while the British photographer downloaded the software and copied two sets of images to the local hard drive. In one directory he put all of the copies of one picture Nedim had sent, in another directory he placed all of that same image Nedim had received. Thirty-eight messages had gone out, but only two had come back.

"First we try this on an image sent to someone who didn't return it," said the Brit.

He entered the commands to remove "God is Great" from the image, then the difference between this baseline and one of the received images. Garbage appeared.

"See, he lied to you," said someone in the back.

"No," said the Brit. "This one was a decoy. Next we try an image sent to an email address that returned it."

He went through the steps to create the new baseline image. When the difference was run against the responding message, out popped the message.

Went fishing today.

Cans and bottles counted.

Worm box ignored.

"Went fishing where?" asked someone.

"We can ask," responded Umar.

"No," said the man in the suit. "Simply observe and report. This was a status report. They will send email again. When Nedim responds to them, we will know their location. We will watch them for a while, then round up the entire cell."

“And bring them here?” came the question from somewhere in the room.

“Depending on the country and who makes the arrest, they will go to our new interrogation facility,” responded the German.

“Where is that?” asked one of the brutes.

“That information is on a need to know basis and you do not need to know,” snapped the man in the suit. He also made a mental note not to let the muscle part of this operation stand around while evidence was being sorted through. Operations like this needed brutes, but they could be damned inconvenient when thinking was going on. As a general rule, they always tried to absorb more information than their tiny brains could hold. This over absorption had a tendency to result in leakage. Operations like this could not function when leakage happened.

Old is New

Hans was glad the suit nipped the location discussion in the bud. He had no qualms about killing, but would prefer not to kill a team member in front of the team. Those kinds of kills are always best done in secret. Sometimes you could even make it look like the other side did the deed and focus the team by it instead of on it.

His real name was Karl, but everyone here called him Hans. They had called him it since the day he was assigned to this team. He doubted anyone other than the man in the suit knew his real name. Every name was an alias here. The man in the suit had introduced himself by a different name to every member of the team when they joined. They all called him “the man in the suit” now. If he smoked they would probably just call him “the cancer man.”

Hans had grown up in Germany. He learned long ago to keep his political views to himself. He had applied himself well in school. Majoring in both Mathematics and Computer Science at the right time. Unlike most following that curriculum, he had played sports, drank beer, and chased as many women as possible.

College campuses are where all parties indoctrinate the youth. It doesn't matter if it is Democrat, Republican or The Reformed Nazi Party. Get them when they are idealistic, yearning to learn; teach them your beliefs and you make them yours for life. Even if they later try to leave, the beliefs, are too deeply rooted to be lost completely. It was no different for Hans. He was recruited by the clandestine agencies in his government to work in intelligence. (Funny how it is always the dumbest people who refer to it as intelligence.)

He was drawn to some of the ideals of The Reformed Nazi Party. Not the ideals so much as the logic they used. They actually analyzed the failures of Hitler and made changes to the platform in accordance. Oh, they hadn't moved much from the Aryan World Dominance theme, but they had changed the method of achieving it.

When he told them of his recruitment they told him to come to no more meetings. From time to time they would send someone to fill him in. He should not openly discuss the party, nor should his name appear on a registry of membership. They told him they had other members in those same organizations. Once he made it through all of the entrance requirements they would help steer him to the places where he could both serve his country and serve his party.

That had been a long time ago. Hans had worked on everything since then. Surveillance, encryption, decryption, computer penetration, you name it. He had killed many times to save his own life and sometimes simply because he had been ordered to kill. It didn't bother him. He knew that everyone playing this game for any length of time deserved to die, including him.

Economic troubles back home had made the party grow some in size and become more open. There were many different versions of it, all claiming to be The Reformed Nazi Party or some such variation of the name. Each group held some political offices. Many factions held the common ground of Aryan Supremacy, others were simply willing to let it slide if they got everything else they wanted. Each had their own laundry list of what Hitler had bungled. Most of those lists only included the military bungles. Only his party had the root of it correct:

The first race you choose to kill off cannot be
one the rest of the world is indifferent about.

College professors had analyzed World War II for decades. They focused on the debacles in Russia and the slaughter of the air force trying to bomb England into submission. While those made for good military discussions, they were not the heart of the problem. No, there were exactly two root causes for Hitler's failure.

1. He hated his mother
2. He was going mad

Historians have only recently (in the last 30 years or so anyway) talked about the first dirty little secret. Adolf's mother was a Jew. His sister chose to remain Jewish and wed a Jew. This sent Adolf's unstable mind careening off well past tither. It was then that the crazy paper hanger wrote his book and proclaimed courage even though he cowered out of every fight.

Aryan Supremacy parties were nothing new in Germany, though most phrased it as German Supremacy. Hitler didn't invent the Nazi Party, he simply co-opted the core beliefs from the other parties so each found it easy to support him. Yes, they had members with egos, but none of them insane enough to preach their values to thousands in a public square like an Evangelical preacher in a revival tent. First came the spectacle, then came the following. Many went along simply for the entertainment value.

The world thought they were punishing Germany after World War I. The Treaty of Versailles left a broken, bankrupt, and bitter German people. Rebuilding the country was out of the question. Each day was a choice between feeding the children and paying down the debt. Each day was the grinding of a boot heel on the back of the neck. In truth, they would have been better to divide Germany among the border countries and leave the Germans without a home of their own. It would have sped up reconstruction and left the Germans without a Fatherland to fight for.

No, the victors, smug in their own glory and self righteousness, sought to humiliate a people rather than solve a problem. The world didn't know it, but the Cold War between Russia and the United States after World War II had probably been the best thing for all. A divided and isolated Germany, controlled by two superpowers who seemingly hated each other (at least publicly) kept the people under control and focused on something else. Thus they were kept from becoming a problem again.

A few years later the Allied powers (mostly the U.S. and mostly due to what Germany had done) decided it was time for the Jews to have a home of their own again. In 1948 Israel became an internationally recognized country. Few things could piss off the Islamic hardliners more. The Nazi's killed Jews because Hitler hated his mother. He had to publish that blue-eyed, blonde definition to narrow the focus of Aryan Supremacy since most of the Jews were pretty much white. The Islamic extremists kill Jews because they are Jews. Whereas the German soldiers doing the slaughter had to be fed propaganda and a big drink of the Nazi Kool-Aid, Islamic extremists seemed to just be born. Hans had heard tapes of services from every mosque surrounding the headquarters. You couldn't grow up here, be religious, and not hate Jews as soon as you were old enough to speak a sentence. Because the Americans were the biggest supporters of Israel, you had to hate them as well.

Education really was the answer, but you couldn't have education in any of these countries without the Quran. Germans didn't hate Americans simply because they were American. There were still some hard feelings over them being the last monkey on the pile forcing them down twice, but that was to be expected. The citizens of either country, able to obtain passports, could and would travel in the other country without strapping on dynamite and detonating themselves in a crowded place. Here, the primary education was that of centuries-old hatred.

Hans could fight these people because he understood them and because it was in line with his party's beliefs. His party had dropped the "blue-eyed, blonde" restriction on the Aryan definition. While those would always hold higher rank, the other whites wouldn't be systematically exterminated. They knew enough about genetics to know that you simply cannot stop recessive traits from surfacing unless you are going to test and abort fetuses, something currently happening in India and possibly China, just to get a son.

What Hans saw in these people was the Nazi Party before World War II. It was led by a mad man who hated his past and was trying to eliminate it from history. In this case, bin Laden, trying to hide the fact he had taken money from and fought for the Americans in one war and that his father had funded the first three companies of a man who became president. That same man was now supposed to send people to kill him.

Adolf would not get undressed for physical examinations and would not allow anyone to give him an injection, yet injections could have cured him of the disease most prominently causing his madness. Bin Laden has a disease which requires a special form of dialysis and other medical treatments. Everyone knew that bad things left in your blood would either kill you or make you go mad.

Neither had created their base platform, they had simply co-opted the core from other factions' platforms and added their own personal hatred. Hans didn't hate. He simply wanted to be on the winning team which dominated the world. Killing never seemed to bother him. Then again, he had never had to kill a child or pregnant woman. Nobody told him to strap on explosives and obliterate a crowd, they told him whom they wanted dead and by when; the rest was up to him.

No, the spirit of glasnost, which caused Germany to be re-united again, had simply opened more doors for him than it had closed. His party had gotten stronger and had more sympathizers in power. Now he worked with Russians, Brits, and Americans spying for them in a quasi-common cause rather than spying on them for each other. This new game was a somewhat safer game, even if more deadly. Now, if he got nabbed by the other side, no less than two of those countries would deploy military forces to get him out of trouble. The story would be on CNN within an hour and citizens from civilized countries would be asking why the troops hadn't deployed already. In the old days, if he got nabbed, he would die a slow agonizing death over the course of months, or years, and nobody would ever hear about it. Of course, captives seemed to have a life expectancy of hours if they were American.

September 11 had been a blunder of biblical proportions for bin Laden. Had he just crashed planes into the Pentagon and other U.S.-only structures, the rest of the world would have had only limited outcry. Taking out the Twin Towers pushed every industrialized country into the fight. Even China, a country which wasn't the best friend of the U.S. and had been playing a cat and mouse game with a downed spy plane only weeks before, called the White House to tell the Americans its airspace was open for anything they needed to fly over. "Just be certain it is broadcasting an American IDC when it flies over and we will route traffic out of its way" was the phrase Hans had heard. Whether it was true or not didn't matter. The magnitude of their airspace being open was large enough.

There were less visible changes brought about by September 11 as well. Influential members of Hans' party had gotten funding and built an interrogation camp deep in the Bohemian Forest. Between Altglashutte and Schlattein. A few hills and woods over it built another camp of the older, more famous style. The location was chosen because of its seclusion and because they could fly people in via Nuremberg, then drive them secretly just over 100 miles to the camp. Some of the party elders must have felt nostalgic building a camp not far from another historical camp, Flossenburg. Had there not been scholars and tourists visiting what remained of the other camp, they probably would have simply re-opened that camp. At least they built it over 250 miles from Birkenau. Most of the world knows Birkenau by another name, Auschwitz.

The first was the camp the man in the suit was being asked about. When Hans' clandestine organization joined this team, they had offered the use of the camp for interrogations. The other organizations were not told its precise location, only that prisoners could be flown in via Nuremberg and that the camp was close enough to the Czech border they could be across it before inspectors arrived.

The Americans could not be asked to join this particular team. The politics in Russia dictated they rekindle the Cold War to enact some changes in their own country. They felt the need to do a military build up due to the American build up in this region; just in case the Americans decided to hang onto all of the oil. Hans thought it best the Americans were not involved anyway. They had rules of engagement and a flock of reporters following their every move. Nothing blows a covert operation like film at 11.

Besides, not one member of this team (other than Hans) knew about the second camp. That was going to be his party's real contribution to this effort. It was also going to be the chain that bound them all together permanently. Once the second camp was put into motion with prisoners who had completed interrogation, everyone would be locked into this operation. His party would be certain to film and document what went on there. Nothing cements a relationship like the threat of film at 11.

September 11 had given the more extreme members of Hans' party what they had always wanted: A license to exterminate. The current world mindset was that if you claimed someone was a terrorist and produced a few emails to support your claim, you could kill them without question. Just like Adolf before him, bin Laden had given the world license and will to kill his people en masse. It was up to Hans, and the few members of his party who knew about the second camp, to keep it quiet until after each participating nuclear power had sent people there to die. Once that happened those countries could not strike back, they could only help cover up.

Hans suspected this cover up would turn most of the Middle East into one contiguous sheet of glass. Some who thought the same had begun debating the thickness of the glass and how smooth the surface would be when polished by the shock waves of multiple nuclear blasts.

Nedim finished his day at work and began the walk home. In a few short minutes his "cousin" was walking beside him and saying nothing. There was quite a crowd leaving work that morning, and another smaller crowd coming in. Like most of the off-shore technology companies, this one ran a day shift and a night shift. Some workers, like Nedim, had to toggle between the two shifts. Others only did technical support while the Americans slept.

Once he arrived at home, he found that his new "friends" had actually bothered to pick up some food and drink. They ate a meal, saying little, then told Nedim to check his email before he went to bed. "I usually go to morning prayer now," replied Nedim. "Do you want us to join you at the mosque?" came their response. In a way he did. He wanted someone who knew him to speak with him after prayer, or the cleric himself. Word would spread quickly that Nedim had new friends. His al-Qaeda contacts would disappear. Then he thought better of it. Yes, his contacts would disappear, but not before one final contact was made. Had he been taken to prison, he would be honored as a near martyr, but with these men living here, he would be branded a traitor and assassinated at the first opportunity.

He resigned himself to checking his email. This really was a no-win situation for him. Eventually his cleric would miss him at the private Quran discussions. Someone would stop by, and the truth would come out. Logic told him he had about a week to sort this out before he would die.

This email session went a little faster than the last. There were only a handful of emails to pull down, decode, and forward. His “friends” asked the same questions they had asked that morning, but mostly just to confirm what they had already written down. The one file he had to pull down for them contained fewer photos, but lots of plans and spreadsheets containing traffic counts. The traffic counts were spread over several weeks and they listed special events going on in the far right columns. Dates and descriptions of future events that could affect traffic flows were listed at the bottom.

Of course there were several files of blueprints, and one file containing Web links. Special events and traffic flows are always important when you are targeting a bridge. Especially when the bridge had defied attack before. This bridge was the Golden Gate Bridge. All of the files were copied onto a CD produced by his “friends.”

The final message was a new baseline file. Nedim showed them how to decode the text to know who was supposed to receive it. Then came the question they weren’t supposed to ask. “How do you chose the decoys?”

“Some will be email addresses from a spam list I acquired, others will be addresses he has communicated with before,” he responded. There were only five recipients for this base image, so Nedim chose seven decoys to round it out at a dozen.

“Do the decoys know they are decoys?” asked his cousin.

“Not the ones from the spam list,” replied Nedim.

“But the others?”

“Every person receiving this is a good Muslim, they know the Holy Quran.”

Each base image came with a passage from the Quran that would seem to apply to it when read by the casual reader. The spam list Nedim had obtained was a list of members from various Islamic and Muslim organizations around the world. Some had ties to al-Qaeda, and some did not. They all had, at one time or another, subscribed to a “word of the day” or “prayer of the day” sort of service like many of the infidels did. They would assume this was something sent out by the service and ponder it.

What the men hadn't noticed, because they were too busy writing notes, was that Nedim changed a word in the phrase when sending to decoys. Any member receiving the image and finding a word out of place in the passage would simply ignore it. The rest would save the image as a new base image. Any communication they needed to send to this leader would use this new image. Any new instructions coming to them would use this new base image.

One thing the men did write down was the file name containing email addresses Nedim used for decoys. When they reported next time they would be able to speed up progress immensely on this investigation.

Finally, after a very long day, Nedim went to bed. *One more sunrise, and another day closer to death*, he thought.

Back at headquarters Nedim's “cousin” was enthusiastically briefing the rest of the team on what they had learned. He turned over the file CD containing the information on the Golden Gate Bridge and informed them of the file name Nedim used to pull some of his decoy names from.

In all honesty, he thought this would speed up the investigation. Then he heard the man in the suit say, “This is exactly what I was hoping to avoid. Not only do they hide among the population, now they implicate every Muslim devout enough to have a daily prayer emailed to them.”

“They are determined to turn this into a war against all Muslims,” said Hans. They believe that once this gets spun into a war against all Muslims, all Muslims will rally to their cause rather than die at the hands of the infidels.

“But we know he bought this list,” responded Nedim's “cousin.”

“We also don't know who on that list joined simply to hide in the forest,” replied the man in the suit. “The list itself is of no use to us. We will have to look at each image to find out what it contains and build our tree from there.”

Along one wall of the office was now a large marker board. They used a wet erase board rather than the more common dry erase board so information couldn't accidentally be erased. In the center of it was Nedim. Above him was the beginning of an inverted hierarchy chart and below him the more common image of a regular hierarchy chart. Only a couple of other names had been filled in. These were the names of people arrested whose computer email traced back to Nedim. Each of their email accounts had the forwarding option set and was now forwarding email to people on the team. Nobody wanted al-Qaeda to find out an operative had been compromised by a full mailbox bounce.

When it came to the members of the team based locally, only Hans and the man in the suit knew where the other people listed on that board were. They were the first occupants of the first camp built by Hans' party members. Nothing of interest had been learned by their interrogation thus far, but it was early. Hans knew the interrogators held out hope of squeezing more from them by the simple fact nobody in Hans' party had told him the second camp had been put into use.

Kent Braxton was sitting in his big leather desk chair gazing out his 14th floor office window. Kent was only 25, held a Harvard MBA, and came from old money. To everyone who worked for him, this meant Kent was nothing more than a nice suit smiling and schmoozing away money that could be better spent on real employees. Kent knew what they thought of him and didn't care. He was getting a golden parachute from this firm even if they fired him on his first day. Of course he wasn't going to get fired because his people get paid to leave.

Stored on a file in his BlackBerry was a cheat sheet he had been using since enrolling in business school. That cheat sheet contained all of the knee-jerk things an MBA was supposed to say whenever the topic turned to cutting costs. All new MBA hires were always asked to cut costs, so he needed all of the schmoozing phrases at his fingertips. In particular, he needed the phrases relevant to IT. Like all MBAs, Kent had taken the one-day course on how to construct a contact manager using Microsoft Access, and now held a certificate in IT project management. Every MBA had to do at least one IT project before being given a vice president title, and Kent was planning on sailing through his. The less time he spent with these money-grubbing geeks the better. They weren't MBAs, so why should they get paid so much.

First Global Bank, Inc. came into being as a result of the Asian financial crisis. A good many investment firms and banks had gotten too greedy playing options and derivatives nobody could understand. Corporate carcasses quickly littered the landscape once the bubble burst. A few firms hadn't dipped quite so heavily into the never-ending ocean of greed surrounding the financial community. It's not that they did well, just that they had more cash on hand when a competitor's stock prices plunged below \$5.00/share, and then well below a dollar per share. They were able to snatch up assets at fire-sale prices when the companies went under, and those close to avoiding going under were victims of hostile takeover tactics. Kent's brother had gotten him this job, but he had to impress the gray hairs with his ability to cut IT costs.

The simple truth is that Kent could barely find the power switch on his company-issued notebook. He couldn't understand why there were any other computer platforms or software packages because his only exposure to computers had been surfing the Web and sending email. He had no idea how the VPN (Virtual Private Network) worked when he connected in from home, nor did he understand why the company needed it. In short, most 3-year-olds knew more about IT than Kent. On the bright side, not having a clue about what was and wasn't needed allowed him to cut everything without any emotion.

Nine different corporations had been consumed in one way or another during the creation of First Global Bank. Every one of them had a completely different computer system handling all of their transactions. The only bright spot of the entire ordeal was that the automatic teller machines all went through third-party service firms which had actually created communications standards. No matter what ATM you were at in the world, you could check your balance and withdraw cash.

Kent's predecessor had actually known something about IT. Kent's predecessor wasn't an MBA, so the new board had to replace him. This became especially apparent to them when IT costs tripled during the first year of all the mergers. Not one single member of the board knew anything about IT, they just wanted it to work and be free. Such is the lot in life for those who understand IT. Someone who doesn't understand a thing you do will be the first one to fire you to cover their ass.

There was a good reason IT costs had tripled during that first year. The board wanted to be able to see all information from all units. Every unit had a different computer system with a different set of applications located at different places throughout the world. In short, the lemmings walked off a cliff with their eyes firmly fixed on the other side of the gorge.

One thing the board of directors had failed to consider is that every data center is required to have one backup center. When you handle the clearing for stock exchanges, and just about every other financial transaction, you aren't allowed to tell the customer "please try again later" like you can some Internet user. You cannot get large amounts of FDIC coverage without either a fully hardened data center or multiple data centers split across different power grids in different regions of the country. The short description, in terms of the common man, is "you have to be able to completely lose one data center and still handle all of your daily transactions, or you have to build a data center which can survive a nuclear strike." Given the last option is pretty expensive, most financial firms opted for multiple data centers.

When you greedily consume nine other financial institutions, you end up with nine other sets of data centers, some of which are on the same physical block with each other. Your first order of business, not only to eventually “cut costs,” but simply to maintain sanity, is to start consolidating data centers. Sounds simple when you say it out loud, but it requires a lot of outside contractors and a lot of rented/newly purchased equipment ... assuming you don't have to build a shiny new location with enough room to hold everything from all of the other locations. It was this set of realities which caused a tripling of the IT budget under Kent's predecessor.

In a year's time, Kent's predecessor went from 10 sets of data centers to 4 sets. He had cut the number of data center staff needed by a third. He had even put together the plans for consolidating the last 3 sets into the primary set of data centers. Given everything else his predecessor had successfully completed, Kent assumed the plan was a good one. There was no indication if the plan was actually complete though, and given Kent's IT skill level, he had no way to know.

The cost savings which would be realized this year from his predecessor's work allowed Kent to bring in Big Four Consulting to put together a beautiful looking PowerPoint presentation on how they recommended completing the consolidation and still have a lower budget than his predecessor. Kent assumed they would just verify his predecessor's plan and he would have to find price whores to do the work.

Assumptions can kill you. Someone should have told Kent that.

A Cold Calculation of Winter

Nedim's alarm went off around lunchtime. The rest of the week he was allowed to work a late afternoon shift that ran into the evening. He had just enough time to clean up and head for afternoon prayer. He didn't even mind when his "friend from university" tagged along. At least the man stayed behind him and didn't pray right beside him. After prayers he went with the cleric and a group of others for his private discussions on the Quran. He could sense the obvious displeasure coming from the back of the mosque and didn't care. When you have already decided you are dead, you no longer care who will be the one to kill you.

Promptly at 3:00 he excused himself to go to work. Ramesh (the name given his "friend from university") was waiting for him outside of the mosque. When they were out of earshot of others, he began berating him.

"Do you want I should kill you now?"

"It does not matter. If you do it now it will save me the trouble of waiting for it to come."

"Your only chance at life is to cooperate with us fully."

"I have," Nedim lied.

"And you call disappearing with a cleric for hours cooperating?"

"If you wish to join the discussion, say something to the cleric that impresses him and he may invite you. I cannot invite you directly without giving up all of your background and I have no idea what that is. I participate in those discussions at least three days per week."

“If I start missing them I know two things for certain. The first is that the email I'm relaying will stop. The second is that very soon after I will be dead. You might say I know three things. The third is that if I manage to survive doing this until I'm no longer useful, you or one of your team will kill me. Do you really think threatening my life is any way to motivate me?”

For a brief, but not too brief, moment, Ramesh thought about offing him right there on the street in front of everyone. The only thing that stopped him was thinking about how he would explain it to the man in the suit. On short notice he could not come up with a story that was convincing in his own mind. The cleric visit by itself wouldn't cover it. Ramesh also knew there was no way he would be the one sitting in Holy Quran discussions with a cleric.

Nedim stopped at home, packed a lunch, then walked to work. This time Umar accompanied him, but they did not speak. When he arrived at work there was a fax for him waiting at his desk.

I have escalated your issue to the highest authority.

God is Great.

John had understood his message and informed others above him. If there was any cross communications between cells, those Nedim worked with would know in a matter of days. In a week or so, the bulk of his email would stop. Only those under deep cover who do not communicate until necessary would send him anything. Perhaps before then he will have outlived his usefulness. Nedim threw the fax in the shred bin. Funny thing about working for an off-shore consulting company, everything you needed to destroy evidence was right here in the office.

John knew he should not have sent the fax to Nedim, but they had been intertwined in this for some time. He needed to pass along the information to the leaders he knew about so they could arrange for his relocation. Nedim was a good Muslim, but not a great Muslim. If he was squeezed, he would give up John. As long as John had an Internet connection he could obscure the IP address and continue to function without being located, he just had to move before he was located now since Nedim knew where he worked and the infidels probably had a couple of his work emails. Those fax numbers went to physical addresses. He had to be a long way from here by tomorrow.

A new passport and identity were being delivered to him within the hour. He would move to another tech center and hide among the population. This time he would be living in Bangalore. Technical support centers were so desperate there he didn't have to fill out an application. Simply speak clear enough English during the interview and answer two out of five technical questions correctly. If you were willing to start off with a pathetic salary, you walked out of the interview and started your shift. Most people hated working at the call centers, but not John. It provided him with income and didn't cloud his mind when he left. His real occupation was communications relay center for al-Qaeda.

His computer at home had to be left on to retrieve all email to an encrypted folder. He received more than 500 emails per day. He never bothered to decode them, he simply didn't have the time. There were now 14 cells for whom he handled communications. Most ISPs in this country would bounce your email after you received 200 messages. John couldn't risk that. Many of the soldiers in the field used libraries and colleges to send email to him. He couldn't risk a bounced email landing in an administrators folder. It might actually be looked at and figured out.

John kept up on all of the latest technology trends. He read the industry trade magazines during every free moment. He didn't read as much to satisfy a thirst for knowledge as to find out anything new that was mentioned about surveillance and viruses. He ran every kind of virus scanner imaginable. The last thing he wanted was some Trojan horse piggy backing on an email message that would give him up to the authorities.

This may be India, but he would not have a trial here. At best he would get a brief pass in front of news cameras with officials denouncing him as a terrorist, then he would be executed. The “best” situation didn’t happen much anymore. John knew several of his co-workers were members of local cells. They had no idea he was the communications method. One day some of them simply quit showing up to work; by late afternoon replacements sat at their desks. His bosses said nothing about it. Had they left for other jobs there would have been much hollering by one of his bosses and shouts about suing a competitor. The silence was more telling than a confession.

Infidels have a saying “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” He had heard some of them say this while helping them with computer problems. For John, this wasn’t a saying, but a mantra for survival. He had a scheduled job which deleted all of his sent items twice per day. It also emptied his email wastebasket once that was done. Finally it kicked off some privacy software which would perform a DOD-secure erase of all empty space on his hard drive. He had to thank the U.S. Department of Defense for publishing a standard of erasing data so securely it could never be recovered. John knew all too well that just because a file was deleted didn’t mean it was gone. He had helped many customers recover deleted files.

While waiting for his new identity to arrive he was cleaning his home like it hadn’t been cleaned before. Wearing gloves and a hair net, he was scrubbing and wiping every surface. He even pulled the hair traps out of the drains to remove any and all evidence of his presence. He took special care to scrub the underside of the toilet lid and seat. He had read about police checking there for fingerprints.

Finally his new identity arrived. An old friend of his had brought it. They both knew they would probably never meet again. John picked up his two suitcases, computer briefcase and bag of trash from cleaning, then left. His friend took the key to the place as they said good bye. The bag of trash did not leave his possession until he was three streets over. He bought a ticket, and waited for a bus. While he waited, he read through his new identity. It came complete with references from a consulting company in the very city he had worked and some walking around money. *So, they did what we said and never told us*, he thought.

Nedim returned home from work exhausted. It was the wee hours of the morning and all he wanted to do was sleep. Of course, his “friends” were waiting for him and wanted him to check his email before turning in. “Why don’t you do it, I’ve shown you how?” he asked them.

“We cannot risk a mistake at this point,” his cousin replied.

Sighing, he sat down in the chair and logged into his email. Seven messages were waiting with two coming from the same user. His friends noted this and wrote the user down. As Nedim went through the forwarding process they noticed that one of the forwarded messages went to this same address. They had him translate all three messages. One message referred to a plan to blow up a tunnel under a river. Another message made reference to blowing up multiple trains at the same time. The response going back was a request for more information about what was required. No hint about a location was in the messages.

Nedim was now allowed to eat, pray, and go to bed. Ramesh gathered up his notes to file a report with headquarters in a few hours. Umar settled down on a sleeping bag. In a few hours, Nedim would need to be awake again and Umar would need to be his shadow. Ramesh informed Umar about the lectures with the cleric Nedim was attending and told him he would be required to infiltrate the circle to hear what they were discussing. Umar was not pleased.

Kent was sitting in a conference room with his Big Four Consulting firm team. It was the largest conference room the bank had in this building, and was almost too small. His assistant Margret, was the only other bank employee in the room, all of the rest came with the consulting firm. Because Kent knew nothing about IT, he had little ability to defend himself from the team surge that happened three days into the project. Other than the team leader, they were all fresh college graduates, which the team leader claimed were all required. All Kent knew was that he was paying \$120/hour for each of them, there were only seven slides in the PowerPoint presentation, but they all billed him for 40 hours per week. A quick math calculation informed Kent that about half of the consulting budget he had available went out the door last week.

All of the girls working on the project wore short skirts with stockings and heels. They all wore some kind of top that looked very business and professional when you looked at them standing, but when sitting down they could turn/twist/bend to show all they had to offer. There was a lot of turning and twisting keeping the conversation going during the entire seven slides of the presentation. They managed to consume exactly 40 minutes before opening it up for questions.

Kent had asked them to review his predecessor's plan and see if the final round of data center consolidation was well mapped out. He expected a yes or no answer. If no, he expected to get a few extra pages added to the plan to round it out. What he got was neither of those.

Big Four's entire presentation had been a bunch of quotes from the Langston Group about the cost savings of off-shoring all IT operations. There had been spreadsheets computed with some of Kent's own numbers showing the dramatic year-over-year cost savings once all of the data centers had been moved to India. The grand finale of this presentation included a spreadsheet showing how the entire cost of the move would be recovered by the sale of the existing data center locations and all of the equipment inside of them.

Kent sat shell shocked for a while. He didn't know anything about IT, but he knew how to read spreadsheets and the spreadsheet they presented showed him an IT operating budget which was less than one third of his current budget. It wasn't until the team leader offered to give this same presentation to the board with Kent and let him take credit for it that the gleam appeared in his eye. He had just bought the white elephant, and everyone in the room could see it.

Even the tiniest bit of research would have told Kent this wasn't a consultant's analysis, but a sales pitch. Kent's assistant sat there shell shocked after they all walked out of the room. She thought they should all have been summarily fired half way through the presentation. The fact they were allowed to complete the entire presentation, and bill for it, left her feeling numb.

Margret actually had a degree in IT. The only reason she was allowed to keep her job when Kent came in was that she had also minored in business. Since he started at the bank, Kent had been after her to go back to school and complete her MBA so she could move up in the company. He had no clue that she didn't want to climb any higher. Had the market been a little better for consultants, she would already be an independent consultant. A lot of companies were consolidating data centers now, and the experience she had from the prior consolidation was a license to print money when the next big project came up.

What Kent didn't know, the board was too lazy to investigate. Big Four Consulting had an off-shore division and Kent was being told to have it as the bank's new data centers. A great big data center had been built and a lot of different communications hardware had been installed and was just waiting for a client to install computers. Another company the Big Four owned half of was the Indian version of the Iron Mountain backup storage company. It was all a neat little package.

Anyone possessing a degree in IT and having more than a handful of years in the field knew that Langston Group was more a marketing company than an independent analyst. They were paid to promote a new trend every year or so. Each new trend had some big marketing war chest behind it and just happened to be the very thing the Big Four Consulting companies were experts in now.

Off-shoring was currently promoted as a Utopia for slashing labor costs. Management viewed all workers as Grade 8 bolts. If you didn't have an MBA, you were a Grade 8 bolt. You could be replaced by a Grade 8 bolt from a cheaper supplier with absolutely no negative effect on business. Thousands of workers with actual skill had been replaced by recent grads working off-shore for less than welfare payments amount to in this country. Hundreds of companies were now engaged in creative accounting, hiding failed projects on their books so they could still tell investors just how much money off-shoring was saving them. Hell, the bank had refused to extend lines of credit to three just last week. Yet, here they were, about to do the same thing themselves.

Vladimir sat in his office just outside of Nuremberg. He had been born in Russia and done his fair share of black bag operations in the past. That lifestyle had him riding around in a wheelchair now. There was a bullet lodged in his spine from when an operation went bad. He had always been good with computers and now it was the only thing supporting him.

He didn't really remember how he got involved with this operation. It all seemed to start with a friend from the Russian mafia providing an introduction to an Arab gentleman. They wanted the same kind of Trojan horse virus he had written for the Russians to collect much of the same information. He originally assumed it was yet another identity theft ring. What was once a necessity of the spy game was now big business. He was somewhat surprised when they told him he didn't need to make the virus install itself or look for credit card information. They were more interested in gathering information on the machine itself: CPU serial number, Network card ID, the full IP routing where possible. A mental warning alarm should have went off when he heard this, but it didn't.

He told them the best method of getting what they wanted was a small simple ping script attached to an email that would ping a fixed IP address hard coded into the script, which then communicated with a server. The server and virus could send several messages back and forth containing the email address, message header, machine hardware information and other data. He would be able to write both sides of the software and as long as the script didn't try to open the address book of the email software it should remain undetected. He could also put code into it which would allow it to determine if it was being read from within a Web page rather than an email program on a local machine. He could then have the browser return much of the information.

The Arab asked how many versions of the Trojan horse Vladimir could deliver. He was certain that eventually some virus checker would catch onto the signature and the tool would be useless. Vladimir felt he could come up with five versions with different signatures and tactics so most virus scanners wouldn't block them for months. He said the real danger was in using a hard-coded IP address instead of a Web address looked up on-line. It is easy to get caught that way, but a hard-coded address that avoided DNS (Dynamic Name Service) lookup would stall off virus scanners longer. The Arab informed him they had no fear of getting caught. The IP address would be forwarded

from inside of a secure facility.

In truth, that last statement should have been Vladimir's second warning. He was definitely off his game. It wasn't that Vladimir minded the killing game or killing itself. If this had been simple seek and destroy and he had still been hale and whole, he would have gladly signed up to kill al-Qaeda members. Russians had died in the Twin Towers as well. A good many of his former coworkers actually went off to engage in that sort of game shortly after September 11.

What bothered Vladimir about this operation was learning what he shouldn't have learned. Vladimir was the only non-Nazi Party member to know about the second camp. At least he believed he was, with the exception of the Arab he had met. Vladimir had absolutely no problem killing these people. He had spent many of his younger days putting two behind the ear of many different types of people. His objection was to the incinerator and the "showers" and a building site that could end up on the news. His office wasn't far from the place where trials had been held and photographs of things like that sent some rather infamous people to their deaths.

Life in a wheelchair was still life after all, and the Russian mafia had been paying quite well for his services. He kept his old contacts active there in case he needed to make a speedy trip with a new identity. During his idle time, Vladimir pondered why he had taken this job. It always came down to the same two reasons:

1. The pay was more regular and just as good as his other work
2. He really believed these people deserved to die.

Vladimir made himself a promise though. The day people started going to the second camp in buses and trains instead of the back of a car, he was out of here. He told nobody of his promise, but he had his mafia contacts move his money to accounts in many different countries. There was simply no telling how far he would have to run when this was over. One thing he had not puzzled out was why there were so many refrigeration units built at the site. With all of the refrigeration units and loading docks out front, the place looked like a food distribution center.

His computer playing a WAV file and popping up a message pulled him out of his thoughts and back into the room he called his office. Much like some people have their email client playing a “You’ve got mail!” jingle when email came in, he had his ping server set up to play the Monty Python “Message for you sir” sound byte whenever it got a confirmed hit. He quickly clicked on the message box button to display the information and the IP address trace. Two hits had been received from the same address in Lutton, England.

The man in the suit had just finished reading his email when Umar came in to make his report. Hans and the Brit were there as well. Umar gave them a complete report and the translations for the messages concerning tunnel and trains. He was complimented on his team’s work and told to get some sleep for tomorrow. After he left the man in the suit set Hans to hacking into the registration database for the email account providers and gave the IP addresses he had just received in his email to the Brit to run against the database. Within an hour, they had both completed their tasks. One of the IP addresses came from an Internet cafe in Lutton, England, the other came from a library in the same city. One of the email addresses was actually tied to a Lutton address.

The Brit wanted to immediately turn it over to a British special investigations unit, but the man in the suit stopped him. “What do we have to give them?” he asked.

“An address and a plot,” responded the Brit.

“Neither of which can be used to make an arrest,” was the counter argument. “We don’t even have a name or know if the address is real. It could simply be a vacant lot. The only thing we can do is attempt to confirm the address, then have our own people put them under surveillance. Until they build a bomb or give us more explicit details, there is nothing that could be used as the basis for an arrest.”

“We should be able to nab them for questioning ourselves,” said the Brit.

Hans replied, “We will, once they have been under surveillance for a while and we can identify just *whom* to nab. We need to identify the person at the keyboard sending the email. This group is eager. They were sent back a request for more information. Something will let slip in the email by the time we have identified who is sending the email.”

“Give me all of the addresses. I will send them to our people in England and they will begin hanging out at the cafe and library. If the address is actually real for the email address, we will have someone watching there as well. It shouldn't take too long to get logging software installed on every machine in each place. In less than two weeks we should be able to identify exactly who is sending the messages. If they are this eager to move, they should be having regular meetings with the rest of their cell. It won't take long to nab the entire group. We just have to be certain we are getting the entire group,” said the man in the suit.

Greed

Nikolaus sat in his office going over the construction specifications. He had been a member of the Reformed Nazi Party for many years and worked with the many different factions who all claimed to be *the* Reformed Nazi Party. His current job was a vice president position for a bio-tech company whose name he couldn't even remember. He didn't need to remember it. The name was printed everywhere. Corporations were just chess pieces to him. He had both built and crushed dozens of them.

Most of this corporation's upper management were loyal party members. They let him do whatever he wanted because he was higher in the party than they were. To do what he did for the party, Nikolaus could never be a celebrity or public figure. His lot was to work in the shadows, making sure all of the details were taken care of. He also made sure that his signature was never on any documents relating to his current project. Signoff came from those higher in the company when he told them to sign.

The current project was the type that would make one famous if discovered — the kind of famous that gets you executed after a lengthy public trial. Nikolaus was very much aware of the risks involved. He had split the building of the thing across several different contracting companies run by loyal party members whose employees were mostly loyal party members. In truth there were only a couple of thousand loyal party members spread across the entire country. The rest were party members when the sun was shining. Still, he was impressed what only a thousand people could accomplish when they worked in secret and remained focused.

A secured facility for both research and manufacturing was how the project was presented to the board of directors to get initial funding. It had been the decision of the party that this facility should be built by a corporation with stockholders rather than just the party or a privately held company. When you spread the blame around from the beginning you reduced your chance of going to prison or being executed. This blame had already spread to the bulk of the financial institutions on America's Wall Street.

The corporation had several manufacturing and research facilities scattered around the globe. They were big suppliers of various medical products and a few patented drugs. In Wall Street's eyes, the bio-tech star was once again rising.

It wasn't a well kept secret that several black-ops contracts were being worked on by the corporation. With all of the concern about terrorists using biological or chemical agents to attack large populations, business had been booming for the lines making antidotes. Even if an attack never happened, every government had to stockpile enough for all of their citizens. Some of the products would only keep three years in storage unless the storage was kept at or below -60C.

The cost of keeping millions of doses stored at such a temperature was very prohibitive for most countries. Now the company was offering "storage provider" contracts. Countries either too poor or unwilling to spend the money up front could pay the company an annual fee in the millions of dollars range. The company promised to have on hand in storage the number of doses needed by the largest population participating in the contract. The company would air lift the doses to the country in need within four hours of being notified about the attack.

Because wind can carry a biological or chemical agent a long way, there were five separate "storage provider" contracts, also referred to as plans. Countries chose which contract they wanted to participate in. The fees for the plans were determined by the largest population participating in the plan. Each country was instructed to join a plan that didn't have neighboring countries in it. The plans would only protect as many people as they had doses. Other plans may offer to sell some of their doses, but if they didn't, you would have to wait for production to get scaled up cranking out the

product you needed. In short, everyone was banking on al-Qaeda never getting strong enough to launch a biological agent high enough into the atmosphere to cover more than one continent.

Had the citizens of any country participating in the plans heard of this, they might have thought it ghoulish, but insurance companies play the statistics game every day. Human lives are meaningless numbers on a spreadsheet to them. They were banking on two things. The first was that al-Qaeda couldn't pull it off. The second was if they did pull it off, everyone would be dead anyway, so no fear of being sued. Everyone that is, except the leaders who chose to join the plan instead of providing in-country storage. They built their own little freezer and hooked it to their data center UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply). The taxpayers paid for that little project as well, they just were never told about it.

The beauty in all of this was it allowed Nikolaus to be in charge of building a new secured facility with acres of both refrigerated and frozen storage. Because the facility would be storing a commodity which was beyond any price once an attack happened, it had to be highly secured. If you are going to build a highly secured facility, you should also put some research labs, sleeping quarters, etc. in the compound so you can do all of your government-funded or secret projects there. The dorm like settings allowed for the building of communal showers. Last, but not least, the only way to keep your secret projects truly secret is to have a large incinerator on site as well.

Everybody on the board of directors knew this would be a location for some clandestine operations. Every one of them understood that they didn't have clearance from the various governments involved to know what projects were going on there. They swallowed this pill because the cash influx from the "storage provider" contracts alone gave them the largest stock option bonuses they had ever had. Once the facility was fully operational, the following year's option would be even bigger.

Nikolaus made certain some of the labs were of “pilot plant” size. It was easy justifying the creation of them since the company had routinely set up pilot plants for new drug or chemical lines working out the production kinks before adding the line to an existing factory. The board of directors didn't know it yet, but this company was poised to become one of the largest suppliers in the world of stem-cell and whole-blood products. The profit generated by producing new stem-cell lines would be staggering.

Margret sat in the board room watching Big Four Consulting run through their PowerPoint presentation. Her boss, Kent, had signed onto this idea several weeks ago and helped prepare the final spreadsheet using numbers provided by the consulting firm. The room was packed with consultants not old enough to shave but dressed in their finest anyway. The exact same people made the exact same comments they had made in the presentation to Kent; of course Kent's assistant was the only one who noticed. Twisting, bending, smiling and empathizing all happened right on queue. Good-looking young guys were placed strategically around and across from the female board member, while the short skirts virtually smothered the dirty old men.

It wasn't that she minded the “sex for sale” marketing tactic used by Big Four Consulting. Lord knows they all did it. Had she not been on the short list of people who would be left twisting in the breeze when this project went south, she might have even considered helping herself to a few servings from some of the dishes being offered. What really pissed her off was knowing that the tweaked libidos in the room were going to sign off on the project in hopes of getting some, only to have put the entire corporation face down on the table to be rectally violated when the invoices from the project started. Margret could already see how this train wreck was going to play out.

1. Contract would be signed, then someone would buy drinks and dinner.
2. Mothership would dock the very next day, spilling out an unbelievable number of well-dressed kids not old enough to shave, costing the company \$120/hr. each.

3. Paper consumption would increase 50-fold at the company as hand carts full of great looking documentation having absolutely nothing to do with the project were generated. All of it required by the “process” used by the consulting firm.
4. Entire budget then would be consumed, requiring a small “extension” budget.
5. Once the extension budget was granted, Big Four Consulting would step out of the picture and make company employees do the actual project, putting in 90 hours per week on salary.
6. Most employees involved in the project would quit and the department heads would be tagged for the failed project.

Some people said Margret was sarcastic, those who knew anything about IT knew she was a realist. This is the standard M.O. for large consulting firms. They weren't there to solve your problem, just schmooze you long enough to consume all of your budget. Very few board members were ever willing to say they had been taken for tens of millions of dollars, so they very rarely got sued. When they did get sued, it was usually by a company in dire enough financial straits that they could simply apply for continuances until the plaintiff took bankruptcy. It was an outright racket, but the MBAs would never admit it.

The project leader finished her positive and energetic chat about the last PowerPoint slide she had up. She smiled to the board and asked if they had any questions. *Oh, she is good*, thought Margret. *Such a classic burn and bucket bunko scam. Just wait for it ...*

“What will this project cost?” came the question from one of the board members.

The lemmings are about to go over the cliff, Margret thought.

A quick click of the mouse brought up the final slide in the presentation, which was Kent's spreadsheet, prepared using the Big Four's equipment valuations. There, in black and white, the board saw how half of the project would be paid for by sale of the existing equipment and software licenses once the move was completed. The rest of the project would be paid for by the lack of software and hardware maintenance contracts over the next three years. Given that maintenance contracts tend to go up every year, the project would probably be paid back sooner, but they had to use the numbers currently on file.

Margret sat in silence. If the board was dumb enough to overlook the obvious, she was not going to pipe up about it. She was only Kent's assistant. True, she would be the first fired when this train turned from locomotive to a pile of twisted smoldering steel, but she would be fired today if she pointed out just how stupid both her boss and the board of directors were. What was missing from that spreadsheet was just how much the service contract would be for the three years they were using the software license savings to pay off the project. Margret was fairly certain it was going to be way more than the savings, but the girl had chutzpah for putting up a spreadsheet and leaving that off.

The board made some appreciative sounds and a few members even nodded at each other. Of course they said they would have to discuss the project among themselves before making a decision, but everyone in the room knew the white elephant had been sold again. Business cards were handed out with promises they could call the cell phone any time with questions on the project. The team leader even offered to make reservations at a very posh restaurant where they could get a private room this evening to go over any details in a more relaxed surrounding.

Oh, this girl can work it! thought Margret. *I wonder if there will even be 14-year-old girls in the room to catch on video with the dirty old men? Nah. They won't resort to that this time. Some of the fresh faces in this room might be on their knees later, but they all know the elephant has been sold, so they will just be doing that out of habit.*

Margret added an item to the To-Do list in her PDA: Update Resume.

Kent walked back to his office using his strutting man-in-charge walk. He had power gripped each of the board member's hands at the end of the meeting and assured them he had every confidence of this project's success. He had an entire folder of links to articles from the weekly trade press expounding off-shoring as the answer to world hunger and the Utopia of cost cutting. Of course, Kent had to have his assistant Margret find those links and create that folder, but the board didn't need those details.

Yes sir, Kent was already picking out his corner office in Mahogany Row. He was going to go from director to president, skipping all of those cumbersome VP roles in between. Kent was going to achieve this feat because Kent had a plan!

Original ideas didn't happen much to Kent, at least not good ones. In truth, this wasn't an original idea, and it wasn't his, but he was going to claim it. Kent was going to be stuck in this IT role for approximately two years because the bank frowned upon people changing jobs more often than that. He could be "offered" a job through HR as part of a promotion, but he couldn't apply for one directly before then. You didn't get "offered" the kind of job Kent wanted unless you ended your tour on an up-swing, and he had an up-swing planned.

Big Four Consulting assured him that they could migrate a data center every other month as long as there was a maintenance window in that month. They wouldn't risk moving a data center during the end of a quarter when many additional jobs would need to be run. Moving all four sets of data centers to the new off-shore set would take under 18 months. While the plan would address a massive cost issue, it still wouldn't address the monumental effort of integrating the various applications so management could have its "world view" of First Global Bank.

Kent's big plan was to completely eliminate the on-shore programming staff. He had called a college friend at GM who told him how they had massively reduced their pension liability and direct cash outlay for programming by outsourcing all development to a consulting company that was using programmers in India and paying them \$10/day. Of course the consulting company was charging \$10/hour for those programmers and pocketing the difference, but that detail didn't come up. Another detail that didn't come up was the fact every project of any real size the off-shore workers did was a complete failure that had to be hidden in the books. No portion of it could be fixed or salvaged. No matter what country you went to for IT workers, skilled software developers didn't come cheap. This was an arrangement based on cheap, so they didn't get skill.

All Kent had to do to justify getting rid of everyone here, and thus cement his rise straight to a presidency desk, was to eliminate all of the on-shore staff. To do that, he needed a project the board would leap at, thus the "world view" project became the goose laying the golden eggs in Kent's eyes. He could enlist Big Four Consulting, which had just gotten the off-shoring contract, to put together a spreadsheet with staff hour estimates that were amazingly high for an integration project. Then he would have them put together what the project would cost using their off-shore development staff versus the cost of on-shore labor at their standard contracting rates. His staff would of course have to train their own replacements before being shown the door.

Kent wouldn't even have to finish the project. He would get the credit for it, and his replacement would have to deliver it. His replacement would have to work at least a year before he could come up with some other cost cutting measure, and it would all pale compared to the costs Kent had cut. His walk around the company had a very special "I'm the man!" strut today.

Kathryn, project manager for Big Four Consulting, was ecstatic when she heard the news they had won the contract. All of the schmoozing had paid off big time. She quickly notified the services manager and got the contract drawn up to overnight to Kent for him to sign. Each invoice presented to the bank had to be below a certain dollar amount so Kent could approve it, but they could invoice as often as needed.

Unlike most projects, they were actually going to do this one instead of just generate paper. They had already contracted with a communications company to provide all of the communications cut over effort for about a quarter of what was in the contract. A huge data center had been built in Bangalore. While a large amount of networking and communications equipment had been installed, not a lot of computers were there. The contract with First Global Bank would get the ball rolling. All of the mainframe and midrange computers used by that company had excess capacity. A deal would be struck to purchase the largest models available from those computer vendors and get them installed. Once installed, they could sign another deal with another client that used the same equipment and bill them out twice. This was going to be a massively profitable venture!

With the overnight sent out and her phone calls made, Kathryn was dreamily calculating what her commission would be from this project. Judging from the email sent out with commission rates for project managers, she would be pulling in an extra \$50K per quarter once this project got moving. Not bad at all.

First You Build the Wheel

John arrived in Bangalore and went to one of the addresses provided him to rent a place to live. He took an apartment in a complex built by one of the American companies there. It was very expensive, but came with air conditioning and an Internet connection. Getting a reliable Internet connection in India was more of an obstacle than one from a first-world country could imagine. All you had to do was look at the mud trails that passed for streets to see hundreds of cables wrapped around a single telephone pole which had two or three other poles propping it up from either side. Power, phone, high-speed Internet, all wrapped in a big bundle at the top of the pole. It looked like one of those massive rubber band collections you see pictures of on the Internet.

Once his computer was set up he immediately set out masking the IP address and then retrieving his email. There were lots of pending messages. He had been gone almost long enough for his mailbox to overflow. He started the deleting and purging jobs and began forwarding the messages to their intended recipients. It took him the better part of the afternoon to get through the existing email.

With the email handled, he went out for a walk past the technology companies to see which had postings out front. He saw a very large building that had been built recently and saw the name of the company. It looked like a massive data center. He went in and found they were looking to hire operations staff, technical support, and just about every other kind of computer job. He dutifully filled out an application giving them his new name and address. His new identity kit came with references and some job history, so he filled that in and handed back the application. The man behind the desk asked him to take a seat and said someone would speak with him in a moment.

John could hear some phone calls being made and some discussions being had. About five minutes later another man came out to greet him and bring him back to an office. He asked a short series of technical questions and John was able to answer all but the mainframe questions. When he was asked why he moved to Bangalore, John responded that he wanted to broaden his IT skills and couldn't do that where he had been.

The man seemed to accept this response in light of the fact he wasn't going to have to pay a buyout fee to obtain John. Competition for low-paid workers was fierce in India. Not fierce enough that any company was actually raising wages, but fierce with lawyers and lawsuits. The standard practice now was that you had to pay a year's wages to a company when you stole one of their employees. You see, the upper class in India keeps everything to themselves. They could care less if the lower classes lived or died as long as they made money at it.

The man interviewing him would also be his boss. He told John he was joining the company at a very opportune time. His company had just won a contract to off-shore four sets of data centers into this building and another building just like it in a different location. The additional generators and UPS equipment were being installed even as they spoke. Another building was being built on this campus to hold programmers.

It would be a few weeks before the new machines arrived and were installed. They had managed to obtain some books and training documentation on the mainframe and midrange systems that were arriving shortly. Their U.S. partner was flying over a small team to handle the installation and configuration. John's job would initially be computer operator and network monitor. His first assignment would be to read through all of the documentation they had obtained and get fluent on the systems.

John asked the man if he had some links to sites with the documentation so he could continue reading on his own. The man took his email address and emailed him the links to the on-line training. They then finished the paperwork to get John on the payroll. John didn't negotiate salary with the man and the man was all too happy to avoid an argument about the low pay. They had been seeing a lot of push back about the pathetic wages they were offering. The main reason they hadn't already staffed up for this (or any) contract was that few would take their pathetic wages and the owners were too

cheap to raise the salary. John would be making \$12.00 per day. Some days would be 8 hours and some would be 14, but he would always make \$12.00 per day.

Several busy, yet uneventful, weeks passed for John. He established a bank account under his new identity so he could cash his paycheck. Every day he went into work and spent most of it reading manuals. A flurry of people went in and out of the data center installing computers and giving John some instructions on how to start and stop them. The team from Big Four Consulting landed with the first set of backup media to install on the machines. John had even more documentation to read with respect to the starting, stopping and troubleshooting of the bank applications. He spent quite a bit of time on the phone in training conference calls.

John's boss managed to hire several other people who knew less than John about computers. He was supposed to train them as best he could. John was promoted to lead operator simply because someone had to be lead operator and he had been there the longest. It was odd to be at a place only a few weeks and receive a promotion. Of course the promotion came only with a title, not any money or extra benefits. It did come with one intangible benefit for someone with John's sideline. He was allowed to read up more on the banking systems and received administrator passwords on the systems. In his reading John learned that once the data center migrations were complete, roughly one-third of the world's money supply would pass through the systems he controlled every day.

Margret sat looking at the pile of paper on her desk, the triple booked meetings on her schedule and then back to the email from Kent which had been copied to Kathryn.

Margret,

I will be traveling to our other locations over the course of the next four weeks having meetings with the IT teams in place there. I'm assigning you the data center migration project. You will be the liaison between Big Four Consulting and the business.

Kent

“The son of a bitch should be castrated with a rusty spoon,” Margret said aloud. He had done nothing on the project or work related for the past three months. His entire day consisted of hobnobbing with higher-ups to get a lunch appointment set up each day, then spending the afternoon coordinating foursomes for Saturday golf. He wouldn't even attend a meeting unless someone above him was going to be there.

Margret pulled up Kent's calendar and looked at the last three weeks. *What an MBA*, she thought. He had studiously filled his calendar with bullshit entries leaving only 15 minutes open here and there. Margret was all too familiar with this tactic. To seem important you had to “look” busy and make it difficult for people to have meetings with you. This made the higher-ups think you were slaving away for the company.

What Kent was really doing was spending the day surfing the Web. Margret knew this because she had run the IP usage report for Kent's machine. Now that the little bastard had figured out how to get on to the Internet and run a mouse, he did absolutely nothing. He even surfed the Web from home using the company's VPN! The higher-ups never saw the IP usage report. They would only request reports about the amount of time people spent logged in and active, not reports about what they were actively doing. This man had turned doing nothing into an art form. Now, he dropped the project which was going to get him his promotion onto her back along with everything else of his she was doing.

Traveling around the world to visit each existing data center and programming staff was probably an easy sell for him. Most likely he pitched it as “doing the legwork to ensure a smooth migration.” What he was really doing was taking a company-paid four-week vacation. He would meet with each data center manager and each development manager to discuss their needs, then they would all be compelled to take him out for entertainment.

He would be traveling to four different countries and taking in the sites while there.

Every one of those IT teams reported to Margret, not Kent. She could have easily prepared the report on who they could eliminate after each migration. Every one of those banks had their own IT culture. It was incredibly difficult to impose the processes and controls used by the original bank. You could try the pitch that if their IT processes had been better they wouldn't have been eaten, but that argument was hollow. Had upper management not been so damned greedy and went so far out on a limb with options and their derivatives, the banks wouldn't have gone under; everybody knew it.

On the right side of Margret's desk was a pile of paper with programming requests from all of the different branches. On the left side was a pile of paper, mostly from the board, screaming about getting a single view of the company for ease of planning and financial reporting. Margret knew this entire data center migration thing was a lark. It had been a lark when Kent's predecessor started it, but the only experience the guy had was in data center consolidation and the board was looking for a "quick win" at cutting costs.

Had Kent's predecessor even bothered to read her integration plan, they would have been down to one set of data centers now. All they had to do was train each of the branch locations on how to use the existing system, then migrate the data into the existing systems. There was only a handful of additional fields in use by the banks that had been conquered. Had they started and used quality consultants, they would be done. All of the extra data centers would have been permanently eliminated, along with the programming staff from the conquered banks. Cost savings would be in the millions and the board would have been able to get a single picture of how the bank was doing. Now the programmers at each location were busily making changes that weren't supported by the central bank systems just to try and hang onto their jobs. Almost no documentation existed for these changes. Migration was going to be a real PITA (Pain In The Ass).

Three weeks had gone by since they first found out about the cell in Luton. The Brit had been grinding his teeth for three weeks as well. He was beginning to wonder if the Pakistan government hadn't allowed them in just to rub their nose in it. As long as Pakistan was "cooperating" with this operation, the world powers wouldn't invade, at least on the grounds they were aiding and abetting terrorists. The nuclear program they had going on was going to be a different story all together. The Brit had been quietly gathering what information he could on that and feeding it back to his contacts in the UK.

What had him in an irate mood today was the sheer fruitlessness of it all. More and more information had come in. The man in the suit kept saying that the people on the ground could only identify the message senders. Three weeks of tailing them had turned up no meetings or other members. There was now beginning to be open speculation that this entire message series was a ruse to see if anyone had caught onto how al-Qaeda was communicating now.

The Brit had spent far too much time in covert operations to believe al-Qaeda that smart. They had intercepted messages about the quantity and type of explosives being assembled. There had even been a long list of prospective targets. It seemed that they were planning to blow up multiple trains in the tunnels under London in such a way that when the last bomb went off, one of the trains would be directly under the river. The plan appeared to be to blow up the trains where the tunnels connected so there would be little to no chance of damming the ensuing flood.

A good many messages had gone back and forth about the size and type of explosive needed under the river. Some files had been transferred with specifications for the tunnel itself, but there had not been one single meeting of a cell. In fact, the two people being followed didn't seem to go anywhere but to the Internet locations and to the store. Some were willing to drop the tail, but the Brit kept bringing up the one piece of information which made it all credible. They had been seen buying multiple disposable cell phones. Given the quantity of explosives they needed, it could only be a matter of time before the explosives purchase and/or storage would surface.

The Brit was taking this one personal. Everybody knew it. He never spoke of home, family or lovers, but even if you had none of those back home, seeing an attack coming on your own soil was bound to bring forward some feelings of patriotism. The man in the suit kept an eye on him and monitored his communications while this was going on. Even MI6 didn't know about this operation and it was his job to keep it that way.

All it would take would be for the Brit to leak the information they currently had. Even if he told them nothing of the operation, everyone would know there was some clandestine OP going on. Then they would want to take credit for it, which meant they would have to get more information on it to claim being part of it. Not a good situation, but the risk was to be expected. He had to control it. Politicians would eventually say the operation was occurring with the full support of the Pakistan government and that would lead to large terrorist attacks here, in the man in the suit's own country. Not to be allowed. Only a handful in Pakistani intelligence knew anything about this operation. Too many in the government were backing al-Qaeda to let any officials know about it. They would all be executed the same afternoon officials found out.

Kathryn had spent her morning cracking the whip and denying overtime wages for the subcontractor actually doing the communications migration. She planned to spend the afternoon talking with the first group of 20-somethings who had just gotten back from Bangalore. They flew the first set of backup tapes over to the new data center and restored them onto the machines. Once there, the systems managers from the data center being phased out was to spend time tweaking startup and shutdown procedures.

A temporary high-bandwidth connection had been created so there could be one last data migration during the evening of the cut over. A handful of staff from the bank's data center had been given operations accounts on the new system in case there were any problems. A few consultants had been contracted by Big Four Consulting to actually partition the machines allowing only enough of the machine to be visible to this client as they would need. They also created the accounts for the bank's employees restricting their access. The meeting in the afternoon was to try and find out if there had been any problems in getting the software loaded to both data centers.

It was odd to have time to kill before lunch. Kathryn had always been in the mode of flashing her body and smile to clients over lunch trying to find one dumb enough to actually use this firm. Today she had no lunch plans. Kent was out of town for weeks and Margret didn't appear to stare at her legs or look down her top, besides Margret couldn't sign any contracts or take them to the board. Kathryn had always been in the mode of working three to five clients at a time trying to close a deal. All of that changed when she landed this contract.

Getting the data centers operational was considered vital to the cash flow of the company. Every moose with ears was buying, partnering, or otherwise whoring out Indian programmers to U.S. and foreign clients. Only about one in a hundred brought into their off-shore business was actually worth hiring, the rest were help desk script reading people passing themselves off as programmers. Margins were so low that nobody was making squat off the commission from getting that type of work. The only way you could boost the rates was if you already owned the client lock-stock-and-two-smoking-barrels. The only way to ensure you owned a client that completely was to get them into your data centers.

Margins were very high for this contract. The data center in India was roughly a football field in size and cost less than the cramped little data center First Global Bank had on a quarter floor of a high rise near where the Twin Towers had been. Running numbers for the board had been easy. Padding the hell out of them had been even easier. Because this contract was going to bring in so much money over the next five years, Margret was removed from all other accounts. She didn't mind the reduction in work, but had gotten very used to expensing her lunch in posh restaurants.

Today she was eating half a sandwich and some soup from the cafeteria downstairs and checking email over lunch. There were the usual pleas for help from the younger and newer account managers who inherited her other projects. She sent off a few sympathetic messages and informed them they already had all of her documentation for those accounts. Had any of them thought to buy her lunch today she would have given them her insights on the fetishes and weaknesses of each person in charge at their client site so they could close the deals. No lunch equals no unwritten information. You could never write information like that down, not even in your PDA. It could turn up during an investigation.

Finally she got to the message Kent had copied her on. At first she wondered what she had done to piss Kent off. He knew damned good and well that Margret didn't like Big Four Consulting. After his previous email with respect to the follow on project she thought they had a good rapport. True, she hadn't been there much the past couple of weeks. Communication was mostly via email and phone calls, but she did leave a bunch of young skirts and heels around to keep his libido going, apparently they weren't flashing enough. It was back to slit skirts and see through blouses once Kent returned.

Maybe things wouldn't be quite as bad as they seemed. She could bring some young hunky guys over to meet with Margret and offer to leave them there for additional information. Perhaps she could even take everyone to a late lunch tomorrow and pump a few glasses of wine into the girl to loosen her up. *Only one way to find out*, she thought as she picked up the phone.

"Hello Margret, this is Kathryn. I just got done reading Kent's email and it sounds like we are going to be working together."

"It would appear so."

"I have some assistants working with me on this to help coordinate all of the details. Perhaps we should all get together for lunch and make certain everyone knows what everyone else is doing?"

"A restaurant is probably not the best place for such a meeting," responded Margret.

"I was thinking you could come over to our offices and I would have lunch catered. There is a great little Italian place which delivers here and we will probably need access to overhead projectors, white boards, etc." responded Kathryn. "How does tomorrow at 11:30 sound? If we allow for two hours that should be more than enough time to cover everything."

Two hours to tell me what your subcontractor is doing? You really do know how to work it! thought Margret. She looked at her calendar and it was open, so she agreed. *If nothing else, at least I'll get a lunch.* Kent had been bellying up to the free lunch trough since he got here. The only free lunches Margret got were catered in conference rooms during working meetings. Kent usually stopped by long enough to get some food. God forbid he actually participate in the details of his project. Margret pondered if she was going to be shown the same tits and legs Kent had been drooling over, or if there was going to be something provided for the straight side of her life.

Kathryn finished out her day meeting the team that had went to Bangalore. They were all positive about the experience, mainly because they had stayed on the campus and few had ventured out into the squalor of the surrounding streets. They did report some of the contractors treated them like idiots and beverage fetchers while they were working, but that everything had been installed and reports from the U.S. systems managers made it look like everything was a go. They had even tested both a full month-end and quarter-end job cycle, so all jobs would run. The remote printers and email had been blocked to capture the output and avoid a nasty media story.

Judging from the sheepish grins she saw and some of the meeting comments, at least a few of the guys had ventured over to the Red Light District. Kathryn made a mental note to get them terminated before they got diagnosed with full-blown AIDS or passed it on to some of their female coworkers here. Nothing would kill the "sex for sale" marketing tactic like an outbreak of AIDS at the firm. She had seen the reports about how over 80% of the brothel girls had full-blown AIDS and were still working. Anyone who did the math could see that shipping IT jobs over to India would effectively halve the population inside of a decade.

IT workers were paid more in a day than other workers made in a week. The culture there was such that you didn't need a big house or any car to have prestige, so the male workers spent much of their money in the Red Light District. This was the main reason they had partnered rather than buying outright. Inside of seven years the bulk of the IT workforce would begin dying off from AIDS. Already there had been some quickly hushed reports from companies that had been there the longest. Few still had any senior people. Everybody blamed it on talent poaching to hide the truth. The talent poaching scam worked pretty well given the 200+% turnover rate most

companies had. Still, it was only a matter of time before the truth started coming out.

One day ended and another began. Kathryn had a morning meeting with some of the upper management types at her firm and actually had the gumption to mention that they should begin partnering with an off-shore firm or two in South Korea and in Russia. China was already being priced out of the market with Wal-Mart and other companies setting up factory towns. The influx of cash had Chinese companies and the various Chinese mobs snatching up IT workers as fast as they could be found. There were still places in Russia and Poland where college education was almost as high as the poverty and land was cheap.

The first reaction from some of the management had been they didn't have the Indian operation turning a profit yet. Other companies had tried going the Russian route and failed. Kathryn responded that off-shoring wasn't being marketed then, so it was unfair to judge by that history. Then you had a major uphill battle to sell off-shoring. Now all you had to do was be cheap.

Perhaps it was the fact she had overslept. Perhaps it was the fact she was now going to be making more money than some in this room. Maybe it was simply because she had to deal with the coffee from the cafeteria this morning instead of her usual \$9 quart of heaven, due to oversleeping. Kathryn pulled out the documentation showing the epidemic rate of AIDS at the brothels. Then she went into the story that most of the single male IT workers spent their extra cash in the Red Light District. Finally, she dropped the bomb that she suspected several of the male 20-somethings they had sent over to India had visited the brothels near their campus.

People were getting irate with her while she went into her oratory. The men assumed this was a severe case of PMS and began doodling on their legal pads, trying to make it look like they were taking notes. You could have heard a pin drop after she dropped the last bomb though. Every man in there knew those horny jocks they had hired were swimming in whatever pool they could find. They all knew that the "sex for sale" marketing tactic would be decimated if it ever got out that one or more of their barely old enough to shave crowd went public with AIDS, not to mention the cost of their insurance plan.

Kathryn sat there drinking her nasty coffee from downstairs and let that bomb burn its way through their brains. Finally one of the married guys with absolutely no skills piped up that this was an event horizon they had to consider. Another volunteered that he had two clients with locations already in Russia, so could probably pump them for some information about IT skills in the area near them. One more said they had a manufacturing client in South Korea already and he would make some inquiries there as well. Finally it was determined that they would quietly investigate building operations in all three of the countries Kathryn had mentioned. Even if they didn't lose their entire IT staff every few years in India, the resulting talent drain would push salaries up to the point it was cheaper to do the work in the U.S.

The morning meeting ran long, but ended in time for her to check email and round up the troops for their lunch presentation. She wasn't sure why, but she decided to use the guys who had been to India in this meeting. It made sense given that they had just gotten back from there, but she doubted Margret was dumb enough to get turned on once she found out that horny bunch had been to a country with legal brothels and little in the way of health care or prevention.

Margret arrived right on time. Lunch was just being set out in the conference room and they all stuffed themselves while chit-chatting about quasi-work-related things. The guys had strategically placed themselves around Margret as they had been trained to do and the girls fawned over getting lunch allowing glimpses and brushes. Kathryn still wasn't sure which way Margret's door swung, or if she even had a door. It was difficult to tell.

One thing which she made mental note of was Margret's prodding to find out who had ventured outside of the campus in Bangalore. Those who admitted to having gone out at all she suddenly had little interest in. *The woman wasn't stupid*, thought Kathryn. Lunch allowed for the team to provide glowing reports about how the backups had been installed and how well Margret's people worked with them during the process. No real details, but few were needed. Margret had already talked with the systems managers who had done the testing. This was just a little time for mutual appreciation and bonding.

With lunch over, the team began showing off the PowerPoint presentation they had put together with a timeline for the migration of the first two data centers. It was going to happen on the following weekend. They kept pointing out the massive bandwidth connection which was set up just to do the final data migration. Margret's own people had written the software that would do the extract of final data changes, then copy it across the network and load it onto the new system. The same software could be run in reverse if a back out was needed. All in the room assured her it would not be necessary, but that it didn't hurt to have a Plan B.

It was obvious to Margret she was being coddled to keep this golden cow putting out golden milk. She was outright pissed that the only guys provided her had been to an AIDS-infested area and she was certain none of them were smart enough to avoid catching it. Her summation of the girls in the room told her three of the five were too stupid to care. In short, this team would soon be moving on in one way or another.

Since Kathryn had chosen to treat her this way, like a napkin at McDonald's instead of the full-table setting at a nice place, she decided to drop a bomb on them and ruin their week. "This migration to off-shore is all well and good, but you seem to have overlooked a serious recovery issue," she said. All of the younglings leapt to inform her that the data centers were designed to split load and fail over just like the existing centers. They also professed to having witnessed the fail over testing themselves.

Kathryn finally chimed in saying she assured her they had tried to think of everything, but wanted to hear her concern so it could be addressed.

"Well," started Margret, "Every night we do incremental backups and every morning, the prior night's backups are sent to Iron Mountain for storage. The media return in such a manner that we have two full weeks of incremental backups. We also perform weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual backups. Each of those backups goes off to Iron Mountain as soon as it is completed. There is a set of rules in place so we have at least the last three sets of each off-site in secure storage. I don't see anywhere in this plan where we have included the round trip shipping cost of backup media, nor the turn around time it would take to have the media flown to India and do a full restoration in the event of a disaster."

The only sound in the room was that of the ventilation system when Margret finished speaking. Margret looked Kathryn directly in the eye and waited for a response. She knew there wasn't one, but wanted to see the tap dance. After waiting for a minute while Kathryn began looking through some documentation saying she was sure they had it covered and others sputtering assurances, Margret dropped her other bomb.

"In order to qualify for FDIC insurance, we cannot have a recovery period which is longer than 12 hours. The flight from the closest coast to India is over 14 hours, and that doesn't include restoration or testing time."

Nothing like hitting someone with the 2x4 of a federal regulation right between the eyes after you've eaten their food, thought Margret.

Kathryn made a mental note to never offer Margret tainted nookey again when trying to coddle her. This girl didn't play slow pitch or croquet, she was fast-pitch hardball all the way. The "barely old enough to shave" crowd was no help to her now. Time to cry uncle.

"I'm sure we addressed this issue at a high level, but now that the project is moving forward, perhaps we need to get into more detail and ensure there will be no problems going forward," said Kathryn with a slight emphasis on "going forward." If you are free this evening I would like to schedule a meeting with yourself and our Data Storage & Recovery Team.

Margret was pretty certain that "team" was going to be formed about five minutes after this meeting got over, but she responded saying that she would have to check her calendar once back in the office. They would not be able to get into too much detail without Margret bringing in her existing systems managers because they would have to sign off on any BRP (business recovery plan) put into place.

There was a special spring to Margret's step when she left Big Four Consulting that day. She knew very well that she had no plans tonight other than staying late to get caught up on some paperwork. Had Kathryn bothered to do any of her own research when putting the plan together, she would have been able to shoot Margret out of the saddle. Yes, there was a rule claiming you couldn't have outages and a catastrophic event had to be recovered from inside of 12 hours, but as long as your secondary data center could handle the full business load you had quite a bit of time to get your primary data center

restored. Margret simply wanted the same four-star treatment upper management got.

Nedim had not heard from John since he sent the fax. In an odd way they had been best friends. The past three weeks had been mentally grueling for Nedim. His cousin and his friend were still living with him. Umar, who was using the cover of being his cousin from Saudi Arabia, had even joined his mosque and gotten invited into the private discussions on the Holy Quran with Nedim's cleric. The only time he was actually "free" of them was when he went to work. He dared not attempt to contact John again, but he really needed to know John had gotten away. Nedim was certain he would not live long enough to see John again.

A heightened interest in the email exchanges from a pair of addresses had Nedim worried. He could tell from the content of the messages that something was going to happen soon. He had even tried to not translate all of the messages. Soon, the men stopped asking him for translations, they just had him printing out the results. While they still had some things copied off to CD, most of the messages were simply translated and printed. He had been printing enough that his printer was starting to have issues.

That's it!

He still had the support contract with the company where John worked. Both of his "roommates" had even complained about his printer acting up recently. John was in charge of his account. He could log a ticket with them and see who responded. If the response didn't come from John, he would at least know he had gotten away.

Nedim returned home after work and began his ritual of processing email. When it came time to print, his printer started acting up right on cue. Both roommates complained. Nedim opened up the file containing his support contract information and went to the Web site. After keying in his customer ID and password he was allowed to enter a new trouble ticket. He ran the applet which gathered all of the information about his system configuration and driver versions and attached the file to the trouble ticket. He informed his roommates that if the problem was in the driver or other software he had, he would have a fix before tomorrow.

Ramesh made a note to have the team purchase another printer. Once a cheap ink jet printer started having problems, they tended to go straight to Hell. This printer was a Brother printer; the absolute bottom of the industry. Ramesh was surprised it had lasted the past three weeks, let alone however long Nedim had been using it. One thing was certain in Ramesh's mind: *Products with the Brother name plate were condoms - Use once and dispose of properly.*

Kent sat in a very fine restaurant in Paris. The IT workers in this location were giving him the royal treatment trying to hang onto their jobs. Given that some of the board members liked to vacation in France, Kent had put this data center as the last one on the list before the central two. The bank was still going to have to keep some kind of offices here so board members could take "business trips" to France. These trips always coincided with the start of their vacations, but thankfully neither the shareholders nor the IRS had called them on it.

Prior to lunch, Kent had asked each of the department heads to come up with a migration plan for this division of the bank to use the existing bank system rather than the one their bank currently used. The deadline for them to get it to him was Friday. They had complained that all of the work currently being done in the existing system wouldn't allow them time to prepare such a migration plan. Kent told them to stop all work on the system and to begin mapping the data for load into First Global Bank's existing system.

What Kent didn't know was they had already done this work a year ago at Margret's request. They had a list of business rules that must be added to First Global Bank's system before it could be used, but the bulk of the data mapping was already in place. They would have to spend less than a day on updating it. In effect, Kent had given them the rest of the week off when he put in writing no further work was to occur on the system they supported. Most spent the rest of the day updating their resumes and talking with family on the phone. Nobody there was stupid enough to believe they still had a job.

Kent's real reason for going on this trip was to get everyone putting together a plan to migrate their systems into the primary system used by the original bank. He was visiting the data centers in reverse migration order so if the migration project came in late, he would be able to pitch the "world view" project to the board as the natural completion. Kent hadn't bothered to read any of the documentation Margret had emailed him prior to contracting with Big Four Consulting to do the data center migrations. If he had, the data center migration project wouldn't be happening at all.

Now he sat in a very fine restaurant drinking very fine wine and eating very fine food. Only the heads of this bank division were at the table, and they were sparing no expense. They all knew Kent presented projects to the board. Everyone at the table was wondering just how long they were going to have a job. They were only too happy to agree when he said they had to schedule a training session on how to use the main system for First Global Bank. He told them to contact Margret and obtain a pair of trainers from her. All of their employees needed to be trained by the end of next month. Kent had no idea if the system could be cut over in that time frame, but he intended to make them fear for their livelihoods. There were several other sites Kent wanted to see in France before moving onto the next location and he didn't expect to pay a dime to see them.

Tactically, it would have made more sense to have had this location migrated first. It had the highest cost of operation in the company. Because of the lax work attitude in France, they had twice the operations and programming staff of any division. Payroll and other worker-related taxes paid here by the bank were astronomical. If they really could simply cut over, Kent would be able to eliminate all but one IT person here and sell off all of the computer equipment along with the building the data center was in. Real estate prices had risen in this area and they could ask a premium for a fully equipped data center.

Kent assigned the task of getting the data center up for sale to the VP in charge of business real estate mortgages. The head of IT simply looked at his plate like it was his last meal. Kent saw this out of the corner of his eye and got an erection from the power rush. He then changed the conversation to what sounded like small talk, dropping in hints of what he wanted to see before leaving. Every VP at the table, except the VP of IT, volunteered to take him as their guest. *Ahhh ... It's good to be King!* Kent thought.

Nikolaus was sitting at his desk going over reports on freezer construction and existing freezer utilization when his phone rang. The voice on the other end told him the interrogators were finished with the two occupants of the first camp. As instructed, the person calling Nikolaus informed the interrogators they could just go home and everything would be handled. Nikolaus told the caller to transfer the prisoners.

As soon as he hung up the phone, Nikolaus picked up a disposable cell phone and called a special number. When they answered and exchanged pass phrases, Nikolaus told them to assemble the teams, there was a transfer in progress.

Then You Find a Hill

Kathryn sat in the main conference room for this location of Big Four Consulting. This time, she wasn't the one pitching, but the one being sold. Well, sold wasn't exactly it. A vendor was launching a new project and had just opened up the marketing war chest. Big Four Consulting was being paid to sell this product, so a more accurate statement would be Kathryn was being instructed on what she was to sell.

Pytho Corporation had just expanded its ERP product into a complete banking product. They weren't happy with having the world's most unreliable, yet best-selling database, they wanted more. Every Big Four Consulting account manager in the room was being given a box of CDs containing PowerPoint slides and marketing PDF files on how to sell this product. The heads of sales were handing out their cards and shaking hands. They paid very special attention to the three people on the other side of the room as those three people came from the Langston Group.

Kathryn had to laugh at the phrase "industry analyst." These people analyzed nothing. They were all given a folder with a printed document and a CD with a Word file of the same document. The document was a marketing article carefully written to sound like an analyst report. Margret knew that the English majors working at Big Four Consulting had spent about a week writing that article, but when it appeared in the Langston Group's private newsletter it was going to have only these three listed in the byline.

The industry had turned a blind eye to the incestuous relationship that spawned its leaders these days. Now that management had taken over the IT world, the leaders were pretty much a result of inbreeding just like other areas of management. It really was a self-sustaining machine.

“Industry analyst” groups would only provide their insight to IT leaders whose companies not only subscribed to their service, but promised to follow their advice. In return, IT leaders found themselves featured in industry trade rags any time they implemented something the analysts claimed was cutting edge. This allowed the IT leaders to be covertly marketed to other companies who wanted to obtain great IT leaders.

Of course, the leaders at major IT vendors all subscribed to the service. This allowed them to write articles for the analysts that would be featured in the newsletter and magazine. These vendors also paid big consulting firms to train a few of their account people as experts for marketing purposes and a few more as technical experts. For a fee, and a cut of the sale, the big consulting firms would then pitch the product as the be-all and end-all to their clients' needs. This had been going on so long in the industry it was now considered an accepted practice.

The weekly trade press was at the mercy of the “industry analysts.” Whenever advertising revenue fell off they would run an article or three questioning the credibility of the firms, but never actually do anything close to investigative journalism. They relied too heavily on the money the “industry analysts” spent promoting service subscribers in their magazines. Of course, they couldn't grumble too loudly or report too accurately. If that happened, the “industry analysts” would contact all of their subscribers and the entire stream of advertising revenue would cease to flow. Weekly trade rags went out of business when they went up against the “industry analysts.”

Kathryn had to hand it to the Langston Group. They had turned fraud into an art. Most of the analysts drove really nice rides that were leased for them by the IT vendors, so there was never a money trail showing on the books. They could open up their books and show clear lines of demarcation between marketing and analyst efforts. The analysts themselves took their perks in leased cars, information junkets, and outright paid vacations, all on the sly. How they could stand there and claim “Holier Than Thou” to the “sex for sale” marketing tactic of big consulting companies Kathryn would never understand. *Maybe they were really born without a soul*, she thought.

Once the presentation was over, Kathryn and the Langston Group analysts were offered lunch. The restaurant was four-star so Kathryn accepted. She had no illusion as to why she was being given the full treatment. She held the account of First Global Bank. This vendor needed to land that account and get the bank to announce a glowing report on the software. The “industry analysts” had a better lunch engagement, so they had to bow out.

At the restaurant there was the usual small talk about the product and how game changing it was. When the vendor was buying, their product was always game changing. Kathryn decided to twist the knife just a little, stating that the presentation didn't seem to cover much on the international flavor of the product. She was quickly assured that Pytho had spared no expense in making the product multi-lingual. From what Kathryn saw in the presentation this product was about as multi-lingual as Microsoft's operating system was multi-platform. You could use this product in any country you wanted as long as you spoke English. You could run Microsoft's operating system on any computer you wanted, so long as it was an x86 clone and not a real computer.

Since they didn't understand the gist of Kathryn's dig, she expanded on it by saying, “I was thinking more along the lines of international mortgage and banking laws. If I'm going to pitch this product to my client it must be certified to conform to all of the mortgage and banking laws in all of the countries where they do business. To start with, that would be Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, and Germany. I assume you've already had a team of auditors verify it conforms to the banking laws for passbook savings and mortgages in the United States.”

There was a lot of smiles and silence at the table as Kathryn took another drink of wine. Pytho Software hadn't bothered with testing for any countries other than Canada and the United States. At the time of development they were figuring on gradually handling the other countries. Then again, the Asian financial crisis hadn't happened until the middle of development and it was too late to change course. Now the one client they wanted had operations in many countries. Kathryn had them by the nads and everybody at the table knew it.

An awkward silence continued for quite a few minutes as Kathryn continued eating her meal. *Always drop a bomb like that after food is served*, Kathryn thought. *It gives you something to do while they squirm. Damn I'm good at this!*

Just prior to the check arriving, the leader of the pack stated, "We would like to retain your services for a globalization project."

Kathryn responded, "I will have to talk it over with my boss. I'm supposed to remain completely dedicated to the First Global Bank account until we complete our work there. What you really need me to do for you is to assemble the team that will provide you the banking rules for each country you target and provide testers to ensure those rules are met. If you complete such a project inside of a year, I can present your product to my client. Such an effort will not be cheap and my client would be expecting an amazing deal if they are going to be the first company to use this product out of the gate. You would in no way recoup your development costs on the first sale, it would probably take 10 sales just to recover this new effort before you could start recovering your prior investment."

"Understood," replied the leader.

Kathryn couldn't remember any of their names and hadn't bothered to write on their cards so she had to make one last gesture before owning this account. "If you have the authority to sign or present such a deal to your board, please give me another one of your cards so I may pass it onto my boss. He will then contact you when we have a number and a plan for you." Without any hesitation Kathryn was handed a card.

"Well, this lunch has been quite productive I think," said Kathryn. "I had planned to spend my lunch hour at the Mercedes dealer down the street from the office pricing out a new car, but I think my time was better spent here." Yes, it was an evil knife to twist, but Kathryn decided she should have the same perks as the industry analysts. A look from the leader to one of the others at the table brought the response Kathryn had intended to get.

"If you don't have plans after work I would be happy to go there with you. Our company has a leasing arrangement with Mercedes Corporate so I'm sure we can get a very special deal for you."

Kathryn could already smell the new leather of her convertible Mercedes.

Back at the office Kathryn quickly informed her boss about the details of the lunch, sans the new Mercedes detail. He called in a few account reps who had clients doing auditing work in the countries in question. A task list of phone calls to make and numbers to obtain was passed out. True to her word, Kathryn handed over the business card. When the others had left the room Kathryn's boss said: "Another whale like this and you will be in line for senior partner." Kathryn smiled and went back to her desk, waiting for the phone to ring. The man buying her a new car was supposed to call at 4:30.

A panel van arrived at the second camp late in the afternoon. Both the special security team and the lab technician team had arrived earlier. Special security escorted the van to a special pilot plant building at the back of the campus. There were no windows in this building and it had special sound-absorbing insulation inside.

The two occupants in the back had recently been released from the interrogation camp and now were to be disposed of. The foreign interrogators believed the subjects were going to be sent to an isolated prison where no records would be kept. What they thought didn't really matter. In a few hours, there would be no evidence these men ever existed.

Nikolaus was somewhat saddened that both were men. He had hoped to get the place fully operational, but they needed female subjects for that to happen. There would be little profit in the disposal of these two, but he would see how the team functioned. As a trial run, two was an adequate number. The security team would remain outside of the building making sure nobody entered until the products were created and the bodies taken to the incinerator; he was not worried about them. He was worried about the lab technicians. They had the dirty work and might not be up for it.

In the 1960s researchers first discovered that bone marrow contains at least two kinds of stem cells. One population, called hematopoietic stem cells, form all types of blood cells in the body. Years later they also discovered bone marrow stromal cells, which generate bone, cartilage, fat, and fibrous connective tissue. While the press was all blushing with news about stem-cell research, most were focusing on embryonic stem cells. There was a thriving black market for the other stem cells, and complete bone marrow itself. Some diseases could only be cured with a bone marrow transplant.

The blood type and DNA of these two had been documented when they were received at the interrogation camp. There had been plenty of time to find very wealthy people who needed both, and could use what these two had to offer. Tonight two of them would have donor material air lifted to their hospitals. All of the bone marrow would be removed from these two men, once the saline pump had replaced all of their blood with saline solution. Their blood was to be harvested and sold on the blood market as well. At some point the men would expire. Once everything had been harvested, they would be incinerated. It was a shame no wealthy customers could use the other internal organs. Black market hearts were worth twice their weight in gold. Liver and kidneys sold well normally, but the blood tests had to match.

Nikolaus need to see how the lab techs handled this. If any of them wavered, the special security unit would have to put them down and incinerate their bodies. The team was too new to be asked to harvest one of their own. Many of the techs were loyal party members who had been groomed for exactly this task since birth. They were taught the party philosophy before they even went to school. Once they were in high school and interested in medicine, they were all made an offer. College would be a free ride, but you had to pass and work for the party. Technically, they didn't have to graduate. They had to know their way around a body, but they didn't need any skill at saving lives.

Two separate options were available to women prisoners if their ovaries were still working. They would be allowed to live in the special, highly secured dorm, fertilized every other month and have an abortion on the following month, until they stopped producing eggs. This option was only available to the ones who cooperated. Those who didn't cooperate would simply have their ovaries harvested while blood and bone marrow were being harvested. The lab techs would fertilize as many eggs as they could from the

ovaries, then harvest the stem cells. Nikolaus left it up to the technicians as to how the fertilization was to occur. Parentage didn't matter in this endeavor.

One thing was still nagging at Nikolaus. These two men had been found as a result of the post-September 11 investigations. Their email had led to Nedim. Reporters had been sniffing around in various countries trying to get leads on investigations or clandestine efforts to hunt down al-Qaeda. They lost the scent of these two long ago. All records of them having been followed, arrested, or questioned had been purged completely. So completely it was no longer even on off-site backup media. What was bothering Nikolaus was an email from Hans telling him reporters were sniffing around in Pakistan and seemed to believe some clandestine operation had a mole handling email for al-Qaeda. Nikolaus had left the handling of it up to Hans and the man in the suit; they could kill the reporters or let it play out. If they killed the reporters, it needed to look like al-Qaeda did it.

Heidi donned her nursing fatigues and set about to start the saline exchange. The pump they were using was the same pump funeral homes used to embalm bodies. During her nurse's training she actually had to work in the morgue for a while. The only thing different about this was the body strapped to the table was still alive. Oddly, it was that training which made her most suited for this job.

She looked over and saw Nikolaus looking through the room's observation window. She gave him a smile behind her surgical mask. He recognized her and smiled back. Nikolaus and her father had been friends forever. They were both loyal party members and she had been raised to be a loyal party member. Her nurse's training had been paid for by the party. As part of her payback and continued training, she had worked as a nurse in various military medical units and served as a med tech for some clandestine ones. She had seen first-hand the carnage caused by explosives, and had no problem with what they were doing.

Heidi knew the history of al-Qaeda on her soil. Germans had been hunting them long before the Americans started killing them wholesale. The American's really didn't get into it until after 9/11. Yes, they had done some monitoring, and even launched a botched attempt to kill bin Laden prior to 9/11, but they got involved too late. Had the American's shared their information with the people in her party, bin Laden wouldn't still be walking around. Her party had some of the best trained assassins in the world.

From the history Heidi knew, al-Qaeda began operating in her country some time in 1992. They had a cell in Hamburg that had defied being rooted out by normal criminal means, and turned out to be the source for most of the 9/11 hijackers or at least selected and educated them. In 1994 al-Qaeda had killed two German intelligence agents because they were trying to dismantle the operations al-Qaeda had in Germany. After that event, the Reformed Nazi Party started getting a lot more influential members.

In 1995 German intelligence identified a suspected leader of a Hamburg cell and found the Twaik Group was a front company for Saudi intelligence. Several members of Saudi intelligence were suspected of being in the pocket of al-Qaeda and funneling millions through this front into the hands of al-Qaeda. The Hamburg cell leader was accused of not only financing 9/11, but of helping to select the hijackers.

In 1996 the Germans began going after the Hamburg cell in earnest after receiving a tip from Turkey. They began monitoring the mosque where the 9/11 hijackers attended and the radical Moroccan imam Nedim Fazazi preached.

In 1998 the Germans arrested Mamdouh Mahmud Salim (a.k.a. Abu Hajer) in connection with the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Africa. He was later called "head of bin Laden's computer operations and weapons procurement." Shortly thereafter, the CIA and German police foiled an airplane bomb plot where al-Qaeda had penetrated airport security in Amsterdam and planned to smuggle bombs into the cargo holds of American passenger planes.

After 9/11, the world found out about the Hamburg cell. Heidi's party got a lot more funding and a lot fewer inquiries from government officials about their activities. Everyone knew what had to be done, and they were willing to keep their distance in case the world didn't quite understand.

Heidi had no illusions about what was going to happen here. They were going to kill these two men, and harvest salable components for market. As more subjects came through here, the cash influx would allow them to launch larger initiatives. Covert operations funding had been good enough to get them this far, but you needed serious funding to carry out work of the magnitude which had to happen.

This train of thought was interrupted by Lisa touching her arm. "They're still alive," Lisa whispered.

"Not for long," responded Heidi.

"I wasn't told about this," Lisa whispered nervously. "I'm a surgical nurse, not a murderer."

Lisa, this girl was a real piece of work. Heidi had told Nikolaus not to bring her into this operation. When people heard Heidi's name they instantly conjured up an image of a blue-eyed, blonde sex toy. Heidi's hair was somewhat blonde and her eyes a shade of blue, but she was a long way from a sex toy. Lisa was the complete image of a sex toy. She was doing a senior party member and claimed to be a loyal party member herself, but she really just wanted to sleep her way to a better station in life. If she kept up talking like this she would be tossed into the incinerator tonight.

"Just continue your work and keep your mouth shut," responded Heidi. "With power comes the responsibility of doing what has to be done."

Lisa nervously went over to begin prepping her tray. While Nikolaus could not hear the exchange he had noticed it and Lisa's reaction. One look in Heidi's eyes told him what he needed to know. The first wash out was in the room.

There were times when Heidi wished she looked like Lisa, but only times. She had her share of lovers in life. Better to call them sex partners, for they were never really in love, nor was she. They exchanged laughs and orgasms when circumstances allowed, but rarely kept in touch. One notable exception had been during an operation involving some Americans. She had heard one of the Americans refer to her as a "closing time gal." Another had joked the other could always "go ugly early and get a good night's sleep." Beauty was not her forte. She could look good, but never be beautiful and she had come to terms with that.

Still, one of the Americans had chosen to take the advice. They kept in touch for quite a few years after that. He was kind and funny. She laughed a lot with him and was all too willing to sleep with him. Sex with him had really caused Heidi to call into question that whole “Aryan Supremacy” thing. He was dark skinned, not black. More of a Hispanic or American Indian descent that had been intermingled with whites for many generations. In bed, he was a ride on the multi-orgasm express. Had the party ordered her to have as many babies as she could with him she would have done it with gusto!

Life gives and life takes away. One day the letters to Heidi simply stopped. She had written a time or two after that, but received no reply. Oddly enough, it was the guy who had called her a “closing time gal” who wrote her back some months later to say her lover had been killed in a fire fight. He was very sorry to be the one to tell her because his squad buddy seemed very happy with her. He gave her some contact information and told her the squad would always look out for her. If she was ever in trouble, they would come and get her because the squad takes care of its own. The last line had been the one which ripped her heart out. She had only been with her lover three weeks, but on the second night they all treated her like a lady. Now, when they had no further obligation to her, they made the largest commitment anyone in clandestine service can make. They claimed her as one of their own.

Heidi noticed the blood was about to overflow it's container. She quickly switched containers and checked the patient for life signs. No pulse. She turned on the pump and signaled the surgeons to start work. In a few minutes she would be draining the second patient.

All color drained from Lisa's face as the surgeons began removing the major bones like a lumber jack felling a tree. She dropped whatever she had in her hand and tried to run out of the building. The last Heidi saw of her was a pair of special security guys grabbing her, gagging her, and taking her out. Heidi knew that was the last she would ever see of Lisa. She wondered how Nikolaus was going to explain it to the party member Lisa had been sleeping with.

John had been quite busy over the past few months. Despite the determination of India's upper classes to keep wages down, he had gotten a raise and was now training new hires at his data center. The second building to house programmers had been completed, or at least completed enough that they were starting to bring on development staff. His boss had left most of the interviewing and new hire selection up to him.

He had sent multiple messages out to the cells he communicated with for them to send IT professionals to him. He could almost ensure the people would get in as long as their paperwork was in order and they wouldn't quibble about the low wages. It had been a hard sell. The leaders were unwilling to compromise such a crucial communications backbone. John had promised to train another, but said he needed the people now. They were extremely reluctant until he told them his plan. The following week he hired seven al-Qaeda members. Some of them had just returned from working under H1-B Visa status in the U.S. financial district. They were not allowed to know he also was a member. One week later John had a new temporary roommate he began training on how to process email.

Not long after this, John began hearing rumors that some of the workers were trying to unionize. He had heard of unions springing up in other areas of the country and that even a few locations around this one had become union shops. This scared John to no end. If upper management heard the rumors, security would be tightened dramatically and his plan could never be carried out. He sent several communications back to the cell leaders for them to relay to their members working for him. They had to crush the union at all costs if this plan was to succeed. There were now only three data centers left to migrate. Within eight months more than one third of the world's wealth would be controlled by the systems in his care. Two of the programmers working in the data center had already written software to generate electronic transfers as part of a migration fix for the client. These programmers had come from the financial district in New York, so they knew how to perform wire transfers. With some slight modifications they were certain it could be used to transfer all of the funds from all of the systems if they had access to all of the systems. They simply couldn't risk a union fight now.

Ramesh returned to headquarters with the smudgy printouts from Nedim's. He told the man in the suit that they needed to put a new printer at Nedim's if they wanted better results. The man pointed and said, "Take that one." After finishing his report to the team, Ramesh dutifully boxed up the printer along with some extra ink cartridges and a driver CD.

Once back at Nedim's, he installed the printer, taking his old one out to the trash down the street. He got the drivers installed and tested out the printing function. "Much better!" he told himself.

Shortly after the installation process, Nedim returned home with his other shadow. They both wondered what Ramesh was up to until they saw the new printer. "Where did you get that?" Umar queried.

"Don't ask," replied Ramesh. All considered that enough conversation on the topic.

Nedim sat down to process email for his shadows. He knew that eventually he would be killed, but at least he now had a better printer. They laughed when Nedim opened the response from his technical support service saying they believed he had a hardware problem. Things progressed in a rather boring manner until Nedim came across one email with special phrases he had not told the others about. He took a deep breath and said, "I guess it is good you brought that printer today." His shadows looked at him confused. "This is a courier pick up to happen two days from now."

Outrage gripped both men and raised voices came out with all kind of accusations and statements about Nedim's physical relationship with his mother. Finally, when they simmered down, he looked at them and said: "There hasn't been a courier pick up in over two years. I didn't tell you about it because I thought we were done with that. They stopped happening once everyone embraced the anonymity of email and hidden FTP sites. The instructions tell me to print out all of the information in the file you took yesterday. I am also supposed to add Google aerial maps of the location along with MapQuest driving maps. I am to put it all in a binder, then give it to the person who asks for it on the way to work."

"We will have to add a tail to him," both shadows said in unison.

“One thing is certain, you won't be able to follow me closely for a couple of days,” responded Nedim. “This may be a simple way for them to kill me. They could have learned about you by now and decided to use this as a ruse so a killer can get close.”

Neither shadow had considered that possibility. The team would need to call in some resources and spread them around the path Nedim took to work. They would also need to obtain a small courier shoulder bag. It would be the easiest thing to hide a transmitter in. They couldn't risk a voice bug, but a passive location tag that could be tracked by either satellite or hand scanners would allow them to follow the path the documents took, at least until they ditched the bag.

Nedim began printing out the documents from yesterday's file and visiting the map sites to obtain the correct images to print. He knew from experience he needed to print at least four copies of the maps so others could draw on them while making plans. They wouldn't have a copy machine in the mountains. He also started moving the images and files into a directory so he could burn a CD to go along with the documents. They might have a laptop with a solar charger up there in the mountains.

Ramesh raced back to headquarters. A report of this magnitude could not wait. They would need enough team members to cover the nearly two mile walk to where Ramesh worked. They would also need a cheap courier bag from one of the local vendors, then get the locator tag sewn into it. Probably put two or four tags in the bag near some corners so if one failed or was found they could still keep tracking the bag.

The team was somewhat shocked to hear there would be a courier pickup. All members at headquarters expressed outrage this had not been discovered earlier. Ramesh told them Nedim said a courier hadn't been used in over two years since everyone went on-line. He included Nedim's worry that they may have been found out and this was nothing more than an assassination attempt. There was quite a bit of silence in the room when that bomb was dropped.

A lot of pain and effort had went into working Nedim. While there were still some doubters on the team, he had been a treasure trove of information about al-Qaeda's on-going activities. The flow of email and the ping server had allowed them to put tracking teams on 27 different cells in just a few short weeks. With the notable exception of the Lutton cell, all of the highly active cells were about to be taken down. Some would be arrested and interrogated, others were to simply be killed. A 10 member cell had a senior bomb maker coming to its location to train newbies in how to make bombs. It seemed like a waste to arrest that cell when you only needed a small blast to set off a bigger blast. One small grenade launched through a window once they started blending the components would take care of everybody in the house without leveling the block.

Finally, someone in the room said the one question others were thinking: "How could they have found us?"

"They didn't find us," responded Hans. "They found what they believe is a weak link."

"Do we have a leak?" asked the man in the suit.

"No," responded Hans. "We have reporters."

Everybody turned to look at Hans once he dropped that bomb.

Somehow the BBC got a lead that Pakistani intelligence had turned an al-Qaeda operative and was now exploiting him. They had been working every connection they have trying to get further information.

"Don't look at me," said the Brit.

"Relax, it wasn't you," Hans continued. They got this lead in America, which leads me to believe someone in an American intelligence agency was feeling unloved. They pointed them at Pakistani intelligence and gave them a vague story because that is all they had. We are clean — for now — but we need to make sure all of the arrest paperwork is filed and doesn't have any of our names on it. They are just about a week away from forcing this story to break."

"I thought we only had to worry about CNN," the Brit asked.

“CNN hasn’t hired a journalist in 20 years,” the man in the suit retorted. “They take what we give them and only ask for enough to fill the space between commercials. We should have paid more attention to what the BBC was doing here.”

“Doesn’t matter now,” said Hans. “We can follow the courier and once the cell raids happen we will have more computers to search. Another communications center will turn up. We knew this well would be pumped dry at some point. It has been a long time since we found a courier though.”

“Agreed,” responded the man in the suit. “I will take care of the paperwork filing. You three take care of obtaining a document bag. You two take care of bringing in mechanics for a tail. Odds are this will be a multi-drop transfer. We probably won’t be able to get much, if anything from the first leg of the journey. Once the journey is complete, or we lose the trail, we can round up the various mules for interrogation.”

Hans knew exactly what that last statement meant. We were going to round them up so they could go to the camp. He had received word from the party that the second camp had been activated, but to make it fully operational they needed a few women. A courier-nabbing operation was bound to put at least one woman in the second camp. Most of the couriers wouldn’t spend more than a day or two at the first camp. Al-Qaeda couriers worked on the “next hop” principle. They only knew the person they got the information from and the person who got it next. Usually, they didn’t even know a name, just a location and a description of something the person would be wearing. You only found out where the information was going if you caught the last courier in the chain.

Islamic extremists were outright stupid in Hans’ mind. It didn’t matter how much college education they had or how many infidels they killed, they would always remain stupid. This stupidity stood out predominantly in their treatment and views of women. The extremists treated women as little more than cum receptacles. They were supposed to remain illiterate, quiet, and out of sight. They were a necessary evil for producing sons, and nothing more. Low be the woman whose first child was a girl.

These very same people had no problem whatsoever with letting pregnant women strap bombs to themselves and blow up buses. Besides becoming martyrs, women were habitually used as links in a courier chain. Because women were not allowed to go out alone, they tended to have their daughters or other women with them when they were carrying messages. This was probably one of the reasons women were to remain illiterate, so they couldn't read the messages they carried.

Hans tried to picture someone telling one of the German women he knew to be subservient. That was just asking to die a slow and painful death, assuming you weren't lucky enough to piss her off so much she killed you instantly.

No, al-Qaeda was little more than the scum that grew under the rim of a public toilet and it was long past time to scrub the toilet.

Margret sat around work after 6 p.m. She had received an email telling her the Data Storage & Recovery team wanted to meet at 7:30. Since it was a four-star place, Margret decided to tolerate the inconvenience. She had finished the last of the work she wanted to do around 5:30 and was now debating about going home and changing. Margret had eaten at that restaurant once before. Her normal business attire was probably not going to go unnoticed. True, she had on a suit, and a good suit, but it was a suit. This place traditionally wanted women in evening dresses. She did have several she hadn't yet worn. There was time to go home and change prior to the meeting. She knew her companion for the evening would be changing now. With that, she logged off and left for home.

Yes, Big Four Consulting was going to be buying two meals tonight, and the second meal was going to be a real bitch slap, literally. Margret had called Carol and told her to read up on FDIC regulations, then to meet her at the restaurant at 7 p.m. so they could talk at the bar for a while. Carol might have been the only female lawyer the bank currently had. Well, had before consuming all of the other banks. Margret didn't know any of the other lawyers at the other divisions around the world. Carol had been given the gist of what Margret had dropped on Big Four Consulting and Carol chuckled at hearing it. She had never eaten at the restaurant, but heard it was incredible. She said she might have a surprise for Margret when they met.

As Margret changed, she wondered what kind of surprise Carol was talking about. She and Carol hadn't really socialized. They chatted from time to time, but never stopped for drinks after work. Carol had been a key player when it came to contracts for the IT department and she was typically well versed in whatever federal regulation they might be about to bump into. "Bump," laughed Margret. *We don't "bump" into regulations, we simply choose to ignore them and avoid creating a document trail saying we broke the law.* In any event, Margret was dressing to the nines and willing to let whatever happened happen tonight.

Margret arrived at the restaurant roughly the same time Carol got there. She assumed this because Carol was still poking around the bar looking for her when she walked in. No doubt about it, Carol looked hot. It had been a long time since Margret had sampled anything looking that good. They saw each other and Carol came over to Margret.

"You look great!" Carol exclaimed.

"Figured it was time to bring out the big guns on this one," responded Margret.

"They are definitely some serious artillery," Carol spoke without thinking.

Margret laughed. "I'm glad you like them. Let's find a table around here so you can fill me in on what you have found."

They quickly found a table out of earshot of the other patrons and ordered a round of drinks. Once the waitress left Margret looked at Carol and said: "So, tell me what you found."

"Your interpretation on the FDIC requirements was pretty accurate when they are taken strictly. Many feel they are more of a guideline, but I have a few contacts who love putting the hurt on big consulting firms."

The waitress returned with their drinks and Margret opened a tab with her credit card. Once the waitress left Carol opened her leather folder and pulled out a fax from an inspector for the FDIC. It came complete with their letterhead. In a nutshell it stated while they had been somewhat understanding in the interpretation of this requirement when large scale disasters such as floods and multi-state power outages had struck, they (the

FDIC) had no intention of looking the other way when a recovery plan required 14 hours of flight time during good weather just to get the backup media.

“Well, well, well” said Margret. “Won't this be a major knife in the back if they try to play it down.”

“Yes it should,” responded Carol, “But it isn't the best part. According to regulations, everyone with access to the data center or an account that can complete transactions must be fingerprinted and have a notarized Securities and Exchange Commission pledge on file with their signature.”

“I wasn't aware of that requirement,” Margret said.

“Most people aren't. It was lightly enforced prior to 9/11, but now they are stepping up the drive to get all paperwork in order. Do you want to hear the best part?”

Margret simply smiled and looked Carol directly in the eye. Carol reached into her leather folder and pulled out another document with the heading “Proposed Rule Change 86113B.” It was definitely written in lawyer-ease, but the gist of it was they were going to make it a requirement for banks receiving FDIC insurance coverage to only use U.S. citizens in their data centers.

“When is this taking affect?” queried Margret.

“Still has to be commented and voted on by the regulatory board. It could be a full-fledged regulation within a year though. A lot of international banks are lobbying against it, but the FDIC is waving around some documents from the NSA and Congress is talking about expanding the Patriot Act if the FDIC doesn't enact this regulation. Within 12 months it will either be a regulation or a law. A regulation will just cost you a fine and your insurance, a law will send people to jail.”

“Well, no need for either Kent or Kathryn to know about this little tidbit,” Margret chimed. “His signature and those of the board are the ones on the contract.”

Carol got an evil grin on her face and said, “Now *that* is a power play!”

They clinked glasses, finished the drinks, and ordered another round.

“Well, you have handed me quite a surprise tonight Carol.”

“Oh, that wasn't the surprise I was talking about on the phone,” responded Carol.

“Oh?”

“Hubby is watching the kids tonight. I told him we were going to try to drink the consulting budget dry tonight and crash either at your place or a hotel, whichever was close enough to reach by crawling.”

Margret laughed, “That's a plan, not a surprise.”

Carol looked Margret intently in the eyes and said, “He doesn't know. He probably never will know. But, I think I read you right, and I think you are OK with the rest of the plan.”

The waitress showed up with their new drinks. Once she had left, Margret looked Carol in the eyes, raised her glass and said, “That definitely sounds like a plan.” They clinked their glasses, drank, and made idle chat while waiting for the consulting firm to arrive.

About half an hour later they were all seated at their table. Kathryn had walked in with a spring in her step and her hair out of place from driving her new Mercedes with the top down. Her spring died quickly when she saw Margret and her companion. Kathryn was still in her business suit which wasn't showing a lot of leg and the top wasn't see through. She knew right then not one of the guys she had brought would be able to tell what color the other ladies eyes were at the end of the evening.

Kathryn tried to be pleasant and upbeat. Once the meals were ordered, her companions went right into the story about how they had partnered with an off-shore version of Iron Mountain providing secure archiving services for documents and backup media. They even tossed out the second lowest fee for the service and wrote it into the contract before Kathryn could begin to cut them off. These guys were thinking with their penises. They didn't even try to put up a fight, which was how they were going to get the higher fee.

Margret informed the consulting firm that Kent would have to sign the contract since it would require renegotiating with Iron Mountain and transferring of all existing backup media pertaining to the migrated data centers. Carol chimed in that the closing of the deal and the transferring of media would have to occur quickly since the FDIC was in the process of cracking down on this very issue. When Kathryn inquired how Carol knew this, she pulled out the fax on the FDIC letterhead and let Kathryn read it. The second communication regarding the proposed regulation change was left in the folder.

The wind was really out of Kathryn's sails at this point. She meekly agreed that she would have to make an appointment with Kent next week, when he returns from his work abroad, to get the deal closed. Margret volunteered she would get everything ready for the shipment, but wait to actually give the go ahead on shipping until the contract was signed. She also told Margret she needed to be at her meeting with Kent to ensure he fully grasped the situation.

One of the men asked what the ladies plans were for the rest of the evening. Margret responded, "We planned on spending another hour or two at the bar before going home. It isn't often Carol gets to spend a night out like this away from her mom duties." Several of the guys offered to ply them with drinks after the meal ended and Kathryn resigned herself to another defeat at the hands of Margret. She still couldn't tell which way that woman's door swung, and the business suit didn't have any man in the place checking her out. They were all checking out Carol and Margret.

When the meal was over, Margret excused herself to the restroom before returning the bar. There she used her cell phone to reserve a jacuzzi suite at the hotel down the street. Promptly at 10:30, the ladies called a cab and went to the hotel, leaving the guys both drunk and horny. Once they were in their room, Carol took a quick tour of it and spotted the jacuzzi. "Now this was definitely a plan!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, it was," replied Margret filling the tub. "We have to do this more often. So tell me, how long have you known about me?"

“Oh, I suspected for quite a while. I assumed you didn't make any advances because you didn't want it to be known, and given the situation with my marriage I couldn't be open either. Tonight I had the opportunity, so I took the chance,” Carol said while undressing and hanging up her outfit.

“What if you had been wrong?”

“I'm not often wrong in when it comes to knowing if a woman enjoys another woman, but if I had been, I was certain you wouldn't say anything. My cover story was already in place, and it has been years since I enjoyed another woman. Had I been completely off-base, I would have had to try my luck in the bar, because I couldn't really go home early. I already promised hubby he could go drinking with the guys and watch the game tomorrow while I took care of the kids all day.”

With the tub filled, and them both disrobed, their evening began.

Someone Points

Time seemed to fly while Kent was gone, given all of the work he had dumped on Margret when he left. Naturally he didn't take anything off her plate when he got back. He had been back from his trip for a few weeks now. Margret and Kathryn had informed him about the issue with backup media and recovery time. For a small additional contract Kathryn's company had partnered with another Indian company that provided much the same service as Iron Mountain. They had agreed to keep the annual fee below that of Iron Mountain and Margret had arranged for all of the backup media from the migrated sites to be shipped to the new location once Kent signed the contract.

This was one of those things which absolutely baffled Kent. Then again, nearly everything to do with technology baffled Kent, hence, he was made Director of IT. He had no concept of backing up or recovery. He did have a concept of the FDIC regulation Margret presented to him and knew violation of any requirement would cost him his career if anyone found out and the bank lost its insurance. Kent quickly signed the contract and Margret got the shipments going.

Now alone with Kathryn, Kent brought up his new project. He had already received the spreadsheets with the estimated effort for data conversion, and Margret had already worked up estimated hours for adding the additional banking rules to the central system. Even using both consultants and employees it was going to take a long time just to get the French banking rules in place, let alone the other countries. Kent didn't have a budget for consultants and didn't want word of this to get out. He needed a method of getting this done right around the time his two year stint was over in IT, and he needed to get rid of most of the programmers once it was completed.

Kathryn smiled to herself. "I may have a solution for you Kent. There is a new comprehensive banking software product coming out from Pytho Corporation. They currently have U.S. and Canada banking rules audited and certified. They are also working on every other country you do business in. I can get you some product literature in a couple of days. Nobody knows about this product yet as they aren't finished with the globalization effort, but it should be completed in another four to six months."

Kent sat there dumbfounded. Finally he asked, "What does it cost? Will it run on our existing machines? How many of the existing machines can be eliminated?" At this point he realized he was talking like a little boy trying to get a girl to show hers to him for the first time and he shut up.

Kathryn responded that they hadn't settled on pricing yet, though Kent would be able to eliminate all but two of the existing machines at the off-site locations once the data center migration had completed. She informed him that he would need to train and keep only two developers to handle any additional reporting needs of the bank as the vendor had a support staff for the product. If any deal was put together, the bank would need to make some kind of public statement they were moving to the software. This could be as simple as Kent giving an interview in one of the weekly trade magazines and answering a few questions during a phone call from a Langston Group analyst.

"A rough estimate would be four months for them to complete certification and one month for each system migration. You could install and begin conversion using the U.S. and Canadian systems this month if you wanted. As new countries are added you would receive software upgrades and each country's migration could occur piecemeal. At the end of another six months or so, you could have every location running this software, lose at least 12 machines at the off-site locations, and skip having to migrate the last three data centers. Once completed, you could eliminate all of your IT staff except the two developers you should keep and one or two operator people to walk reports around if management refuses to pick up their own. It should dramatically slash your costs."

"So, you are saying I will go from a staff of over 60 to a staff of four inside of a year?" asked Kent.

“Inside of six months if all proceeds according to plan,” replied Kathryn. “According to the numbers we had for the data center off-shoring project, you were spending \$16 million per year on IT expenses and personnel salaries. Once this is complete I will wager that your annual IT expense falls below \$4 million. Do they give promotions for saving \$12 million per year?”

Kent simply smiled. Once again he had bought the white elephant.

Margret soon returned to the room and the rest of the meeting was spent going over the progress of the data center migration and its numbers. So far, every machine they abandoned had been sold, though not for as much as they had hoped at the start of the project. Still, one data center had been sold for much more than they planned, three more had offers at or near list, and they had to pay a pair of lease termination fees or find a company to sublet two others. The New York data center was now in the middle of a three-way bidding war and was going to close later this week for four times the original asking price if the machines were left in place. The rest had not been put on the market yet. All in all, things were progressing smoothly. Even Margret was somewhat surprised.

Kent chose that moment to inform Margret of the new system from Pytho and the plan to move all of the locations onto it. Margret was a bit defensive at first and pointed out she had filed such a consolidation plan with Kent's predecessor. She could tell by the look in Kent's eye that the white elephant had just been sold. She even assumed that Kathryn had told Kent he would be able to get rid of Margret once the new system migration was completed.

Kathryn tried to placate the situation by stating Pytho had hundreds of developers working on this and several leading auditing firms providing the certification. The timeframe for them to deliver all of the countries was measured in months, not years like it would be using internal staff and consultants. Margret was very aware “timeframe” was the operative phrase for Kent. His two-year tour would be up around the time this project completed and he was looking for a major promotion.

The meeting ended with Kathryn agreeing to put together the sale numbers and a timeline for roll-out. There wouldn't be a data center migration this month anyway due to the end of quarter happening. It would be a good time to have a presentation to the board since they would have just jumped through all of the hoops to validate numbers from various banking systems.

Lenny had been called many things throughout his life. He was never the most popular kid in school, nor the best looking. He wasn't a jock or a chess player. Lenny knew only two things: How to run a business and how to shred a business. He had been called a corporate raider, a shareholder's advocate, and everything in between.

He had worked as an accountant for a large auditing firm before they got into legal trouble and lost their license. He got out in time to save his own license and avoid paying any fines.

Lenny hadn't been paid a lot working as an auditor or a senior auditor, but he did know how to read balance sheets and smell ripe fruit. He played a lot of penny stocks while working as an auditor because those were not on the verboten list of things to do. A few thousand dollars bought you millions of shares in those companies. Lenny was good at finding those with a chance of turning around. He managed to turn \$10,000 into \$10 million more than once.

After leaving the audit firm Lenny could invest in stocks trading on the big exchanges. He used all of his audit contacts to get inside information and quarterly reports days before they went public. He formed an investment group so things were done through company accounts and paid himself a healthy salary. What really shocked him was when a couple of other wealthy individuals offered to invest in his company. Overnight he went from managing \$50 million in assets to managing more than \$500 million.

This wasn't a large operation and it didn't advertise. He had a very nice office in a very nice office building away from the hustle of the city. There were five programmers, three analysts and a receptionist. Legal services were provided by a law firm kept on retainer. Lenny's data center wasn't a bunch of worthless PC's, he ran everything on a fault-tolerant OpenVMS cluster. He even had a hot site on another power grid out in another suburb. As tiny as Lenny's operation was, he spent well over \$1 million per year on IT and data services because that is what made the money.

On this particular day Lenny had received a data file from one of his informants. It was the quarterly report for First Global Bank in XML format. The report wouldn't come out for several days, but Lenny wanted to see what was going on. He loaded the data into one of the formatting programs and let it crunch the numbers. Something stunk with this report. First Global was going to beat analyst estimates by nearly a dollar per share, unless the analysts quickly upped their estimates. The analysts generally didn't miss sales or business increases, so this must have occurred from someone refusing to eat for three months.

At any rate, this stock was going to hop big time, so Lenny keyed in the trading parameters of maximum price, total number of shares to be purchased, and chose an account list to spread the purchases across. Lenny always tried to purchase more than 5% of a company, but until he was ready to go public, he spread the purchase across many trading accounts so the SEC couldn't figure it out. Lenny had trading accounts spread across a hundred paper companies. Every one of his employees had set up a P.O. Box address for at least a dozen of these companies. Banking stocks had been trashed lately, and the entire stock market was looking for some good news from the financial sector. This was going to be good for a \$3 to \$7 bump in share price and Lenny wanted to take advantage of it. He keyed in the target sell price for each of the accounts doing the purchases and then chose the submit option.

Most people thought Lenny's programmers spent their entire day thinking of new ways to analyze financial data. In truth they spent about three days per year doing that. The rest of the time they spent creating inventive ways to distribute purchases so Lenny wouldn't have to go public until after he owned 40% of a company instead of the 5% the SEC made you report.

With the purchases submitted and waiting to happen, Lenny called in his

three analysts and told them to start digging on this and find out where First Global slashed a dollar per share from its operations over a year ago. It shouldn't be a big task for them because there was a program on the system to kick those things out. He wanted them to find out the details, not just the place where the numbers differed. Lenny doubted the bank managed to trim a penny per share in a hundred locations, so there should be a dead fish laying on the bank for them to find.

By this afternoon Lenny should have the company's credit maxed out purchasing 100 million shares of First Global Bank. Once the target was achieved he was going to have several trading floor workers put out the story that First Global Bank was going to beat analyst estimates and beat them big. The rumor sniffers would hear the rumor and see the trading volume. They would assume it all to be insider trading and jump on the band wagon. Stock would be up \$2.00 per share an hour later. If Lenny didn't have the rotting fish in his hands by then, he might have to get out rather than run a bigger play.

You see, Lenny knows how to run a company and Lenny knows how to shred a company. You can make a profit running a company, but you always make a killing shredding a company. This company was looking like a perfect setup. Yes, he would make around \$7.00 per share during the run up with his little bit of insider knowledge, but that was nothing compared to the \$60 or so per share he could make by selling short after the run up then shredding the company. All it took to start the shred was a few well placed rumors based on facts. Before Lenny could make more than the initial bump, he had to hold the rotting fish in his hand.

Vladimir had a lot of time to read and surf the Web with his current job. He only needed to work when the hits came into the "ping server" and not all of those had to be responded to quickly. Any IP address he had previously identified and stored in the database would simply generate an automatic email out to the team stating the time the hit came in and what hit number this was.

When Vladimir played the killing game, information was his friend. He analyzed everything when it came to an operation. More often than not he got it all right, too. The problem with being in the field and being right is that those making the decisions tend to filter your reports via a paper shredder because those reports exposed them as idiots too many times. This was how Vladimir ended up in this wheelchair. Those who should have listened didn't, and his team was sent into a meat grinder. When the grinder was done, two of his team were dead and he had a bullet lodged in his spine. The debacle made the news and some government officials had to investigate. When they got a copy of Vladimir's report there were some people no longer working in the agency and a comfortable retirement for Vladimir. Nobody spoke about what happened to those no longer working for the agency.

Of course most major media were completely controlled by the interests of the MBAs running the media corporation. They would never run a news story lambasting a corporation they held stock in. They would also never allow a story to be run that said their money maker was either bad or about to hit a brick wall.

Vladimir knew where to look on-line to get the real news. He had written his own spider programs to crawl the blog sites looking for keywords and pulling down the content for him to read. Blog sites that happened to get something really right had a tendency to disappear in a matter of hours. One MBA called another MBA and the account got deleted. In this way the Internet was not an avenue of free expression, but was quickly becoming a heavily moderated form of Corporate Correct Speak. Politically correct didn't matter, as long as you never dissed or pointed out the crimes of a company one of the other MBAs held stock in.

Since Vladimir learned what part of this project was really about, he had been using his talents to identify the next terrorist hot bed. Nobody cared about the desert training camps and everybody knew about the current hot spots. He was looking for the next event horizon. The one that would be the basis of a 9/11 or larger-sized attack. For the last three days Vladimir had been reading stories which were scaring him. The Indian IT workers were trying to unionize.

There were quite a few articles in the Indian news and on various blog sites stating Union Network International was trying to organize the call center and back-office workers in India. They had already made some progress in Bangalore, but were having an uphill struggle.

UNI had failed to organize the programmers back in 2000, but they just might succeed with the call center and back-office workers. Currently, these people made around U.S. \$2,400 per year. Well below the poverty level in any industrialized country, but way more than the \$500 per year many other workers made in the country.

What was going to help UNI was the stress level. Three in 10 changed jobs at least once per year and one in seven left the field entirely during that same time frame. Burn out and poor treatment were commonplace. Most of the major off-shore companies already had operations or were starting them in places like Korea where the work could be done for even less. Indian workers were getting \$10 per day and the companies were billing them out at \$10 to \$20 per hour. That kind of margin allowed you to exploit any poor person in any country you wanted.

Vladimir did what he always did. He wrote a report and emailed it to the man in the suit. He was pretty certain the report would just be ignored as the report was ignored for the operation that cost him his ability to walk. If the IT workers unionized and the off-shore companies moved the jobs, this would be the largest pool of disenfranchised educated people in the world. Many of them were Muslims already; Al-Qaeda would have a field day bringing in recruits. After a moment's thought, he also sent a copy of his report to his friend in the Russian mafia.

He did some quick number crunching to gauge the impact of this event. According to some reports, most of the IT workers held on to over half of their money. There wasn't much in the way of quality home builders in the areas where the data centers were, so they couldn't go into debt on McMansions. They also didn't have much in the way of roads, let alone interstates to drive on, so most didn't buy cars; or they bought those \$3,000 cracker boxes made by Indian and Chinese car makers for sale in that market. Some employment reports stated there were as many as 300,000 IT workers in India working for off-shore companies. That was a lot of untraceable cash. If they banded together, they would be able to purchase a nuke or a biological

weapon. Vladimir doubted if such a sale could be stopped again.

Once, a few years ago, one of the Russian crime families dealing in arms tried to sell some uranium to representatives from al-Qaeda. "Tried" was the operative word. Vladimir's friends found out about it and took care of the problem. You could sell all of the grenades and automatic weapons you wanted to them back then, but if you tried to sell something uncontrollable, you were dealt with. A few phone calls were made to some other crime families and two days prior to the delivery, that crime family ceased to exist. When the police tried arresting some of the mechanics, the information was given to Russian intelligence along with the location of what the family had been trying to sell. Everyone was released. It was OK to be a bad man in Russia, it was not OK to be *that* kind of bad man.

What bothered Vladimir the most was not being able to see how the attack would occur. Educated people with money tended to not strap bombs to their chest and blow up buses. He didn't think it would be enough for this group to simply design and fund an attack. Then again, given the class system, the upper class may choose to design and fund those attacks and order the lower classes to their deaths. The problem with that idea is that the lower classes were the ones working in IT, while the upper classes made a profit off them.

The day came when Nedim was to make the drop to the courier. His shadows had followed him from quite a distance. The rest were in place up and down the street. All of the documents and a CD were in the courier pouch they had given him. Thankfully, they thought to buy something made locally which was used and cheap looking. It was exactly the kind of bag locals carried things in. A new leather bag from one of the big name manufacturers would have been a major tip off something was up.

Half way to his office a woman he worked with walked up beside him and asked him if he had a bag for her. Nedim was shocked that this woman would be speaking with him. She was obviously not a good Muslim: Speaking to a man who was not her relation and she was not asking him permission to do something. Still, Nedim played along. "God is great. He may have provided a bag for you."

“God’s word lights the way and is only for me to carry,” the woman responded. With that, Nedim took the bag off his shoulder, and without stopping handed it to her. She put the bag over her shoulder and disappeared into the crowd without breaking stride.

Thankfully, many IT workers had cell phones now. As bad as cell phone service was in Pakistan, it was still more reliable than land lines. The devices receiving the tracking information looked and functioned just like cell phones. When the woman was sufficiently gone, Umar came up alongside Nedim and asked, “Did you know her?”

“She works at my company.”

“Do you have a name?”

“No, but I can get it. Her cube is four rows down from mine and we all have name tags.”

“Good. See that you get it and email it to this address first thing this morning.” He handed Nedim a slip of paper with an email address on it. “Probably an alias, but we should be able to find out where she is living from your employer.”

Nedim stopped and looked at Umar. “How?”

“We have access to all employment records filed with the government. Don’t worry, your employer won’t even know we were looking.”

With that, Nedim continued on to work in silence. Something bad was about to happen, he could just feel it. These people had never tried to comfort him in the past.

Some time later he arrived at work. On the way to his desk he took a different route which took him past the woman’s cube. He quickly wrote her name down on the back of the slip of paper he had been given. Once at his desk he logged in and sent the requested email. *This is simply not going to be a good day*, he thought.

Hans came into the man in the suit's office and turned on the BBC. He did not ask permission nor speak to the man in the suit. When the man in the suit saw him heading for the satellite television set, he opted not to protest. There was a news report stating that Pakistani intelligence had arrested an IT worker who was a suspected link in the al-Qaeda communications network. They didn't have a name yet, but they had enough generic information to finger Nedim to anyone who knew him. The report did not yet say they had turned him and were using him to infiltrate al-Qaeda operations, but that information couldn't be more than a few hours away. Hans simply looked at the man in the suit and walked out. Both of them knew what they had to do now.

The man in the suit made a phone call to his contact in Pakistan's intelligence. He arranged for a strongly worded protest to be released to the press. He needed to buy time for the couriers to be nabbed. He made certain the press release stated the the person arrested had remained in custody pending a full investigation.

Hans had his own communication to make. He had to tell the team in the field to nab each courier as soon as they made the drop. They were to immediately be flown to the interrogation camp as this operation had just been burned. They were now in a race to find the destination before others found out about the operation. The *others* he was worried about were the al-Qaeda leaders who were about to receive this pouch. If they got wind and ran to ground, this operation's biggest nab would vanish. Nobody knew who was supposed to receive the pouch, not even Nedim. It had to be an old timer who didn't like technology and they had to be somewhere in the mountains, but finding them would be impossible unless they could follow the bag.

There was one final duty for Hans before he could return for more instructions and a debriefing. From his bag he took a disposable cell phone and a slip of paper. He went upstairs to an empty room and made an international phone call.

Nikolaus had not been expecting that particular cell phone to ring when it went off. There was only one person who had the number, and this wouldn't be good.

“Hello.”

“It's me. Our asset is being outed by the BBC. Perhaps you've seen the news? He is in the process of making a courier drop and given the situation we are nabbing each courier once they make the drop. I know the first one is a woman. Until the field reports in we won't know how many we are sending your way, but they are all coming your way. This operation is burned. We have to tie it off and get out until we manage to locate another asset.”

“Understood. We have less than 24 hours to get everything in order. You will call again to let us know when the plane is leaving?”

“Yes.”

Nikolaus hung up and used his own disposable cell phone to make a call. He relayed to the man on the other end the story Hans had just told him. Unless something happened during the nabbing, there would be at least one woman with this bunch.

Couriers never knew much, sometimes they didn't even know they were working for al-Qaeda. It sounds weird when you say it out loud, but it is true. A lot of the couriers are simply that by trade. They carry drugs, contraband and information from one place to another each day. It's dangerous, but it's a living.

It was agreed that most of the couriers would undergo interrogation for a week or less. So far the interrogators had all been professional and they could tell when they were pumping a dry well. Nikolaus told him to notify the team.

Jeremy had never been a smart individual. If it hadn't been for friends helping him and doing his homework, he would have never gotten through college. He had a long list of friends from college who were now successful and his only real asset was his contact list. Combined with his expense account it turned up very valuable information. His boss, Lenny, was a cheap bastard when it came to things like pay checks and bonuses, but he never batted an eye when you turned in a \$300 receipt for drinks and dinner if you listed a stock symbol on the back you were researching. He knew information was more valuable than money and that you had to spend money to get information.

It had been quite a morning at “Group Lenny.” That wasn’t the official company name, of course, but it was how he and his friends referred to it. In truth, Jeremy had to look at his business card to remember the company name. Lenny had the reputation, not his company. The reputation Lenny had earned was that he only accepted investments from people with tens of millions to toss around and he generally averaged returns in the 100%-400% percent range. As a result, Lenny didn’t advertise and didn’t let anyone in the media know anything about his company. They weren’t even listed on the company roster for the office building. People with tens of millions to invest were smart enough to keep their mouth shut. The last thing Lenny needed was a bunch of reporters or SEC investigators running around trying to figure out how he achieved those returns.

There was no real magic. Quite simply, Lenny, and everyone working for him, broke the law. They used every contact they had to obtain information two to three days early. Nobody at this group would use information obtained only one day in advance. Trading one day before big news about some company tended to be investigated by the SEC. If you had a three day window, you could spread out your trades and leak the news via channels once you had your position in the market. This type of thing was done all of the time. Nobody ever seemed to question how financial reporters broadcast a company’s news days before it was officially filed with the SEC. As long as you had a few reporters you could feed third-hand you could get away with it.

On this particular day Lenny had assigned his staff the task of finding out how First Global Bank was beating analyst estimates by so much. Jeremy assumed the news was already being leaked since the automated trading should have acquired their position by now. The number crunching algorithms on the computer system flagged an unusual drop in IT expenses and some increased income from asset sales. There had been no news of First Global Bank selling any major assets, so this set Jeremy to searching the various on-line databases and making some phone calls.

Six phone calls into it he found someone who knew First Global Bank had sold their New York data center for a boat load of cash. Jeremy made some other small talk with the contact, then agreed to meet them for supper at a four-star restaurant they both liked.

A data center sale was not outside the realm of sanity, but it didn't account for the staggering difference in earnings. First Global Bank had eaten a good number of bank chains in the past couple of years, so it made sense to consolidate data centers. Loss of the New York center struck Jeremy as odd since First Global had a brokerage division, which would mandate keeping your trading engine as close to the New York trading floor systems as possible. Milliseconds meant millions when filling market orders.

The Web searches now centered on commercial real-estate sites and related news sites. It turned out that First Global Bank had a lot of their data centers up for sale or had given up the leases on them. Could they possibly have completed merging all of the other bank chains onto their original system? Didn't seem likely. There were a lot of countries involved and First Global had been in only North America and Canada prior to the acquisition spree.

When the hour approached 4 p.m., Jeremy struck pay dirt. One of the skirts he used to do in college was now working at Big Four Consulting. After offering to meet her for supper the following evening at a four-star restaurant she really wanted to try and the possibility of a roll in the hay, she volunteered that Big Four Consulting had won a contract to off-shore all of First Global Bank's data centers. By the end of the project, the 10 original sets of data centers would be down to one set located in the cheap labor market of India. Admittedly, First Global Bank had already consolidated down to four sets of data centers before Big Four Consulting got involved, but the project was quite large anyway. Jeremy thanked her and asked what time he should make the reservation tomorrow.

Exactly at 4 p.m., Lenny called the analysts into their meeting. Lenny went around the room asking each analyst what they had learned. The other two simply regurgitated what the computer analysis had told them. Jeremy informed him he had to fly out tomorrow to repay the contact who had given him the information Lenny needed. First Global Bank was moving all of their data centers off-shore. In about another year, they would have no computer systems in any country other than India. The nine sets of data centers they had were being sold or having their leases terminated. All of the hardware inside of them were being sold as well. They had outsourced all of their data center work to a partner of Big Four Consulting in India.

The other two analysts had graduated with 4.0 GPAs from good business schools. Jeremy had barely graduated from a state college. Yet here he was, once again bringing home the bacon.

“You can verify this?” Lenny asked.

“The New York data center just sold for a killer profit,” Jeremy responded as he handed Lenny the print out from the commercial real-estate Web site. “Two more are up for sale,” as he handed two more screen prints. “It appears some were leased and now have leases listed as available.”

“At first I thought they had simply completed a consolidation project getting all of the other banking chains onto their original system, but it didn't fit given all of the countries involved. Then when I found the person who knew the details, it all made sense. They never attempted a consolidation project, they simply got rid of all the machines and outsourced to the land of cheap labor and low rent. I doubt anyone's banking records could ever be subpoenaed now given that the data centers are in another country.”

Lenny sat back and thought for a moment. “This is very interesting indeed. Does anybody else have this information yet?”

“I don't think their shareholders even have it,” responded Jeremy. “Normally you don't send out letters to shareholders when you are simply moving computer systems around.”

Lenny pondered awhile longer. “The board had to know. A project of this size would have had to get their approval and funding. I imagine their next step will be to use all Indian IT labor to do the consolidation project. Only one problem with this situation. Not one person depositing money in these banks knows the banks no longer control the access to the data systems.”

The three analysts looked at each other, then at Lenny. Finally Jeremy asked, “Does any depositor know if their bank controls access to the system it uses?”

“It is both assumed and required,” responded Lenny. “Your research said they were selling off all of their computers, but said nothing about buying new computers. This means the off-shore data center is providing a turnkey service. The banks don't own the computers they are now using, which means people who have not been vetted by the FBI, SEC, FDIC or whatever government agencies in this country perform the background checks. Each country has its own rules, but there are some common rules across most of the countries we do banking with. No convicted felons and nobody on a terrorist watch list can ever be employed at a bank or financial institution. When the data center isn't in this country and the bank doesn't own it, who is to say what type of people are hired and now have accounts with complete access to the system?”

At that moment, the reality of what Lenny was saying sank into all three analysts. After the money was made over the next couple of weeks with the share price run up, Lenny was going to start a very slow process of shorting the stock. Once he had achieved the kind of short position he wanted, this very story was going to leak. It would be timed to leak right about the time the off-shoring project was past the point of no return.

Jeremy was told to book a convenient flight out tomorrow. No need to come into the office if he didn't want to. He needed to find out which divisions of the bank already had 100% of their data center operations migrated off-shore. “Focus on the U.S. branches for now,” Lenny told him. “You also need to book a date with her for the day/evening after they complete migrating the last data center. I'm sure you can find a jacuzzi hotel suite in a nice restaurant to thank her properly.”

“Do you really think we can do a shred with just this?” Jeremy asked.

“How little you watch the news Jeremy. In 2002 a former UBS Systems Admin planted malicious code that took down about 2,000 servers in their network. His arrest and trial have been appearing in the news over the past couple of weeks, but most articles are focusing on weeding out bad employees. Imagine a story surfacing about a global bank who didn't bother to screen that type of employee at all? Once the federal agencies get wind of it there will be congressional hearings. We will not only shred the bank, but we will shred Big Four Consulting as well. Whether they know it or not, they've been a willing accomplice in a crime.”

A Little Nudge

Stacie was looking forward to tonight. She hadn't hooked up with Jeremy in a couple of years. Oh, she knew nothing would come of it, but she remembered he was pretty good in bed. Since he had a hotel room, she wouldn't have to deal with her two roommates tonight either. She loved her roommates. They had great fun hanging out together. Having roommates meant they could have a really awesome apartment and spend a ton of money on clothes. When you are 20-something, dressing to the nines and partying all weekend is a priority in life.

Big Four Consulting didn't pay her much. Then again, she had a degree in mass communications, not IT. That, coupled with her looks and minor in English got her the job with Big Four. They always wanted the young people working for them to dress for success. Thankfully, two of their clients were major retailers which extended a "partner" discount to the employees of Big Four Consulting. Every Saturday Stacie got up at the crack of noon and took shopping whichever roommate was home. All three of the girls had run out of closet space and were buying wardrobes to store additional clothes in.

Still, the roommate thing had a major drawback. When you decided to score, you had to inconvenience others. Stacie wasn't dating. Older people described it as "playing the field." She found it when she needed it, and sometimes she would find it in the same place more than once, but her career came first. Big Four promised her she would travel and told her to get a passport. She had already flown to several states in the U.S. and recently returned from Bangalore, India.

Unlike most of the girls Stacie worked with, she wasn't a complete fool. She knew full well which guys had left the compound to visit the Red Light District just a few streets over. There was no way she was going to hook up with any of them. Jeremy had always been a safe hook up. He didn't want anything long term and had only asked her to attend one wedding with him. They had both known the groom getting married so it wasn't a big deal, just lots of drinking, dancing, and fun. Stacie let Jeremy know when she accepted that he now owed her a wedding and he was cool with that. When you are 20-something, you really hate going stag to a wedding. When you're in your 40s you can play the divorcee field at a wedding, but 20-somethings always seemed to be paired off.

All of the girls had heard about the four-star restaurant that had opened up a couple months ago. It was the new "hot" place to be seen. Stacie was going to be the first of her roomies to eat there. They would have to wait until she got home tomorrow to find out what it was like.

The nice part about having a friend with benefits is you don't have to come home in the same clothes you left in. Nothing tells the world you were picked up like leaving a hotel in the morning wearing an evening dress. A "date" would require she meet them at the restaurant or have him pick her up here. She wouldn't be able to pack an overnight bag and bring it along. You meet a friend at their hotel room and leave your bag there. *So* much more convenient.

Stacie left her apartment promptly at 6 p.m. She had the doorman turn on the cab light and was quickly picked up. Fifteen minutes later she arrived at Jeremy's hotel. He had called earlier in the afternoon to let her know he had checked in and gave her his room number. She told him he had better be wearing a damned nice suit when she arrived because there was a strict dress code at the restaurant.

As far as anyone at work knew, Stacie was simply hooking up with a flame from college this weekend. She didn't tell them where Jeremy worked, mainly because she could never remember the name of the company. She simply told them he worked for some small accounting firm. Saying he worked at an investment firm would have gotten her a meeting with HR and a chat about disclosing insider information. She knew damned good and well Jeremy was coming here to thank her for that. He was going to owe her a

weekend at Salish Lodge when she fed him the other little bit of information she had.

Today had been a hectic day. Stacie had to participate in the presentation to First Global Bank's board of directors selling Pytho's new banking software to them. It started off as a tough sell. Pytho hadn't thought to bring anything in the way of eye candy to the meeting, so the Big Four Consulting girls were laying it all out to the board. Stacie hadn't participated in the sales pitch that sold the off-shoring contract, but some of the girls in the room had. Only the women they had shown the most interest in were asked to display themselves again. Stacie was asked since she had been to India and had established the best relationship with the on-shore team. The rest appeared to be models who didn't have a runway gig this week. They knew nothing about the software being pitched or the client. They did know how to dress though.

In contrast, Kathryn had made Stacie take home the entire CD kit from Pytho. She had to work with a team of girls creating a PowerPoint presentation, then show it to Kathryn. Once Stacie had finished giving her five-minute summary of how the data center consolidation was going, Kathryn had her segue into the presentation and even remain walking around answering questions during it. When the questions came up about how far along the globalization project had gotten, the Pytho reps had to take over. Kathryn made sure she dropped the names of the audit firms handling certification of each country's banking laws. The board was quite shocked to learn their own auditing firm was certifying the system met French banking regulations.

When the meeting concluded there wasn't a dirty old man in the room who hadn't seen every breast and leg on display at least twice. All of the girls had worn tight skirts, but not so tight they looked like they were trying to stop a gun shot wound from bleeding. All of them had some part in the presentation where they were supposed to walk around keeping the board's attention. Stacie thought it was a lot like stripping, but you didn't have to break a sweat or get dressed when you were done.

The board ended the meeting taking copies of the plan and cost spreadsheet. They said they were going to have a meeting with their auditors to see how close the French regulations really were to being implemented. The Pytho sales reps were all smiles and handshakes until the board left, then

they showed outright rejection on their faces.

“They didn't buy it,” one of them said.

“They never buy on the first pitch,” responded Kathryn. “Unless you've taken steps to ensure their auditors give them a glowing report about the progress made on French banking regulations, this sale is dead.”

“Our 'World View of the Bank' pitch really hit home though,” Stacie remarked.

“Yes it did,” Kathryn said. “It was the only reason we were allowed to make this presentation. They just had everyone jumping through hoops to prepare quarterly financial reports and the cost of doing that is fresh in their minds. We even scored big with the cost savings from staff reductions, but *any* package is going to do both of those things for them. This sale hinges on the French regulations.”

“How so,” Stacie asked.

“Our biggest IT headcount and operating cost is in France,” responded Kent. “Even if you never got the other countries operational, the entire project could be paid for by eliminating those people along with our U.S. and Canadian IT staff.” Kent had stayed in the post pitch debriefing because this project was his baby. He was the corporate sponsor and project champion. It was his job to sell it to the board because his name was on it.

Stacie knew that if this deal went through, she was going to be spending some grueling overtime training at Pytho software. She was also going to have to spend some time brushing up on her French. She had only taken one semester in college and couldn't speak or read it very well now.

That was four hours ago. The thoughts of her awaiting treadmill left her mind as she stepped into the elevator with her overnight bag and went to Jeremy's room. Tonight was an elegant meal with fine wine and some long overdue physical pleasure.

When Jeremy opened the door she was floored. *That man can wear a suit!* she thought. She made him spin around to check him out and even commented that he bothered to shine his shoes. Stacie wasn't an expert in mens clothing, but that suit would retail for around \$1,200 in this neck of the woods. Jeremy made some very appreciative comments about the way she

looked, kissed her passionately, then took her bag to the bedroom.

“Must not have been a killer kiss,” Jeremy said with a smile when he returned.

“You did good!”

“Not good enough for you to follow me to the bedroom,” he grinned.

“If I did that I wouldn't get dinner!” she exclaimed. “Let's catch a cab before we don't make it out of here!”

With that they proceeded to the restaurant and ordered dinner. It was everything Stacie had heard it was. The food was fabulous and the menu didn't have any prices. Stacie had no idea what the champagne and wine cost, but it had to be a down payment on a car. Finally, the opener came:

“So, how are things going at work?”

Stacie flashed a mischievous smile. “Well, I'm going to be putting in some grueling hours soon becoming a trainer on a new software product Pytho has coming out.”

“What product is that?” Jeremy asked.

“Before I answer that question, you have to promise me a weekend at Salish Lodge any weekend I ask,” responded Stacie.

Jeremy had heard about the place and knew it had an amazing reputation. He also knew if Stacie was putting it on the table, there was something big coming out of her mouth next. He was pretty certain Lenny would allow him to expense the weekend, and even if Lenny didn't, he was certain to have a fantastic time with Stacie. He looked her in the eyes and said “Done.”

Stacie positively beamed! She had wanted a weekend there ever since one of her girlfriends had told her about it. Her roomies would be *so* jealous when she told them.

Conversation had to pause while the server came by to inquire how things were going. Stacie wondered how the server's feet felt walking around in heels all night, then she thought that skirt and stockings demanded heels. Anything less would ruin the atmosphere of the place. It struck her as kind of odd how women who weren't bisexual could easily appreciate the phenomenal body of another woman. She guessed you simply didn't get jealous when you

looked hot yourself. Briefly she thought it would be a pity when she had kids one day and it all went to hell, then she snapped her attention back to the table.

Jeremy had that stupid grin on his face again. It was the kind of grin he got when he had some smart ass comment to make which would be the perfect zinger for the moment and would ensure he didn't get sex that night. What Stacie appreciated about Jeremy is that he had the good sense to save them until after they had sex so they could both laugh about them when they were more relaxed.

She smiled back at him, then took his hand and said, "I need a necklace and matching earrings to wear when we go to Salish. Diamonds would be nice, but as long as they are real stones and set off my eyes, I'm fine with it."

"I didn't even make the comment," Jeremy sputtered.

"But you were thinking it," she chimed back evilly. "Besides, after I tell you what I have for you, I think you'll agree you should be able to afford them."

That widened Jeremy's eyes and made him sit up.

"It was a long day parading my body around the board room," she said, toying with his hand. "Once the auditors for First Global Bank give a glowing report on how Pytho software's new banking product meets all of the U.S., Canadian, and French banking regulations, they are probably going to buy it. Every location they have will be migrated onto the new software. Every country will move as Pytho completes certification for said country. In much less than a year, they will be rid of all their IT staff, save a token few, and have all of their business run by software in an off-shore data center."

"I had to wear a sheer blouse and my finest stockings. The skirt and heels really showed off my form. If it wasn't for their own auditors being involved, we would have closed the sale today. The board really admired my legs. Just imagine how many of those rich old men want to be where you will be tonight."

"True," Jeremy responded. "Not to break the mood, but you wouldn't happen to have some marketing literature on this product would you?"

“Greedy bastard!” she teased. “Here I am talking about sex, letting you know I’m ready to go and you are still talking about making money.”

“Well,” Jeremy sputtered.

Stacie laughed, “Remind me to take it out of my overnight bag when we get back to the hotel.”

When they stood up to leave, Stacie nuzzled his ear as he put his arm around her. “So, am I getting diamonds?”

Laughing, Jeremy said, “Yes, the best I can find at my local Helzberg.”

Now it was Stacie's turn to have her eyes go wide and head snap up.

Margret was somewhat surprised to come out of the demonstration and find there was a meeting request from Carol waiting for her. They rarely had any meetings unless some big contract was going down. If the girl was going to become clingy in the office, Margret would have to nip it in the bud. Still, she accepted the meeting and half an hour later Carol arrived in her office closing the door behind her.

Before Margret could get control of the situation Carol said, “I did some more research and we need to get some letters on file with notary stamps and dates on them. The letter or letters need to inform Kent of the pending regulation change requiring all data center employees to be U.S. citizens for U.S. banks and have passed all of the new background checks prior to being hired.”

Margret was not expecting this. She thought they were going to keep it a secret. Carol read the confusion in her eyes.

“The regulation change has just been opened for public comment and will be put to a vote some time next quarter. There is no keeping it quiet now. Given how far along the off-shoring of the data centers has gotten, there is most likely no way to pull it back without incurring massive financial loss.”

Margret nodded.

“Then, I need to forward you the email announcing the public comment period. You need to forward it to Kent, then schedule a meeting for the three of us and Judy, the girl who does notary for us. Just a 15-minute meeting to tell him this is open for comment and may be something he bumps into. Bring a print out of the email to the meeting. When the meeting is over, we will have Judy put a notary stamp on it and hand write the meeting time, date, etc, on it, then sign it. Copies will be put in your hands, my hands, and the legal department's document archival service. When this landslide tumbles down the mountain it will be Kent who hangs.”

One thing about Carol, Margret thought, *that lawyer side of her is vicious!* “OK. I'll schedule the meeting later today as soon as I get your email,” responded Margret.

Carol noticed the look on Margret's face. She looked at her and asked “What?”

“When you put in such a generic meeting subject I figured this was you getting clingy and I was wondering how I could shut it down before anything got out. I wasn't expecting this.”

“No worries on that front. My hubby would divorce me in a second. I have to keep this more hidden than you. That doesn't mean I'm not going to help you cover your ass though. If this becomes a regulation, the bank is going to have to re-hire some of the operators they are about to fire and get them to live in India. There will be a limited window for compliance and then the hammer will fall.”

“We'll have to pay a fine,” Margret said.

“You need to read the email I will forward you. Loss of insurance is the first penalty, fines second and third is a recommendation of criminal prosecution under the Patriot Act. They are playing hardball with this one. Only the content of the regulation is up for comment, not the penalties.”

Margret's eyes widened at that. “Send me the email now.”

In less than three minutes Margret had received the email, forwarded it to Kent and scheduled a meeting with him. He really shouldn't have left a 15-minute opening just prior to 4 p.m. All of the ladies met in Kent's office and told him he could bump into this regulation with his current project once the regulation is voted in. When Kent asked how likely it was, Carol responded nobody knew which way the vote would go since none of the voting members communicated openly about their intent. The bank was supposed to have someone communicating with the FDIC on this, but Carol had no idea who. Carol said her only duty in the matter was to inform both Kent in Margret via both email and in a meeting on the matter. What Kent did with the information was up to him.

Just like that, the meeting ended. The three women went back to Margret's office, they wrote down the meeting time, attendees, etc., signed the document and then Judy put the notary seal on it. They thanked Judy for her time and she left.

"Do you think the bastard has any idea he is about to walk over an open manhole?" asked Margret.

"Probably not," Carol responded. "I simply wanted to get this done within 48 hours of receiving the information so my ass would be in the clear."

Carol leaned closer to Margret and whispered, "Then I had to protect your sweet ass." With a smirk she walked away to find a functioning copy machine. A few minutes later she returned with a few copies for Margret and herself.

"Another day almost over," Margret piped up when she returned.

"I can't believe it," responded Carol. "I thought I was going to have to work late tonight because of the presentation going on earlier today."

Their eyes met and broadcast want to each other. "My place," mouthed Margret. "Half hour," mouthed Carol. Margret quickly wrote down her address on a yellow sticky and included her cell phone number. Nothing was said when the sticky exchanged hands. It even looked business like when Carol stuck it on the front of the pages in her hands. Nobody questioned it or suspected anything. She returned to her desk, completed filing the copies and put the original in a document mailer for the archive service. With the yellow sticky tucked into her suit coat pocket she logged out and told everyone she

was going home.

Hans sat in the man with the suit's office watching the news with him. True to form, once the first story came out, the rest of the talking heads all sent people over to report on it. Pakistani intelligence had apparently started feeding their contacts at CNN now. The arrest report they had planted in the files found its way into their hands. They had Nedim's name now. It was a slow news week, so he was now a celebrity. Too high profile to kill off now. Hopefully al-Qaeda would take care of the task. In a few days, Pakistani intelligence would announce Nedim had been released due to lack of evidence.

True, there would still be a tap on the phone line Nedim used for his computer. They also had a mailbox copy utility installed on his known email accounts and they had their own little remote system monitor software installed on his machine. But the daily reports from his roommates would stop. Both of them had been told not to talk with Nedim again.

Briefly, Hans wondered what would happen when Nedim's shadow quit showing up at the mosque for the Holy Quran discussions. Even if the news hadn't spilled his information all over the world, that would tell al-Qaeda they had a mole.

In a couple of hours a plane would touch down. Both Hans and the man in the suit would supervise the loading of prisoner's onto the plane. There would be no paperwork, simply a count. Four men and two women. As Hans had feared, the courier train eventually ditched the bag and they lost the trail in the mountains. Quite a few military units had been sent out to the area where the trail was lost to see if they could find a cave with al-Qaeda members in it, but Hans had little hope they would hear back. Given all of the publicity around this guy, there would simply be an airstrike against the cave if it was found. This story was about to be completely tied off.

Both women appeared to be relatively young to Hans. Nikolaus should be able to get the rest of the camp up and running. Personally he had no opinion on stem-cell research. As long as it made enough money to let the party bribe officials who weren't completely on board, he was for it. Once enough funding was in place, the larger scale round ups would begin. There was still a cell operating around Hamburg and a few other cells officials knew about in Germany. The police hadn't managed to get enough evidence for a conviction, but the party didn't need that much evidence.

Finally, Hans asked a question that had been nagging at him. "Are we going to close up this shop?"

"At least for a while it seems," replied the man in the suit. "I will keep track of where the team gets dispersed. Who knows when we will turn up another communications hub to monitor. We hope one of the cells we are currently rounding up will have used more than one communications hub, but that is just a hope for now."

Thanks to this operation they had 27 different cells under surveillance. Five of the cells had already been rounded up by various agencies. Few members went to the interrogation camp. Once the courier mules had been processed through there, the remaining 22 cells were going to be rounded up one at a time and squeezed for information. They would most likely provide little in the way of useful information, but their cell phones and computers just might turn up a new communications hub. It was a gamble. They couldn't round up many of the cells at once because there weren't enough interrogators at the first camp to handle 20+ people.

Both men knew the Brit would be utterly pissed they weren't rounding up the Lutton cell first. Obviously they were up to something big. The team on the ground didn't appear to be worth a rat's ass at surveillance. They had to have held some meetings by now. Still, they only identified the few people sending email and no other members. A round up now would simply cause the cell to go deeper under cover. Nobody could risk that. The cell had to remain on monitor status until either more of the members could be located or the explosives turned up.

John was at his wits end. Despite all of his efforts and messages, UNI (Union Network International) was making progress gathering members. It would not be long now before there was a vote about the union in his own shop.

There were only three data centers left to re-locate here! Didn't they understand there would be more money in their hands from the electronic transfer than a union could ever give them? No, they couldn't. Only John and three others knew about the plan here. A few cell leaders who John handled the email for knew, but that was it. Even John's new roommate didn't know.

John's new roommate was a fast learner. He picked up the basics of how the email operation worked in just a couple of days. When John got home now, the vast majority of messages had already been dealt with. He left links and print outs for his roommate to read on how to hide your IP address on-line, viruses, virus scanners, and a rash of other things that allowed you to remain a ghost on-line.

They were going to have to bring in another machine so the roommate could set it up and get his own communications hub running. The leaders were more than willing to purchase another notebook. In fact, they said they were going to purchase two. The second one would be for yet another roommate John was to train. At first John was upset about this, but then he realized he would have at least another quarter (probably three) before the data center migrations were complete and his plan could take effect.

"If only we didn't have this union problem!" he said aloud, slamming his fist down on his desk at work.

"I know what you mean," responded John's boss.

The sound brought John back to his current reality in less than a heartbeat. It was unlike him to drift off and let things slip like that. Perhaps this operation was a bit too much for him. He was used to being a ghost who handled communications, not a covert operative.

"What is being done about it?" asked John.

“Next to nothing can be done at this point,” responded his boss. “They are recruiting people from locations other than here. We have installed security cameras, hired extra security, and watched. Other than the occasional pamphlet found on someone's desk, there is no organizing activity going on here. Once they have more than 70% of our people signed up, they will bring in lawyers and force us to allow a vote.”

John barely heard anything after “more security.” This is exactly what he wanted to stop from happening. He didn't want to kill his own people just to carry out this attack. He made a mental note to get access to the security tapes and assign one of his team members to pull all of them on the way out the door. He wasn't certain how they were going to handle the guard in the security room yet. Perhaps he was already working for al-Qaeda and could simply be added to the team.

No matter what culture you come from, what language you speak or what religion you follow; there are some universal truths. At this particular moment Vladimir experienced one of those truths. He jumped so hard when the phone rang he knocked over three empty soda cans and a glass of iced tea. Cursing, he answered the phone.

“I'm not used to hearing that as a customary greeting,” said the man in the suit.

“Sorry. The phone gave me a start and I spilled a glass of iced tea. What can I do for you?”

“We need you to modify your Trojan horse to pull in every sent email from every email client it lands on. Need them to all be sent to the ping server for analysis.”

“It will be difficult since many access email via a browser in a library rather than an email client. What is your objective?”

“Have you seen the news lately?”

“Yes.”

“Our primary asset has been exposed to the world. We need to snag a new communications center while they are still in chaos.”

The Trojan horse had been written very small and simple so it could work across a wide range of computers and operating systems. When it detected that the user had opened the email via a Web browser, it obtained as much information as it could about the machine and passed it onto the ping server. Depending on which Webmail back end was being used, the Trojan could also attach itself to any messages sent during that session. Each time an instance was created and attached to an outgoing message, it was given a unique ID number based upon the ID number of the parent creating the new instance. The ID number came back in the packet of information to the ping server.

It was via these IDs and the IP addresses that Vladimir was able to map the groups. Eventually they managed to obtain location information for each of the IP addresses (those who weren't really good at ghosting anyway) and he plotted them on an interactive map. Clicking on one of the dots would bring up the date(s) of ping and email messages that had been part of the ping. They didn't always have the email message, but they had most of them. Sometimes they got the message from only one side, and sometimes they got it from both.

You could click a button on the Web page and ask the page to show you date and time ordered message routing. This was a really cool feature. Of course, when they didn't have location information it had to simply pick a location at random and plunk a different colored dot down, but it allowed you to track the communications flow.

Only a few people on the team knew about this page on their internal Web site. Even fewer were authorized to look at it. As always, Vladimir analyzed every piece of information he could find in every way he could think of. Information had always been his friend.

When Vladimir first started putting this database and visualization tool together, he was doing it out of a simple desire to know. Since he was supposed to be storing copies of the data he collected on this "team" server, he created a Web page on it to communicate with the man in the suit. It was far easier to send him an email and tell him to click here, double click there, and watch the screen, than it was to try and explain his analysis.

Lately there had been a significant increase in ghosted IP addresses in the middle of message paths. Quite a few of these paths came from IP addresses that formerly communicated via Nedim. Being in a wheelchair gave Vladimir a lot of time to analyze this data. It looked like someone was training new communications hubs. One link in the chain defied all attempts to punch a hole through to it.

The other ghosted IP addresses weren't ghosted so well. Vladimir managed to send them a special virus with the information he obtained from the ping server. He used a standard spam email offering Viagra without a prescription, but with a subject line that was sure to make them open the email. Once the virus was there, it started sending Vladimir email with information about the activity of the machine. He was able to fully penetrate two notebook computers this way. He even knew the model, brand, and serial number of the notebook thanks to them running a totally insecure OS known as Windows.

If you send an email out correctly on the Internet, it will contain the full path in the message header. Most end users never see this information because their email client or Web page interface has the display of it turned off by default. Each hop an email message makes along the way will add information to the message header with respect to the IP address, name of the server and name of the organization hosting the email server. The emails coming to Vladimir from this special virus contained a full path back. He paid close attention when the first path he uncovered changed and he discovered a new machine using the old path.

That single piece of information told Vladimir he knew where the next email hubs would be. As long as they didn't get wise to his virus he would be able to identify their location. When the DNS and gateway addresses came back the same for the second machine, Vladimir was positive al-Qaeda was training new communications hubs. Perhaps they had suspected what was going on with Nedim or maybe they just decided to spread the traffic out. The reason behind it didn't matter. What mattered is they were training beginners when it came to ghosting. Vladimir would bet half his life savings the person doing the training was the same person whose machine had been completely impenetrable.

“Would you settle for three communications centers and no modifications to the existing Trojan?” Vladimir asked the man in the suit.

There was a pause in the conversation, then came the response, “You have not filed any reports about these.”

“You never read my reports or look at the Web page I set up on your internal server. If you did, you would already know the general location of each,” Vladimir responded.

The man in the suit did not respond immediately. He had read some of Vladimir’s reports and thought the man to be crazy. The Web page had been interesting, but he hadn’t visited it much since he was originally shown how to use it.

“So, where will we be setting up operations next?”

“India.”

“Something a little more specific would be nice,” the man in the suit wise assed back to him.

“Do you want the senior communications person or the two he has recently trained? I would recommend you latch onto the first one he trained rather than taking out the trainer, but it is your call. The second one hasn’t completed training yet.”

“How do you know this?”

“He is still operating from the location of the trainer. If he completes training as fast as the other he will be setting up his own communications center inside of two weeks.”

“Will you know where they set up operations?”

“I already own the machine.”

“Why do you suggest we leave the trainer alone?”

“Odds are small that is the last communications hub they have. If the new trainee stays there long enough, I should be able to get the real IP address of his machine and his primary email account. Once I have that, I can own his machine as well. We got this one by pure accident. If you take it down now, they probably won't make the same mistake of doing a mad scramble to another hub. It will be a lot harder to crack this chestnut if they start going point to point. Trapping and turning each person this one trains will let you play the network out. If this one is starting to do training, they are probably trying to get out of the task themselves or al-Qaeda is trying to set up a grid. We won't know until we have more of the communications hubs.”

“Grid?”

“It's a geek term. Neither Windows nor any flavor of Unix actually clusters. The marketing people and some big vendors all throw around the word cluster when they are describing capabilities, but they are committing fraud when they do such. You cannot actually cluster unless your operating system provides for a common user authorization file and a distributed lock manager to support a distributed transaction manager. The best you can get with either OS or their derivatives is a grid. Autonomous machines network together and agree to let other machines in the network use some of their resources.”

“What good would that be?”

“An email grid can be set up to use encrypted email addresses. All you need to do is to put up N email servers on the Internet and either have them assigned fixed IP addresses you send out with your teams, or actually register them in the global DNS. When email comes in for one of the special email accounts, determined by pattern in the name, it runs a decryption utility on the corresponding encrypted address and routes it there. The encrypted address lists can be changed on a per message or manual basis.”

“You are making no sense.”

“Think of it this way. I register a domain called MyServer.com. I also register the email servers MyPop3Server.com and MySMTPServer.com. When you send email to an account on this server or through this server, it checks the destination email address for a naming pattern. That name corresponds to an entry number in a list which has today's real destination address. The email address is automatically changed. All the sender knows is they sent to xxx1234@MyServer.com. Email could come in from any email system on the Internet. When it gets to the email servers on MyServer.com, they will translate the destination and route the message appropriately, removing all header information and without creating a log.”

“What advantage does that have over what they are doing now?”

“You can set up a domain for under \$100. If you have the correct kind of Internet provider, you can set up your domain behind a dynamically assigned IP address. You will get a new IP address each time your cable modem or satellite box resets. The DNS registry will update within a matter of minutes to reflect the new IP address. All you have to have is the domain registration. There is no hand routing of messages. One person living anywhere in the world could have the admin account to log into your server and change the email address routing. If they strip out all header and trailer information before sending it on, they will strip out any chance anyone has of tracking the thing. There will be nobody to turn because you will never be able to trace back and find out who is logging in, especially if the domain is set up for dynamic rather than static IP. They could boot different machines at different times of the day.”

The conversation had went well beyond the technical capabilities of the man in the suit. He did understand the gist of it though. If al-Qaeda had thought to set up their own domains the email servers could change location hourly and they would be all but impossible to track down.

“How easy is this to do?”

“I've done it three times for various clients already.”

“We certainly don’t want to give them any incentive to make spying on them more difficult. Email me all of the location information you have. We will attempt to squeeze the first one who has been trained, then set up operations on each one to follow. We will put some surveillance on the trainer to ensure they aren’t going to try disappearing. It may be something as simple as the trainer having too much work or they are trying to spread the communications out so we can’t nab as many at once. It may also be that the trainer is now a living martyr and we have to stop an explosion.”

“You will have it within the hour. You should coordinate the information I give you with the map on the Web page. All of the detail is there. I will simply tell you what to click and what to read.”

“Fine.”

The man in the suit had always thought this Russian was crazy. He had come highly recommended, and his being wheelchair bound forced him to spend a lot of time on-line doing analysis since he could no longer be in the field, but some of the reports he filed were just off the wall. True, Pakistanis had hated Indians for a long time and vice versa. Few understood the basis of the hatred anymore, they simply hated.

A nuclear arms race had occurred in the two countries because of this hatred. With all of the revenue coming into that country via the off-shore IT labor market, they were going to soon get the upper hand in such a race. It didn’t help having them so deeply ingrained into the U.S. business interests. When push came to shove, America would nuke Pakistan out of existence because corporate America would lose fewer programmers here. That had to change.

The report fingering India as the next hot bed for al-Qaeda had been shredded for a reason. If that found its way into the hands of Pakistan intelligence, the military would use it as the justification for a preemptive strike. No war between these two countries was going to stop with conventional weapons. Indeed, the first strike would almost certainly be nuclear and focus on the IT centers of the country. That would almost definitely bring the Americans in on the side of India.

Pakistan had been and may still be in a position to nuke the bulk of the Indian population out of existence, thus overrunning the country with military afterwards. It was in no way capable of taking India if any other significant military came to their aid. Even if the Americans didn't have the stomach for another war just yest, China wasn't going to sit by while radioactive fallout from the nuclear weapons drifted into their country. By many reports, China possessed the largest standing army in the world, it didn't have to be the most advanced. They could put so many boots on the ground that the soldiers could walk in with nothing by sticks and stones and still overpower another country. China wasn't the kind of country to let the slaughter of its people stop it from achieving an objective.

This al-Qaeda shit was going to cause most of the civilized world to exterminate Muslims. The man in the suit knew it. That is why he didn't mind killing his own countrymen in the horrible manner Hans' party had devised for them.

If only most of his country didn't have such rampant hatred of America over their support of Israel. That one fact was enough to get them money, recruits and support from many in the government.

A long time ago, the man in the suit had read an essay from another man he thought to be crazy. That essay said all countries must band together and exterminate any country which was run by religion. He had been much younger at the time he read it. He had studied much about the different religions in college along with his other classes. It seemed that every religion wanted to have a country of its own. Later, when he got deeper into history classes, he found the real truth.

Every religion which gains any kind of power feels compelled to "spread the word" by any means they can. World history documents "The Great Crusade" to free the Holy land, the slaughter of the Incas and the Spanish Inquisition among many other crimes against humanity committed in the name of the Catholic Church.

Now, the Muslim religion was quickly out-breeding the Catholics and would soon overtake the Catholic religion as the dominant religion on the planet. It was a long way from overtaking all of the combined Christian factions, but it was about to overtake the oldest and the root of most other forms of Christianity. Did that also mean the Muslim religion had to repeat

the atrocities of the Catholic religion?

At least when the Catholics were getting it out of their system, the only weapons of the time were swords, arrows, catapults, and all of their variations. Wiping out an entire city was a labor intensive effort. Now all it took was someone with a glass container smaller than an aspirin bottle. Break it on the steps to a subway and let the virus spread. Choose a virus with a three-day incubation period and choose a subway handling airport traffic, you could infect nearly a third of the world before anyone caught on.

Watch it Roll

The Brit was sitting at headquarters and steaming. He had begged the man in the suit to give the order to nab the Lutton cell members they knew about. He heard the same tired argument. “We haven't identified any additional members, if we snag the ones we know about know, the rest will simply go into deeper cover, they might even stop communicating.”

Well, the cell hadn't sent an email in over a week. Whatever was going to happen was already too far along to need any further communication unless the cell ran out of money. The Brit didn't know which was pissing him off more, the silence or the apathy.

He had done covert work long enough to know that when a team went silent, they were moving in on the kill. The Lutton cell was either too tiny to carry this operation out or the most patient cell he had ever seen. Sales of fertilizer were monitored at all of the retail locations in and around Lutton. Nobody was buying more than two bags at a time and it didn't seem like there were any repeat customers according to the surveillance team. There were only three possibilities as the Brit saw it:

1. This was a very large cell and each member was buying one additional bag of fertilizer to cover the cell's tracks.
2. The cell hadn't figured out how to obtain the bomb components needed.
3. Professional explosives were being shipped in from Syria or some other location.

The last possibility had the Brit really worried. Libya had managed to smuggle in tons of C4 explosive to the IRA under the rule of Muammar al-Gaddafi. That one shipment showed the world what a car bomb could do. It ushered in a new age of terrorism. Most people seemed to forget it was the IRA that made the bombing attacks famous. Once the car bombings started, terrorists weren't satisfied with a simple plane hijacking anymore. They were all looking for bigger and bigger spectacles.

Muammar was a real problem. The French didn't realize it. When the U.S. wanted to fly an air strike over France to get to Libya they made the Americans promise not to kill Muammar. Silly French. That one single demand brought out the dark side of America. They kept to the letter of their promise and didn't kill Muammar. Instead, they killed his family.

One thing the Brit had learned during his years of covert operations was that terrorists didn't have any rules of engagement. If you were going to fight them, you couldn't have any rules yourself. Rules of engagement and due process were causing this war to become a meat grinder for civilians. The Americans caught a lot of flack from the international community about killing off Muammar's family, but they achieved their objective. Muammar quit being such a major backer of terrorists. Oh, he still funded them, but he was a lot more careful about it after that. Weapons shipments were smaller and dramatically less frequent. He knew the next time war planes flew over, they wouldn't have made a promise to keep him alive.

Wars fought without rules tended to put a lot of civilians through the meat grinder. The English knew this all too well. World War II was a war fought with few rules. The Geneva Convention was more of a guideline than a rule book. Both sides had taken to bombing whole towns and cities. Granted, the Germans started it, but the carnage reigned pretty freely from both sides once it got going.

Nothing symbolized the desperation of it all more than the evening of November 14, 1940. That was the evening Coventry was bombed. Much of the town was in ruin and the bodies were stacked like cords of wood. What made this particular bombing stick in everyone's mind wasn't just the still photos and newsreel footage, but the story behind it. The English had managed to acquire an Enigma code machine and the corresponding codebooks for it. Two days before the bombing, Churchill had the translated message in his hands. Rather than let the Germans know the most top secret code (Ultra) they had was broken, they let Coventry be bombed. The Brit often wondered how Winston Churchill managed to sleep once he'd seen the devastation he'd allowed to happen. The look in his eyes when he visited the scene some days later seemed deeply haunted, even in the still photos. Almost like he wasn't really alive anymore.

Some say the Allied bombing of Dresden many years later was payback for Coventry. The city had a population of around 650,000 before all of the refugees started pouring into it. The firestorm from the bombings burned so hot it was able to burn concrete. Since nobody had any method of counting or tracking the refugees, the body count will forever be disputed. Some put the count as low as 40,000 while others put it over 300,000. As hot as that vaporizes an entire human body, including the bones. There really is no way to get an accurate count.

What the Brit feared most is that it was happening all over again. He feared there was some reason the Luton cell was being allowed to continue other than the reasons he had been given. He feared the higher ups were willing to sacrifice English citizens again to achieve some other objective.

One thing the Brit knew was that the Americans weren't going to win this war, at least not the new Americans. The old Americans would have already solved this problem. The old Americans didn't seem to exist anymore. Today's Americans were overweight mall dwellers interested only in watching sports on television, drinking beer, and otherwise living the "good life." They had little in the way of commitment or ethics.

The old Americans had the mettle to leave 51,000 of their own on the field at Gettysburg. This was back when the entire population of the entire country was far less than the current population of New York City. The old Americans had the mettle to leave roughly 209,000 Allied forces laying on the field during the battle of Normandy and keep going. Hell, they lost around 10,000 on D-Day alone. The old Americans had the mettle to obliterate Hiroshima and Nagasaki because they had learned the Japanese emperor had organized nearly every citizen with whatever hand tool or weapon they could find to hurl themselves at the oncoming American military. (It wasn't much of an Allied military at that point.) They had the mettle to realize sacrificing the populations of those two cities would be a big enough shock to end the war and save millions of lives. Today's America could barely scrape up 50,000 people without felony convictions willing to join the military under any circumstances. It was little wonder to the Brit that the WWII generation was referred to as "America's Greatest Generation."

No, the Americans had too many lawyers and too many fat cats lining their own pockets to win this war. The Brit knew that all it took was a coward or a stupid individual to lose a war. On the first day of Gettysburg, General Ewell was ordered to take the ridges south of the city "if practicable." He didn't bother to take the hill which overlooked both the town and Cemetery Hill. There were only a handful of Union troops who had stumbled up the hill as part of their mass confusion and retreat. Some accounts have him outnumbering the forces occupying that hill by 50:1. As a result, the Confederates lost not only the battle, but the war. Yes, there were other battles, but the Confederate Army was broken at Gettysburg. One coward in the wrong place at the wrong time could set in motion events which changed worlds.

The man in the suit and Hans were at headquarters finishing packing up most of the equipment. When they finally chose where to set up a new headquarters, the equipment would be shipped to it. For now all that remained was their two machines, the Internet link and the satellite TV service. The building had only had one phone line and it never seemed to work. Everybody on the team used either a cell phone or a satellite phone, sometimes both.

Hans had sent the rest of the team on to other assignments. The first group went to find the apartment where the training was happening. Their orders were simply to obtain some place where they could continually monitor the comings and goings of the place. Until a headquarters was established for the purpose of taking down the trainer, they were not to pursue or tail. All they needed to do for now was keep a record of the people who went in and out.

A destination was needed for the second team. Vladimir had informed them the original trainee had gone silent again. It was the estimation of all that this operative went somewhere to show someone what he had learned, then was given a place to go and set up shop. They had all agreed to wait up to two weeks before allocating that part of the team to another assignment. Until then, that part of the team was given time to go home and take vacation.

It had been three weeks since the reporters outed Nedim to the world. During this time the email flow to Nedim's machine all but vaporized. Both men had little doubt al-Qaeda members watching cable or satellite news had seen the story. Some other means to communicate a new email address to the field operatives must have been used, because the message didn't come through Nedim's machine.

At least Vladimir had been paying attention and looking for the next opportunity, thought Hans. He was aware that the man in the suit and Vladimir didn't get along. More accurately that the man in the suit didn't like Vladimir and it mattered not to Vladimir. He simply continued doing what he always did. Hans had actually read many of Vladimir's reports. When it came to analysis, the guy not only looked at the whole board, he looked at the two boards sitting at the tables beside him, too.

Hans had been the one who had found the IT people for this team. The Brit had been rated very good for what he did, but Vladimir was almost impossible to find. The various Russian mafia organizations he wrote identity theft systems for hid him like the lost city of Atlantis. When Hans finally exploited a covert contact who gave up the name of Vladimir's handler, the man in the suit took over. He could tell the man in the suit doubted Vladimir's reputation from the start.

In Hans' mind, nobody could doubt the wisdom of hacking one's way into the machines of those training to become communications hubs for al-Qaeda. That Vladimir had already set up the next leg of this operation before anyone knew they needed it spoke volumes to Hans. He had not known what to think about Vladimir's fingering of India as the next hot bed for al-Qaeda operations. One's first thought was *there is too much American money flying around in that country for anyone to strike back*, but Hans hadn't thought forward to the inevitable pull out. The thing which had stopped al-Qaeda from being highly successful in that country would now become the thing which opened all doors for them. As soon as the American money stopped flying around there would be a backlash.

Hans had sent this information on to Nikolaus. He sent along his thoughts on the subject, then asked Nikolaus to put the party's "think tank" people on to determining how the backlash and rise of al-Qaeda in India would occur. Hans emphasized that this was too big of a ground swell to ignore.

Jeremy had logged into the company email system when he got back on Sunday to schedule a meeting with Lenny and the other two analysts. Because he knew better than to include any details, he simply put "Analysis Review" as the subject for the meeting. He did not put any other information in the request.

Normally Jeremy would have included only Lenny and simply would have walked into Lenny's office first thing Monday morning. The other two analysts knew that Lenny had offered up the expense account to get this information and that Jeremy was the one to bring it in. Jeremy had taken quite a few digs from the business school twins about his generic state school degree. They weren't necessarily bad guys, they simply thought they were better than Jeremy. He wanted them to know the kind of weekend he had on the company dime and that he alone pulled in this information. Their prestigious schools had accounted for nothing on this one.

Promptly at 9:30 a.m. Jeremy walked into the conference room. Lenny was already there and the other two were getting coffee from the kitchenette. When they walked in he told them to close the door. While Lenny trusted the receptionist, he didn't trust luck enough to believe nobody would walk in the

front door.

Lenny looked at Jeremy and said “You have something more than additional information on the data center moves don't you?”

“I had to promise a future weekend at Salish Lodge and some jewelry to get it,” Jeremy responded.

Lenny nodded.

“Pytho Corporation is working on a be-all-and-end-all banking software package. The client they are targeting is First Global Bank. Already it handles the U.S. and Canadian banking regulations. They have brought in a rash of auditors from multiple auditing firms to both spec and test the banking regulations of each target country. French regulations are in QA now and the other countries First Global Bank does business with won't be far behind. Here is the product information.” Jeremy placed the CDs on the table then continued. “It looks like the big chunk of their sales pitch will be 'turn the knob' functionality. If the bank wants to get into another line of business, they can simply 'turn the knobs' of the software package and it will be ready to go.”

Lenny hung his head shaking it from side to side. “P.T. Barnum was right. There is a sucker born every minute.”

Jeremy continued, “What the sale is hanging on, is the bank's own auditors giving the blessing that French banking regulations have all been met. Once that happens, it doesn't matter if they even deliver the other countries.”

The other two analysts looked at Jeremy like he had just grown a third eye. One of them said, “Isn't the entire pitch based on getting a global view of the bank on one screen?”

“That was the initial pitch and one the MBA is having orgasms over, but it isn't the important issue. First Global Bank has twice the IT workers and more than three times the cost operating in France due to the taxes and lax work ethic in the country. Simply eliminating all of the French IT workers will pay for the entire project the first year.”

Lenny piped up, “You can bet Pytho Corporation is wining and dining the auditors doing the certification right now. They will be hurling 20-something sex toys into hotel rooms with them and leasing cars in scores just to get the auditors to say they passed. First Global just had to go through the manually intensive process of consolidating financial information from all divisions to put out their quarterly reports. Even if the auditors come back saying they think Pytho is a month away from completing France, the sale will go through.”

Finally, one of the prestigious school boys piped up, “What good is this information to us? Do you think Pytho stock will jump enough to make it worth our while?”

Lenny looked at Jeremy and could see he understood. “Tell them what you have figured out and I will fill in the pieces. You are becoming a natural at this.”

“It means that the final data center moves won't happen. The bank will begin converting the locations serviced by the current data center locations onto this software once it is installed in the off-shore data center. One to six months after each business entity is running on this new software, all but one or two IT workers will be let go and the on-shore data centers will be sold along with the machines in them. Within the year, they should have migrated all business units to this new software, discarding all other machines and all other IT workers. Have either of you checked on the FDIC insurance requirements for data center workers?”

Both looked at each other then responded, “No.”

“Full background checks from government agencies are required for anyone with control or significant access to electronic systems handling funds insured by the FDIC. Just how much background checking do you think has happened for the off-shore workers since the bank doesn't own the data center?”

Lenny was sitting there nodding. “You have a big part of it, but you missed the best part.”

“You mean the part about this being a DOT-zero software release, so the odds of it actually working are remote?”

“That’s a piece of it.”

“What’s the other part?” asked Jeremy.

“Turn the knob,” responded Lenny.

Everyone looked at him and finally he went on. “The biggest marketing fraud to be committed by software vendors to date is claiming ‘turn the knob’ software configuration capabilities. This product will be a spin off or a module of their existing product which already does complete order, inventory, warehousing, credit, manufacturing, and whatever else.”

Lenny continued, “Assume for a minute that each knob has only 10 positions. How many knobs do you need before the permutation of possible configurations exceeds any testing capabilities? It isn’t long before you have to have an automated regression testing product which runs for one month solid, throwing no errors, just to get a change out the door. The simple truth behind ‘turn the knob’ marketing is the software you are running is predominantly untested. Oh, there will be a small subset of tests run, but it will be left to the users in the field to find the problems. There are human interventions and work-arounds when problems crop up in order processing or inventory management. No great losses occur and few crimes are committed. With banking software, severe problems could happen for years without anybody being able to track them down. Just look how long those traders losing billions on options and derivatives were able to hide their losses.”

“What Jeremy has given us is the timeline for our shred. Yes, we can now play Pytho stock because the product won’t be announced until after it has been installed and the French IT staff eliminated or at least greatly reduced. It will allow us to do a slow accumulation prior to the run up. Their quarterly numbers weren’t as good as expected so the stock is currently declining. Nobody will look twice at our accumulation thinking we are simply buying in a dip. They didn’t offer any meat with their guidance, so others aren’t buying. Once they have moved all U.S. and Canadian operations off to this new software platform, we can begin our shred of First Global Bank and Big Four Consulting, but we would be wise to wait until after Pytho has made their announcement and we have cashed in there as well. We can then do a triple shred.”

“You did well Jeremy. If you think you can get even more information out of this lady, feel free to get the jewelry at Tiffany's instead of Helzberg. We may very well clear a billion dollars next quarter.”

The two prestigious business school boys simply sat there with mouths open. They had just been spanked big time and both of them knew they would never find a play like the one Jeremy had just found. They also knew the only reason Lenny would limit his play to a billion dollars is fear of an SEC investigation.

Lenny had advised each of them, and even the secretary, to set up bank accounts in countries that didn't have extradition treaties with the U.S. He advised them to have most, if not all, of their annual bonuses sent to these accounts in case there was ever a problem. He had allowed each of them to invest some of their paycheck in the funds Lenny was running. There were a handful of funds outside of the company where Group Lenny provided buy, sell, and sell short recommendations. Each of them had put some money into those funds as well. The analysts running them had learned to take Lenny's advice. Many years, it was only Lenny's trades which made money for the fund. Until this moment they didn't understand just how risky their jobs were.

Finally, one of the business school boys came back to the room mentally. He tried to speak, then realized he needed to close his mouth first. After that he asked, “Which of the outside funds are we going to allow to play along with this?”

“I have not yet decided,” Lenny responded. “This will be a high-risk play. Too much movement too soon will demand an SEC investigation. Most of the funds we advise have greedy dumb asses running them. Given the returns I've gotten for them before, they will jump in with both feet rather than be patient. There are perhaps two which could participate early in such a play, but it is too early to let them know.”

Lenny hit a few keys on his notebook computer, then said, “First Global is up \$12.00/share over its price before the announcement.” He pointed at the other two analysts and said, “You two need to verify we've liquidated our position. Report back to me as soon as we no longer hold any position in the company. I will start the next step when I feel it will go unnoticed.”

Heidi was prepping one of the secured living quarters when Nikolaus walked in.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m well,” she responded. “Looks like we will be up and running soon. Now I suppose we will find out who else on the team doesn’t have what it takes to be here.”

“Regrettably, yes,” responded Nikolaus. “They will be rounding up six more cells this week. Some of the suspected Hamburg cell members are being picked up as we speak. We’ve already located a couple of organ recipients for the ones currently undergoing interrogation.”

“I wish we could approach everyone who needs the organs,” replied Heidi. “I do hate seeing them go to waste.”

“It’s a bit too risky to do that now. The black market databases are the best method at this time. When the number of patients coming through here increases, we will have our own people set up Web sites to auction the organs off. For now, we cannot cut the others out. Everyone knows it is not a permanent relationship. It is only a matter of time before each site gets shut down or blocked from nearly every country.”

“Do you know how many more rooms I need to prepare? I have the rest of the day off, so I could get them all done today rather than trying to do it all in a rush when they arrive.”

“We currently only have the two women in custody. I won’t have any other information until tomorrow about the cells being rounded up today. Some may end up in the hands of local authorities. Until you kick in the door you cannot be sure who is there.”

“Well, I guess I can go home and relax in a tub then. Perhaps get some carry-out dinner as well,” responded Heidi. “I have the two rooms done now, and we are both assuming the women will opt to live.”

Nikolaus nodded.

Heidi left the compound and drove home. For reasons she could not explain she pulled out a letter writing pad and took it to the tub with her. She decided to write a letter.

Hello,

It has been quite some time since we spoke. I must confess I was quite moved when you claimed me as one of your own. I did not feel your squad owed me anything, but your offer was quite touching nonetheless.

Currently involved in an OP which I cannot describe. Some time in the future I may need extraction. No danger now. Simply keep listening. When you hear about something ugly happening here, it will be time to come and get me.

Heidi

The closing time gal

The last line brought a sad smile to her face. She had some very fond memories of hanging out with that squad and missed her lover from it. In part she added it because they could all laugh about it now. In part she wrote it in case the squad leader was no longer above ground and the rest of the squad needed to remember who she was.

Once finished with her bath, she addressed an envelope and sent it to one of the addresses she had been provided. With postage on the letter, she went out the door with the letter in her coat pocket. She knew she most likely had surveillance on her. The level of clearance she had pretty much demanded it. There was a shopping mall not far from her apartment. The food court there had a postal drop near the bathrooms and cash stations. She should be able to easily drop the envelope on her way to the cash station without anyone getting suspicious. Had she been intent on hiding it, she would have sat at her table paying bills before she left. Anyone observing her wouldn't think twice about a bundle of envelopes.

She didn't exactly know why she did it. She had always been a firm believer in the party line. All of these people were part of a terrorist network and really did deserve to die. Still, given the history her country had and the way some thought in the party, it wouldn't be long before they were using any excuse to round up any Muslim and run them through.

Nikolaus had been a friend of the family for a very long time. He had seen to it that this operation could house no more than 100 women. It took approximately 4 hours to complete harvesting from each person. Less time if all they were harvesting was the blood. Still, someone would notice if the

incinerators started running 24 hours per day 7 days per week. It was always good to have a plan of escape in case things went horribly wrong.

Revenue from the organ, marrow, blood, and soon stem cells flowed through accounts which provided money to the board members, company, and shareholder dividends. The party owned a lot of shares and thus would launder their money via dividends and shares of stock. The party, through one of its investment companies, owned a large chunk of debt which was convertible to dividend paying shares. Of course, the share price had to go up dramatically to make the conversion worth while. It was going up significantly this quarter thanks to the secured location and its antidote storage. The board didn't know about the sale of body components. Once the stem cells started selling it was going to be difficult to hide from them. Their hands had to be good and dirty before they were allowed to know about those. Thankfully it was Nikolaus's job to ensure the board's hands were bloody.

Kent received a letter signed by the board members. They had received feedback from the banks auditors. It was the opinion of the auditors that Pytho Corporation would meet French certification requirements within the month. Kent was instructed to obtain a new bid which was at least 20% less than the current price. The first banking system to be converted would be the French. Pytho Corporation was to commit in writing to obtaining certification for all other countries First Global Bank did business in no later than eight months from the date of contract signing. The letter went on about the order of roll-out to the other countries, but oddly didn't mention either Canada or the U.S. Kent noticed that Marget had been copied on the letter as well.

It didn't surprise Kent that the board wanted input on this issue. They liked to feel they were in control. Perhaps they actually would be once this software was rolled out. There were a lot of accountants who could be let go once each business unit came on-line with the new software. He had thought about making France the first country on the timeline, but that would have meant delaying it just like the board was doing. He wanted this project to hide the fact they didn't get the data center migration done. The board had seen to it that both projects would drag on past the two years Kent was supposed to be in IT, so he wouldn't be able to get all of the credit and a two

level promotion.

Well, he needed to see just how much influence he had with Big Four Consulting now. He picked up the phone to call Kathryn.

Margret laughed out loud when she read the letter from the board. They had nipped Kent's nads. There was no way he could do a cut & run now. By stalling off this contract until after certification of French banking rules, they delayed the purchase a month. This delayed the installation enough that conversion wouldn't be able to complete until the end of the next quarter. True, it would be good for testing, but it meant Kent was actually going to have to complete the data center migrations. *I hope he hasn't already spent the kick back he was to get from cutting that contract deliverable short*, she chuckled to herself.

Carol happened to be walking by on her way somewhere when Margret called to her. "Carol, glad I saw you. You have to read this," she said with a smile in her eye and a sing in her voice.

Somewhat perplexed, Carol walked in and accepted the letter from Margret. She expected some email joke, not what she read. After Margret relayed her take on it, Carol responded quietly, "You missed the best part. The board didn't say anything about migrating the U.S. or Canadian operations to the new system. They deliberately avoided mentioning it by stating the countries. They know the new regulation will take effect before this is complete, and they've offered up Kent to the legal system. Do you see the notation at the bottom?" she asked, pointing to it for Margret.

Margret looked and nodded.

"This was filed as official correspondence from the board. A copy of it is in the archival system for investigators to find. When Kent migrates the U.S. operations to this software, he has gone beyond the board's instructions. If the regulators try to come down on the bank, they intend to hand him Kent."

Margret's eyes got a little wider.

“Oh, you have a notarized letter in the same archival system, you're good,” responded Carol. “I wonder if it is deliberate or if they are just playing the odds,” Carol mused.

“What do you mean?” Margret asked.

“Well, if it is deliberate, there should be some official communication somewhere, probably to the asset group or the realty group, telling them to keep two of the U.S. data centers that have room for expansion and a comparatively low overhead cost in terms of taxes and electricity rates. The board will then be able to say they were under the impression all U.S. banking operations were going to occur in these two data centers while all other operations were going to occur in the Indian locations.”

“You know what, you should prepare a report for them with respect to the expandability of the remaining U.S. data center locations, the cost of electricity at each location, and the space currently available. If you bother sending it to Kent, simply put it in the folder of routine stuff he never looks at. Send it to the board and copy me on it. You can put in the subject that it is per the potential new regulation. Also include the number of people at each location who have the required background checks and clearance.”

Carol saw the confused look on Margret's face and said, “I'm telling you this as a lawyer, not a friend.”

The Lemmings March

Kent had left a voice mail for Kathryn to call him. Some time later she returned his call. He informed her of the board's demands.

“That'll be a tough sell to Pytho,” replied Kathryn.

“It also means you have to continue with the data center migrations for now,” replied Kent. “The end date for the project is three months from now and we won't have France up and running by then.”

“Can't we migrate the U.S. and Canada now?” queried Kathryn.

“The board was very explicit Kathryn. France is to be done first, followed by the list of countries I gave you. Because they are going by countries and not company divisions we will need many trainers who speak the native language of each country.”

“How many do you think you will need?” asked Kathryn.

“If you are planning on doing a flash cut, two for every location where people will use the system. If you are planning a roll-out as resources allow, then two for each location you cut over. I don't know how well it will work having banking being done on two separate systems. We will probably need to bring people in from each location to a central training center and train them the week before the cut over, then have some traveling people at the major sites and leave the rest to call some toll-free support center.”

The profit margin was quickly fading from this contract. Both Pytho and Big Four had planned on reaping the revenues for support from the American and Canadian portions of the banking business up front. That was going to fund the rest of the operation. This latest demand from the board was going to ensure the bank had its payback long before the vendor received any revenue. The support contract pricing was based on the number of locations using the software. By focusing on the foreign countries first, the board was ensuring it wouldn't increase to a sizable level for at least a year. In the mean time, they were going to get rid of all their high-cost IT people in order of most expensive to least.

"I'll talk it over with Pytho and contact you back. Can you email me the exact list of countries so I have the correct order when talking with them?"

"Sure. Sending now."

"Thanks."

Stacie sent Jeremy an email to let him know she had begun training.

Jeremy,

We will have to postpone our trip to Salish Lodge for at least a month. I'm headed off to get trained on some Pytho software product, then off with their team to France to train client site staff. There are about six of us going from here to Pytho.

It should be a fun trip, but not nearly as much fun as our trip will be.

Love,

Stacie

Normally Stacie wouldn't use the "L" word in an email, but she had elected to send this email from work and needed to cover her tracks. Nobody here needed to know it wasn't a relationship based on love, but rather one based on incredible sex between good friends and the favors they could do for each other. At least she sent it to his personal email account so it shouldn't set off any alarms.

In truth, she had just found out this morning from Kathryn that the deal was closing. Pytho had agreed to some changes wanted by the Board of Directors at the bank and a new contract was being prepared for their signature along with a new timeline for roll-out. The board had demanded France be the first country converted followed by a list of other countries they did business in. Everyone was assuming the U.S. and Canada would be the last on the list, but the timeline wasn't going to include those for now.

Tomorrow, Stacie had to report to Pytho Corporation's training facility along with the others from here. They were getting a phi-slamma-jamma training course on how to train bank tellers in the basic functions needed to do their jobs. She was selected because she had taken a semester of French in college. Pytho was supposedly giving about 20 of their own people in France this same crash course. The bank had agreed to send the senior tellers from each location to a one-day training seminar put on at a Pytho location. They were limiting the trip to two tellers per location and the offer was only supposed to be made to the senior tellers.

Stacie hadn't used French in years. She and some of the other girls were hiding in a conference room with a tourist brush up tape. Stacie planned on digging out her French book when she got home. It was one of the few books she had saved from college because she wanted to travel there some day. This wasn't exactly the kind of travel she had in mind though. Here Pytho would only be teaching them in English. From here they would all go to the same training seminar the bank tellers were attending. They were to be paired off with a native French-speaking Pytho employee and sent to a bank location on the day of the roll-out.

What amazed Stacie was the grand assumption going on. By virtue of acquisition, Stacie found herself with an account at First Global Bank. She never changed banks. Her bank was one of those eaten by First Global. From what she had been reading in the days before, Pytho software "ass-u-me-d" there was a PC running some form of that worthless Windows operating system at each teller window. Stacie had actually ventured into her branch more than once and knew for a fact there was some great big monster terminal there with a funky looking keyboard that had all different colored keys on it. There was a big IBM logo on it and while it had normal typewriter like keys in the middle of it, there were at least three other keypad type sections built into it. In truth, it looked like you could hold that keyboard up

in front of you to stop bullets.

Finally Stacie had to bow out of the French language brush up. She went in search of Kathryn and found her coming out of a conference room.

“Hello Stacie, I thought you were brushing up on your French for your upcoming trip,” Kathryn said as she approached.

“I need to talk to you,” responded Stacie in a serious tone.

Kathryn had never really pegged Stacie as being a girl with brains. While she had been smart enough to pass French in college, Kathryn attributed the taking of the class to a young girl's fantasy of world travel. “I have about 10 minutes between meetings.”

“That should do,” responded Stacie as they walked toward Kathryn's office.

After arriving at Kathryn's office they entered and Stacie closed the door behind her. The closing of the door set Kathryn on edge. After the dicey deal with Pytho software that may yet have her giving back her Mercedes convertible. She wondered what was up.

“I spent a good part of this weekend reading through the Pytho promotional and specification documentation you gave me. Every piece of this literature makes the assumption a teller already has a PC running some flavor of that unreliable Windows operating system. I stopped at my bank this Saturday. Like many other people, my bank was eaten by First Global when it went on an acquisition spree. There are no PCs at the teller windows. They have some big hulking thing and a massive keyboard you could use to stop armed robberies. Granted, this isn't France, but has anybody actually walked into one of the French locations and seen what is currently at the teller window?”

Kathryn sat there mortified. This skirt and heels was more than a sex toy to be handed over to old men buying Viagra in bulk. Most of her mortification seemed to be centered around the thought that she should have put the top down on her way in this morning because after this bomb detonates she wouldn't have it to drive any longer. Finally she stammered, “I'm sure Kent took that into account during the presentation and determined all was well,” trying to cover the obvious problem.

“With all due respect Kathryn, Kent couldn’t smell a stink and determine someone farted.”

Something sounded so completely out of place seeing such a sweet and innocent looking face utter the word “farted.” It was like someone with a very posh British accent suddenly dropping the F-bomb in the middle of a conversation. First there was Shock & Awe, then there was hilarity. Kathryn burst out laughing. The absurdity of the sound coupled with the correctness of the analysis allowed for no other response. Finally, when she stopped laughing she said, “I’ll get it put into the contract right now,” as she picked up the phone.

Stacie turned to leave.

“Stacie.”

She turned back around “Yes?”

“Good catch. Really good catch.”

A warm and honest smile lit up Stacie’s face as she said, “Thanks!” then left Kathryn’s office.

That girl just saved my ass, thought Kathryn as she called the team writing up the new contract to make sure First Global Bank was responsible for ensuring PCs running some flavor of Windows were at each teller station.

Stacie didn’t know much about technology. She had a girlfriend in college whose brother was an uber geek. When he was cleaned up he wasn’t bad looking, if you could get past the fact he was nearly six feet tall and only about 120 pounds. He had been the one who got Stacie through her one required computer class and had always fixed her notebook so she could do her other assignments.

Her mind slipped back to that one evening at college when Uber geek returned home from something called a “Black Hat” conference. He was exhausted and he reeked from being locked in a room all weekend without showering. Under his eyes were those big black rings you get when you’ve been up too long and taken too many NoDoz tablets. It was a look college kids understood well during midterms and finals.

Uber geek dropped his bags, set down his laptop, opened a beer and plopped on the couch. After some severe prodding from the girls, he went to take a shower, then came back.

“So, you had a good time playing Cowboys and Indians?” Stacie had asked only a little sarcastically. He smiled and continued with a second beer. Seeing him drink beer was an oddity in itself. Stacie had only ever seen him consuming Mountain Dew or iced tea their entire time in college together.

“The Black Hat conference is a gathering of the best and brightest hackers in the world,” he responded. “Each year we gather pretty much every system known to man and attempt to exploit security vulnerabilities in them. Some attendees are professionals from software companies, some are professionals from organized crime, a few work for the government, and the rest are simply hobby hackers. People from the NSA tend to slip in just to see who is there.”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Bond!” Stacie retorted, simply dripping with sarcasm.

Uber geek got up and went over to his back pack. Stacie began sputtering something which sounded like an apology and Uber's sister simply had a perplexed look on her face. Uber geek returned handing Stacie a business card and said, “He wants me to apply for a job when I graduate.”

There was absolutely no denying it now. There in Stacie's hand was a business card from an NSA special agent. She handed the card to Uber's sister and watched another set of eyes go wide.

“So what do you do at this conference then?”

“We play a security game called capture the flag. Each team managing each system is given a flag file. In that file is a special identification number that only the game moderators know. The file name is pretty much known to all players and posted on an overhead display. Where it is and how you get to it is up to each team.”

“So,” interrupted Stacie, “you sit around trying to hack into each other's machines and get the number from this file?”

“We actually try to get the entire file,” responded Uber.

“How many flags did your team capture?” asked Uber's sister.

“46.”

“How many did it take to win?” both girls asked together.

“High score was 72. We placed third.”

“No wonder you are being recruited,” said Stacie.

“They make the offer to a lot of people at the conference. It is the one place they can both keep surveillance on the criminals they are after and recruit potential criminals into the agency.”

“Potential criminals?” queried Stacie.

“While a good many people get paid a lot of dollars by software vendors to do what we do, if you weren't hired to do it, what we do isn't legal.”

“Oh.”

“Anything else interesting happen there? You guys all go out for lap dances or something?” asked Uber's sister.

Uber chuckled “Few people left the room. The most sleep anyone on the team got was four hours. They did ban one system from ever coming back though.”

“That bad huh? Something from Microsoft? I know you are always talking about how much Microsoft products suck.”

“No, that good, and no, it isn't a Microsoft product. Nearly 200 hackers sat their mainlining caffeine and poking at it relentlessly. It never gave up the flag, and not for the first time.”

“How is that possible,” asked the sister. “You guys know every nook and cranny there is to exploit.”

“It is the most secure operating system on the planet. The NSA and DOD use it extensively as do a lot of companies.” He looked both girls in the eye as best he could given his condition and said, “If you are serious about running a business and keeping it secured, you put it on OpenVMS because it never gives up the flag. It is designed so that if there are N machines operating in a cluster, one of the machines can be taken out via nuclear strike, and the cluster will continue without losing a single transaction. I was the most familiar with it and that is why the NSA guy asked for my resume on the

spot. He is calling on Thursday to discuss bringing me in before I graduate.”

Once again the girls had that deer-in-headlights look on their faces. The dude was only a sophomore in college. Stacie doubted he'd ever been laid by anyone his sister hadn't begged to do the deed, yet he basically had a career type job already lined up. When Thursday came, Uber had accepted the job. He transferred to a college close to where they wanted him to work. Stacie and his sister became roommates.

It had been five years since that day and Stacie still remembered what he had said. Yes, every place she looked seemed to use Windows, but Stacie knew it was a joke. Windows still held the world record in surrendering the flag at the annual Black Hat conference. Uber was nice enough to send her an email with the results every year. Stacie still tried to keep in touch with Uber's sister, but now they lived so far apart it was difficult. She was glad she had never been asked to do Uber. He wasn't a bad guy, just not a guy on Stacie's radar. If the request had been presented, she would have been obligated. Thankfully that request shouldn't come now. She had attended Uber's wedding last year and heard they were expecting a child now. *I Guess some guys really will marry the first girl who sleeps with them twice*, she thought.

It had taken Margret two days to get the information from her people at the remaining data centers. They were a little perplexed when she asked about their expansion capabilities and per kilowatt cost of electricity.

“I thought we were all being off-shored?” asked one data center manager.

“I don't believe it will ever be all of the data centers, just most of those we inherited which have a really high operational cost.” responded Margret. “The board is interested in how much we can expand two of our existing on-shore data centers.”

“So the smallest one loses?” asked the same manager.

“More than likely they will move to one of the other two.”

“Oh.”

Margret really wanted to tell them more, but she didn't dare. There was a remote possibility Kent would find out about all of this or they would ask him a probing question if he should happen to speak to them. She was sure what she had told this data center manager would spread like wild fire as soon as she hung up the phone.

Getting the clearance information from HR had been another tooth-pulling contest. Finally, she had Carol deal with HR while she simply asked the data center managers for information yet again. Oddly, this request for information seemed to invigorate them. Margret could tell they honestly believed there was a regulation somewhere that was going to protect all of their jobs. *Best to let them believe it for now*, she thought. *In a couple of months it could actually be true.*

At any rate, she put the report and spreadsheet together, emailed a copy to Carol and to each member of the board of directors individually. Once that was done she put a copy of the report in the network directory containing all of the report requests.

Just as she finished doing this Kent dropped by with a new copy of the contract and the roll-out schedule. Kent hadn't bothered to read through anything, he simply looked at the timeline document and was upset that the United States and Canadian locations hadn't been included. "I can't present this to the board," Kent said in an exasperated tone. "She'll just have to do this over."

Margret took a look at the document and the contract while Kent went rambling on about something. Finally she looked up and said, "The board only asked for the international locations when they came back with their letter. My honest opinion is that the board isn't ready to risk the U.S. or Canadian operations on a new system until it has been in the field for over a year."

Kent stopped his pacing and stared at her.

"Think about it Kent. The U.S. and Canadian operations allowed us to eat nine other banks because it generated enough cash for us to risk taking over some poorly run corporations. They aren't going to risk the golden goose when all they are really trying to do right now is save money."

Kent still had that “I was born stupid and been losing ground ever since” look on his face.

“Take a look at the list of countries they authorized to be converted to this system and look at the order of the conversions. It is an inverted list of our highest to lowest cost IT operations. Simply gutting those operations makes it worth taking the risk on this system. Hell, once the French IT workers are all gone, the entire cost of this project will almost be paid for. When they get the second country on-line we are turning a profit from this move. After all of the other countries have been converted and are running smooth, they will allow the U.S. and Canadian operations to use the same software, but not until then. That will be a separate project.”

Margret was very determined to not let it slip about the Canadian and U.S. data centers having to remain on-shore and be staffed with U.S. citizens to keep FDIC insurance. Carol was no fool. If Carol thought the board was setting Kent up for a fall, Margret was going to be on her hands and knees behind his legs telling them to push. Briefly, Margret wondered if Kent's job came with stock options. She tuned back into the room just in time to hear Kent say, “So you think I should present this to the board as-is?”

“Yes. It is what they asked for. If they come back and say it needs to include the other operations you can show them the request they sent out and say we complied with their request, but will be happy to work up yet another quote if their wishes have changed.”

Kent picked up the other folder he had brought in, presumably it contained the copies for the board, and walked out.

Could the little bastard be catching on? Margret thought to herself. One thing was certain. None of the big boys had taken Kent out to lunch since he got back from hobnobbing around the globe. Margret had assumed they were simply punishing him for turning in too big an expense report, but perhaps they had people in the legal department telling them to keep their distance for when this went bad. It certainly wouldn't be the first time this bank had chosen a sacrificial lamb for a federal investigation.

Jeremy had been idly surfing the Web for a few hours at work. The surfing was thinly disguised as doing research. He was bored and he was tired. Spending the weekend with Stacie had pretty much worn him out. He didn't really feel it until the second day back when his muscles started to stiffen up. *I really need to start working out*, he thought.

Finally, he decided to check his personal email. Technically they weren't supposed to do that due to the risk of virus. Lenny had made them all start using Ubuntu on their desktops since there were no known viruses for it and the OS was rock solid. Indeed, the only time Jeremy ever rebooted the machine was when an update got installed and popped up a message saying he needed to reboot for it to take effect.

Once he went to the Web page to look at his personal email he saw the message from Stacie. *At least she didn't send me the email at work*, he thought. When he read the email he was damned glad she hadn't sent it to his work email. He quickly printed out the message and walked into Lenny's office. When Lenny looked up he didn't say a word, Jeremy simply handed him the sheet of paper.

After reading it Lenny said, "Well, you definitely need to go shopping for this girl's jewelry and make yourself available once she gets back."

"I take it we will begin a slow accumulation of Pytho Corporation shares now?"

"You are learning boy. You certainly have far more potential than those other two I hired. Yes, we will start, and this evening I will make a few phone calls from a disposable cell phone to the accounts we advise and tell them to do the same."

"Let me guess, you will tell them Pytho will be announcing a big new software package and a major client in about a month?"

"I may leave off the client part," responded Lenny with a smile.

"So, we will wait for First Global Bank shares to drop a little next week and begin accumulating again there as well?"

"You do just about have this figured out don't you?"

"I have a good teacher," Jeremy smiled back.

Lenny chuckled. “We have about a month before the bounce happens. By that time we could own somewhere between 12% and 20% of both companies. Slightly heavier on Pytho Corporation of course. Their stock is down now and will get the biggest bounce from the news.”

“Can we keep 12% hidden that long?”

“Hopefully. If we do it slowly we should be OK.”

“I take it you will start buying them right now, before making the calls?”

“You really can fill in for me when I'm on vacation can't you?”

Both men simply smiled and Jeremy left the room. Once again, he had brought home the bacon. The other two analysts hardly spoke to him since he had shown them up in front of Lenny. No need to call a meeting for this one. The email could have given away his contact. Jeremy was pretty certain Lenny would place that sheet of paper in the shredder as soon as he left. In fact, he could hear the shredder running now.

Jennifer, the receptionist, saw the smirk on Jeremy's face as he was walking by. She caught his eye and mouthed the word “what.” Jeremy walked over to her and whispered, “When the bonus checks come out this year you are going to want to cook me dinner and give me a massage.”

Softly Jennifer responded, “It'll take more than a big check for that, you will have to get my husband an all-expense paid tee time for a foursome at that golf club he wants to try out and settle for it being breakfast while he is golfing.”

“Interesting,” Jeremy said with a smile as he walked away. She was in her late 40s. Kids were teenagers looking at college a couple years down the road. Honestly, Jeremy thought she was simply the dutiful wife and mother working here because they hadn't saved enough for college. He had no idea that she would be open to fooling around once in a while. *The things you learn when you tease!* he thought.

John was not having a good day. Today was the day most of the workers at his company voted on unionizing. He had fought this tooth and nail and still it happened. They didn't need to avoid unionizing all together, simply to hold off for another six months or a year. John needed the data center migrations to all be completed so he could carry out his plan.

His company hadn't hired too many new people lately. In part it was due to fear they would have to pay people more once the union came in. The other reason was nobody would take the shit wages they were offering, probably because they thought the union would be taking over and they wanted to start out at better wages.

They had been short handed the last month. John was working 14 hour days himself and forcing his employees to work even longer. It's not like it was back-breaking work. Mostly just staying awake and monitoring the job schedulers. Sometimes they had to mount media for backups to run, then remove the media and label it for shipping. Backups could take hours. The systems were never off-line. There was a disk to disk backup which happened in a matter of minutes. It was the backing up of the backup to removable media that took forever. Removable media was needed so it could be taken to off-site storage.

His team had only bungled a few of the media cycle rules. It was much easier when they were shipping things to Iron Mountain, but now that the off-site backup storage was here in India, it was a debacle. The company they were using (and he assumed they owned part of) had incompetent help. Basically, John believed they were the people he had turned away. To understand the true level of that insult, you had to know just how low the requirements were to get in here.

If the people working at the remote site managed to get the correct backup media returned to John's people, it often took forever to get to it or it arrived damaged. The backup site was about a two-hour drive away. Correction, the backup site was about two hours away if anything like American highways or interstates actually linked the two places. The chuck-hole-lined mud ruts and the lack of suspension in the transport truck played hell with the backup media. Some of the cases arrived completely ruined. It looked like they had simply been tied to the back of the truck and drug all the way.

John had complained to his boss several times about this problem with the backup storage. His boss tried to look into it, but was always told “they're working on it.”

The problem reared its ugly head publicly when one of the locations needed to restore a document from a backup. Nearly three hours after the request, the backup media it should have been on arrived and was unusable. They had to go back and get the prior day's backup. This time John's boss took one of the upper management types car and brought the media in it. The car didn't look so good when he got back with it, but the media worked and they were able to satisfy the request before it was morning in America. The only benefit from the entire ordeal was that someone above John's boss was now looking into getting better transportation for the off-site storage company. He probably wouldn't have been so interested if his car hadn't developed a very large oil puddle under it after John's boss got back. John estimated the puddle was about five quarts in size. One of those chuck holes must have ripped loose the oil pan.

John went to a window and could hear the chanters out in the street through the glass. All chanting for better wages, better treatment, and a strike. *Just lovely*, he thought. *A strike will have them locking this place down like a fortress.*

When his work day finally ended, John went home to see how his new trainee was doing. This trainee hadn't picked it all up as fast as the first one, but had learned enough to be out on his own soon. Someone had given him some money and he had taken a job with a different company here in Bangalore. He had enough money that he could rent his own place in this complex and would be moving out tomorrow.

They chatted awhile. John answered a few questions, then checked his own email. It really was his own email he checked this time. Over one-third of the cells he normally handled email for were now being handled by his first trainee. This new trainee had a much more capable machine and had taken over half of John's remaining cells. John asked his current trainee when the new trainee would arrive. He was stunned to hear that this trainee would be training two others soon. They would be given the remaining cells John handled and sent to other locations.

So, I'm being phased out, thought John. Guess it didn't matter. He would be too high-profile now that there were surveillance cameras all over the data center. He was going to have to hide once his plan went into play.

It was in the middle of this train of thought when John opened up an email from a cell he used to handle. It was actually for him. Once he deciphered the message he found out they wanted information about the off-site storage company. John didn't understand why, but made a note to pull down the files from work. The bulk of the information was on the company Intranet. The place wasn't of much value as a target. It employed at most 30 people and was only of need if someone had to restore a system or a file.

John was too tired to make sense of it now. He logged out and went to bed.

The Brit was livid! He wanted to kill his entire team. He wanted to kill everyone they reported to, then he wanted to go out and kill everyone he even remotely thought was a terrorist. He had the training to do it and by God it was time he put that training to use!

What set the Brit off was the cable news. The bombings had finally happened in Luton. Three subway trains and a bus all within half an hour of each other. It appeared that the person on the bus got stuck in traffic, so he took out the bus because he missed his train.

This had been what the Brit feared. People would sit on their arses and the attack would be carried out. At least the main objective of the attack had failed. From the pattern displayed on the news, it looked like the terrorists had planned on blowing up each train as it got to the point where one tunnel joined another tunnel. This would take out or at least block the flood gates.

Why were the flood gates important? The Brit had it figured out long before the journalists. The last bomb, which went off on the bus, was significantly larger than the others. This terrorist's train would have been in the tunnel under the river when the bomb detonated. They were planning on flooding the entire subway system killing everyone on the other trains down there. Hundreds, if not thousands would be stranded with no affordable method of getting home.

It was the kind of attack which showed a lot of planning. While the people blowing themselves up might have been illiterate inbred bastards from some poverty stricken region of the world, the plan came from someone with training. Nobody on the Brit's team had seen this coming, not even the Brit. Most were assuming they were going to try and blow up a pair of trains passing each other in opposite directions to maximize casualties. Nobody had thought this far out.

"We should have thought this far out," the Brit said. They have already tried to blow up the Golden Gate Bridge more than once. Thankfully, the people they sent to do it were so useless they ended up getting busted in a routine traffic stop before they had even assembled all of the explosives for the job.

The Brit was lost in his raging thoughts when the phone rang. It was the man in the suit calling him.

"I assume you've seen the news."

"You bloody well know I have!" screamed the Brit.

"There is a team showing up at your hotel inside 15 minutes. Meet them downstairs. British authorities want to handle the remnants of the Luton cell, but we are cleared to round up four other cells. They aren't being arrested, they are being taken to our interrogation center."

"Oh! *Now* we can round them up!" screamed the Brit.

"Nobody saw this one coming, not even you!" said the man in the suit. "If you had put this before me we would have rounded up what we had. It wouldn't have stopped the attack since we only knew of a few and still hadn't seen any explosives. I'll wager that when the news starts giving us the identities of the bombers none of those names will be on our suspect list either."

That truth took some of the wind out of the Brit's sails. He hadn't seen this coming and they only had three names of cell members. This act took one more person than they had identified and there was probably a support network in place for this team.

"What do we do with the ones we nab?" asked the Brit.

“The driver knows of a building on a runway which was used for bombers during WWII. It’s mostly shut down now, but we have people arriving there to set up a holding pen and wait for the rest of the planes.”

“Planes?”

“If you get everybody on the list you will have over 60 prisoners. That’s really more than we are prepared for at the interrogation center, but we have to nab these before British authorities start wanting to nab more of their own.”

“What are my orders for tomorrow?”

“You and the rest of the team will remain with the prisoners until they have all been loaded, so pack some rations and overnight supplies. I don’t yet have another assignment for you, but should shortly.”

With that the conversation ended. The Brit went about getting his hardware and putting some MREs along with bottled water into his backpack. One thing was for certain, leading the life he led, the first thing he did when he landed anywhere was to obtain a case of MREs. Militaries around the world stopped calling the food they supplied “rations.” Now the prepackaged food troops were ordered to carry was called an MRE, Meal Ready to Eat. They weren’t really ready. You had to have a little heater kit that got hot when you put water on it to warm them up, but it was better than a can of beans, which was what rations used to be.

Most people hated being forced to eat MREs. Some of them were good, but most made high-school cafeteria food seem like fine dining and airline food a mouth-watering experience. If you wanted to survive in the field though, you had to have a tolerance for them. Some of them had some nasty preservatives. They didn’t seem to ship that 20-year bread anymore. Even the surplus catalogs didn’t have it these days. That stuff tasted great, and really would last in its package 20 years on a shelf. But it had so much MSG and other preservatives in it that if you ate the entire “loaf” in one sitting you got a severe case of the “quick step.” Nothing makes a hike pure misery faster than a case of diarrhea. In a jungle or a desert, you would be dead before the end of a two-day march unless you happened to find lots of drinkable water along the way. Gathering water along the way was always a risk.

Among the many sacrifices a professional in this business makes is they commit to eating at least one MRE per day even when they aren't on duty. It's not that you like them, you simply want to live when you are on duty.

The Brit had been given time off while waiting for his next assignment. He had come home to England and taken a room at a hotel he liked. There really wasn't much "home" left here for him. He had a sister, but he didn't really communicate with her much. They got along well, and he loved her like a sister, but given what he did for a living, he kept his distance. She was married with two kids and he didn't want to put any of the family he had left at risk.

Most people would take one look at this hotel and wonder why the Brit liked it. Achieving a two-star rating was simply a dream for it. The Brit didn't mind so much. It was a blue-collar area. There were some good pubs within walking distance and the owner liked him. The owner actually let him put a great big gun safe in a storage room. Thanks to home-owner marketing, the gun safe simply looked like a great big safe. The only thing that made it a gun safe was the inside of it having notches to stand guns upright on one side, hooks to hang hand guns in the back, and some shelves to put ordinary things on. This one even had a smaller safe in the bottom of it so you could keep really valuable stuff.

The Brit grabbed his large duffel bag and headed for the gun safe. He met the owner on his way there.

"You've seen the news?"

"Aye mate."

"They are sending you out to do something about this?" the owner queried, seeing the bag and backpack.

"Not this one so much as stopping the next three," the Brit responded. "Too many regulars involved in this one for us to wander in."

With that the owner nodded and unlocked the storage room. Normally you wouldn't lock a storage room with little of value in it, but the owner knew the gun safe was in there and given some of his clients, he'd lock up the little bars of soap if he could. The owner didn't stick around to see what was in the safe. He understood this man's occupation enough to want to know even less

than he did know.

It was always kind of odd when the Brit stayed here. It was like the whole town knew the mercenaries were back. Fights didn't happen in the bars very often. The really low-end scum didn't try to rent a room at his place. The drug dealers hid themselves, well, most of them did, the others were just found dead in an alley shortly after doing a deal in the open. The people out on these streets seemed to know the second one of these guys' planes touched down. Anyone who lived here long enough would notice the quiet. It was like the quiet when wildlife flees before an earthquake.

Vladimir had his Web surfing interrupted by a special WAV file playing on his ping server. One of the control programs he had loaded on the email user's machines was designed to gather a fresh information packet about the machine and send it to him every time the machine booted. The machine serial number indicated the long silent first trainee had found his new home.

Another program was busy sending copies of each email message he received to a special folder on the ping server. *This guy wastes no time*, thought Vladimir. A routine check of the IP address showed that an email hub was once again in Pakistan. *Well*, thought Vladimir, *at least they won't have to move too far*. He prepared an email for the man in the suit and Hans containing the new location information and a link to the folder containing the inbound email. He was pretty certain they would put the Brit to work on the email messages once his holiday was over.

The day was shaping up to be both quiet and productive. Soon there would be some new ping hits from the outbound emails being opened. Things were going to be back to normal it looked like.

Fate simply doesn't like normal. No sooner had Vladimir thought this than he got another packet from a reboot. The machine ID matched the second trainee, but the IP address looked different. A quick search of the previous packets proved Vladimir's suspicion. Still in Bangalore, but no longer with the trainer. Vladimir sent out a tiny ping request to the trainer's machine just to be sure it was still up and running. He had noticed a distinct drop off in the quantity of email messages being handled by the trainer. Now it was starting to make sense.

The second email from Vladimir was much more excited. He included the new location information and the following:

All,

Second trainee has moved to new location in Bangalore. Not far from trainer, might even be in same housing complex.

Volume of email being handled by trainer almost non-existent now. Something big is getting ready to happen and the trainer will be one part of the operation.

Vlad

As always, Vladimir was pretty certain his reports would be filed in the shredder by the man in the suit. Hans appeared to actually read them and respond once in a while, but Vladimir knew he changed little when it came to the major decisions. They did, however, take his advice about how to proceed with these email hubs; that was most unusual. Right now he was wondering if that was such good advice. Strategically it made sense if you wanted to expose as much of the network as possible, but that was before the trainer went nearly silent. Unless the team found out he had some terminal disease with only months to live, this was a scary thing. Al-Qaeda didn't normally compromise assets this well placed.

Heidi was nearly dead on her feet. As expected, the couriers didn't spend very long at the interrogation camp. In less than a week they all came to the second camp. They definitely needed a better method of harvesting because the small team they had wasn't going to be able to handle the 60+ patients that just landed this morning at the interrogation camp if they all came here at once.

She had a choice in front of her now. Drag her tired ass over to the dorm facility to take vitals, etc. of the two women there now so she could sleep longer when she got home, or drag herself back here after only three hours of sleep. It wasn't that difficult of a decision when you phrased it that way. She could have gotten four hours of sleep had she dared sleep in one of the dorm rooms not being used by patients. Two of the surgeons were on their way to do just that now.

Two of the courier women had opted to serve as brood sows for embryonic cell creation. It really struck Heidi as odd that two women who had been working for al-Qaeda would opt to do such a thing. Nikolaus explained to her that these were simply couriers. They weren't part of a cause, just someone who collected a fee for carrying a dangerous package. They served terrorists and drug dealers equally. One of the women was really a girl. She was not quite 16 yet. Besides being a courier she had been selling sex to old men. She was tested for every kind of social disease when they found that out. She was also two months pregnant when they nabbed her. Some time tomorrow she would have an abortion.

Perhaps it was because they were cooperating, or perhaps Nikolaus was getting soft in his own age. The women were allowed to choose the method of insemination they received. They were presented with three options:

1. Extraction of egg, fertilization outside of the womb, and replacement.
2. Artificial insemination once it was verified they were ovulating. This would have to be done multiple times during ovulation.
3. Natural. Also would have to be done multiple times during ovulation.

Heidi couldn't believe both women asked if they would be able to choose the men and when they were told they could only select from those at the camp they each chose natural. The women were allowed to roam around much of the dorm. They could only go out on the second story balcony. The dorm was well guarded, and even if it wasn't there was no way they could get through the camp's perimeter. It was stronger than a maximum security prison.

Each one had a television and radio. The television had a satellite feed with some movie channels. There were also quite a few books in the library area, but most were technical reference books. Of course the library wasn't much use to these women. They didn't speak much English and the girl couldn't read at all.

There were bedding, sheets, towels, etc. all provided for them. Each room had a little fridge which was kept stocked with beverages and some snacks. Meals were brought over three times per day. They had been provided some additional clothing and toiletries as well.

Perhaps Heidi was getting soft in her old age, but she asked Nikolaus to locate an audio course in Punjabi which taught English. Both spoke some broken English because it was the lingua franca of Pakistani elite and spoken by most government officials. Heidi thought things would go smoother if they were able to communicate with the staff.

The women did not have telephone or Internet access. They did have central air and the ability to control the temperature in their own dorm room. From time to time they would wander down to the recreation room which had some tables, a pool table, ping pong, cards and various board games. The recreation room had been designed for when scientists had to remain on-site over the course of weeks while running experiments. Nobody had used it who wasn't part of the team. Quite simply there weren't many experiments going on here which couldn't be done in standard work day. Besides, only the guards really knew about this room. They kept a coffee maker here. Rumor had it one or more of the guards was servicing the woman already. Boys never seem to waste much time when they find out nookey is present and willing.

It would be quite a few years before the reality of their predicament was forced upon these women. Even though they had cooperated, nobody could risk them talking. No matter how many friends they made here, at the end of their usefulness, they would be harvested.

The Ties That Bind

The Brit received his recall notice. He was going back to Pakistan to work with what was left of the team there. He didn't want to go. He had even asked if he could work from here and just email the results or place them in a different directory on the server. This was England, and England was finally stirring.

His request was denied of course, so he put off going as long as he could. British officials were given the information uncovered at the interrogation camps, but they weren't being told much about the source. Quite frankly they didn't care. They had rounded up more suspects than they currently had the capacity to deal with. This meant a blind eye was being turned to who the Brit's team was rounding up. They didn't even want any records kept.

Amazingly, all of this was happening under the noses of every international journalist sent to cover the bombings. They followed the police around like good little lap dogs and the police gave them enough footage for the evening news. Those round ups were three to five people at a time. The Brit's team was rounding up groups of 10 and 20 at a time. They were pulling them in faster than the interrogation camp could get them processed into cells. Indeed, they were being told to slow down because the camp was running out of places to put them. They didn't want to send them on until they were certain they had extracted all information. Besides, it took time to locate wealthy people in need of the organs which matched those they had. Of course the Brits team wasn't told this part.

The real backlog wasn't the prisoner processing — they were still considered prisoners at this point — it was the tech guys and gals trying to keep track of which machine came from where when they began dissecting the confiscated computers and cell phones. More than once they had uncovered a critical piece of information identifying other members and not been able to determine whose machine or phone it came from.

Part of the Brit didn't care about the analysis, but his training told him to care. The best method of finding more to round up was to do the legwork. His primary frustration was the camp being sized so small. There were literally hundreds more they should be nabbing, but no room at the inn.

It was with some regret that the Brit packed his things and got ready to board a commercial flight to Pakistan. He stored the tools of his trade in the gun safe at the hotel and handed the owner a grand to keep it secure. In truth the owner would have done it for free, but this gave him the money to upgrade another room. The low-rent hotel crowd tended to destroy everything and he was sure they would be back once the Brit was gone.

He had heard from his team doing round ups that they were occurring in a lot of countries. It seems more countries than England had come to the conclusion “due process” was something afforded only to the few you could handle in that manner. The rest were simply abducted and never heard from again. Some might call it evil, but it was a necessary evil.

America, Germany, and Russia were among the other countries where cell members were being rounded up. The same process was being used to hide it. The press was alerted to a “due process” round up where they got some great news footage, the more serious roundups happened while the media were busy looking somewhere else.

Lenny called Jeremy into his office to show him the position reports. He called the other two analysts in out of courtesy, but really only wanted to speak with Jeremy. The other two analysts weren't bright enough to realize they knew enough they couldn't be fired. They also weren't bright enough to open their own trading accounts and follow any of Lenny's plays. Jeremy was. Lenny didn't have to ask, he was certain the boy had a small trading account where he was tossing around a few thousand dollars. He didn't begrudge him making some on the side from the information making this company money. Well, he did at first, but this stream of information was coming through Jeremy and Lenny considered any debt the kid owed him paid in full. He was quickly learning how to take over the business after Lenny died. Lenny would never retire of course. At least not as long as someone didn't declare him mentally unstable and threaten to lock him away some where.

The position reports showed they owned over 9% of Pytho Corporation's documented outstanding shares. Lenny wanted more, but the mutual funds he advised had gotten too greedy. Trying to erase some losses their own incompetence had cost their funds, they jumped in with both feet when Lenny told them Pytho had a new software product coming to market inside of a month with one major client already signed.

At least the fools had stopped asking how Lenny knew what Lenny knew. Most of them were smart enough to not ask who the client was this time as well. The problem before them now was keeping enough of a lid on this to avoid investigation and having their credit called in. Once again, Lenny had maxed out the credit limits for all of his paper shells and was now going to need cash to keep the operation going until Pytho made its announcement.

Most of the funds the other two analysts handled were indexed funds. The trades for those funds were almost completely automated. The only reason there was an analyst in charge of the fund was that the regulations required it. True, they could choose to override some of the system's recommended purchases and positions, but neither of these guys had the brain power for that kind of heavy lifting.

What they needed to do now was to liquidate some positions so they had the cash to handle day-to-day operations and acquire a slightly larger position in First Global Bank. Pytho had already been priced out of purchasing range. Lenny was busy laying all of this on the table for them when Jeremy piped up.

“Here's a wild thought. Why don't we sell off our Pytho position to below 3% of the company then use the money to buy First Global Bank?”

Everyone looked at him.

“You just said Pytho was above the price we were willing to pay and still climbing thanks to the mutual fund buffoons. Let it climb for another day at its current pace and it should be cresting above our lowest targeted sell price. If I'm reading this report correctly, that is an \$8 per share profit over what we paid on the first day. Dump those shares and see if it still keeps climbing. If it is still above an \$8 profit for the next day's purchases tomorrow, dump those shares. In the mean time, we will take a position in First Global Bank. Nobody knows about it. Its share price has settled back down after the boost from quarterly numbers. Rumors are already all over the place about Pytho's new software product. It is only a matter of time before people find out it is banking software.”

“You don't think we should trim some of the shares we hold in other companies?” asked Lenny.

“Oh, our other funds have some real dogs in them that have been losing money since they day we bought them. They should have been sold long ago, but selling them won't give us the kind of play we are looking for. We can still go ahead and dump the losers we are holding, just set the parameters on the trading engine and let it trim the dead weight. That won't give us the kind of cash we are looking for and it won't stop us from paying short-term interest which we are doing right now.”

Lenny sat back in his chair and put his hands together in front of his mouth. He was obviously thinking this over. In truth, he was starting to think he was getting old. In his younger days he wouldn't have remained focused on the first play and would have already implemented Jeremy's suggestion. Perhaps he really was getting that old man disorder where they fixate on something which has little or nothing to do with the current situation. He had seen other old men get it and watched people start to marginalize them. Sadly it usually happened to an old man in charge of something so there were terrible business outcomes.

Turning one of the reports to himself he looked at the purchases for the first day. No doubt about it, the highest price they paid on the first day was a full \$8 per share below the current trading price. Every account would have its note paid off and cash left over to do Jeremy's play using just those shares. Jeremy's play was the smart one.

Yes, it was possible Pytho would go up another \$8 per share on the growing volume of rumors, but when First Global announced they were going to be able to trim nearly all of their IT staff and boatload of internal accountants because of this software package, they were really going to pop. Lenny's own rough estimate was they would save nearly \$10 million per year. That kind of cash tended to fall straight through to the bottom line.

He could easily release his analysis to the mutual funds they consulted once a position had been acquired. The mutual fund managers would start inquiries at First Global Bank as to whether or not they were going to purchase this software. A new rumor mill would start stating that First Global could save \$10 million per year by using this software. A mad rush to First Global would occur simply on the speculation they were the first customer. Speculation which would prove to not be unfounded given the fact Lenny already knew it to be the case. In less than a week they would be up over \$20 per share.

Having a new software product is nice, but until you can report sales, you can't get too big a boost in your share price. Most would assume the sale to First Global Bank paid the bulk of the development costs and the support contract would allow the product to continue for a few years. There were other banks in trouble who would be willing to purchase the software if they could get even half of the savings First Global got.

“We will do what you say Jeremy,” Lenny finally said. “It’s a good play. I will handle the sales parameters for this. Why don’t you set up the trading parameters to weed the dogs out of our portfolio this afternoon? We can all meet tomorrow and discuss how much First Global to purchase.”

“I need all three of you to go digging through the banking corporations. There are a lot of them in trouble. We are looking for some that simply aren’t doing well but aren’t too far into the FDIC watch list.”

The business school boys looked at him like he had just started speaking in a foreign language. Jeremy smiled. “Why not make a play of our own?” laughed Jeremy.

“Exactly!” said Lenny. “Only we want a bank with its data center in the U.S. and plans to keep it there. One with at least 20 developers on their IT staff. If they happen to have some branches in other countries that is fine. We want someone that can save enough money getting rid of their IT staff they’ll beg to get this software due to their financial position. The shred we do later on Pytho won’t ruin them. They didn’t chose the data center. A bank with their data centers in the U.S. will allow them to step aside pointing a finger. Yes, their share price will drop some, but not horribly once the truth comes out about who off-shored the data centers. First Global will lose its insurance, be under investigation, and a prime target for hostile take over. Who better to take them over than a bank already running their software. Simply transfer the data and the communication links on Sunday and start as a new company on Monday.”

The business school boys sat there shaking their heads. The Ivy League didn’t teach anyone to think like this. With the plan all laid out before them it was obvious it could work. Given the way these other two guys’ minds worked, the introduction could probably be made without anyone knowing “Group Lenny” was involved. Finally one of them piped up.

“You know we have a timeline problem here don’t you?”

“How so?” both Lenny and Jeremy said in unison.

“It will take months to get a new bank talked into closing the deal. First Global has already started the roll-out in France if I’m understanding the situation correctly. We’ve got about six months to get a new bank on the software so they are comfortable with it when you drop the hammer on First

Global.”

“We won't drop the hammer on First Global until they actually off-shore the U.S. data centers” responded Jeremy. “The clock doesn't start until that happens. None of the other countries' operations are explicitly governed by the FDIC; most have their own insurance bodies. It is possible one of those bodies will choose to drop the hammer on First Global before we do, but it will only be for operations in a single country. They could sell that business unit to get out from under the problem. You do bring up a point though ...” Jeremy drifted off.

“What point is that?” Lenny asked.

“We need them to find a U.S.-based bank for your play, then we need to find out what other insurance bodies are insuring the operations in other countries for First Global. One of them could have or be about to have a similar regulation about data centers staying in-country for security purposes. We need to find one other banking customer in each of those countries over the next couple of weeks. If this play works in the U.S. why not another country as well? We could have one of our paper shells issue them a loan for the software if they need it.”

“Do you think we will have enough cash to play the whole board?” asked Lenny.

“We will know some time tomorrow morning after dumping the shares we want to be rid of this afternoon. Besides, we have to cover all of the bases. If some foreign agency nails First Global before we are ready to shred them, we still want to make money from it.”

“Good point,” Lenny responded after some thought. “It might be better if one of the foreign governments starts the shred anyway. The reporters will sniff around and find out there is an American regulation stating nearly the same thing. From there it will snowball.”

The Ivy League boys had really only thought about the situation as far as the other U.S. bank not being far enough along to even accept the data from First Global when the opportunity came along. They were absolutely floored by the scenario which had just been spun out before them without any prep work.

Firms this size typically had a profit pool of \$5 million to \$10 million when it came time for profit sharing. Lenny's usually had \$20 million to \$30 million. Nobody was paid squat for salary here. The bulk of the money in the profit-sharing plan usually went to Lenny, but they had both gotten bonus checks for around \$300,000 last year. This year, if the plan played out, the firm would have about \$500 million in the pool. They had already achieved a 400% return this year for their handful of investors.

It was the other Ivy League boy's turn to pipe up now. "This is all well and good, but we need to control our traceable participation in this."

"Getting squeamish?" Lenny asked.

"A few weeks ago you were here spouting we might have a billion-dollar year this year. I've got news for you, even with the dogs in our portfolios our last little play with First Global Bank had us bringing in nearly \$800 million. One play! Not counting all of the other smaller plays we have done this year. The play we are talking about now, just the one where we buy Pytho stock and sell after the post-announcement run up is going to pull in some \$700 million to \$800 million in itself. We still have the second play on First Global buying up before they announce the cost savings of this new software."

Lenny nodded.

"I assume you are going to try and get your typical 20%-40% position if you can do it with cash."

Again Lenny nodded.

"You are estimating a \$15 to \$20 per share run up in the price?"

"Correct."

"Well sir, we will be pulling in over \$2 billion on that play, coupled with the other plays, we will probably get some SEC inquiries about how we managed to do nearly \$5 billion in business with only \$600 million in assets."

The room got quiet for a while. Everybody wanted the money. Technically, what they were doing was illegal, but it wasn't like they robbed banks or sold drugs. They simply got information before other people got it. Martha Stewart managed to go to jail when the SEC was inquiring about just that topic. Nobody in this room wanted to go to jail.

Finally Lenny said, "In the morning we will see what our cash position is. Perhaps we will only take a legal percentage in First Global this time. Then again, maybe it is finally time to use that off-shore investing company we set up. Issue it a loan and let it make all the rest of the purchases. We set it up for the day we actually got a big play like this."

Jeremy sat there after the others left.

"You have something more on your mind?" Lenny inquired.

"Does your cousin in Russia have an on-line trading account?" Jeremy asked.

Lenny sat there and slowly got a wide smile. "The taxes would be less and I'm sure he would do it for a small fee. He is not in Russia anymore though. Last time I heard from him he was in Germany. I can send him an email tonight and ask him to give me a call."

Kent was rather shocked when he got the signed contract back from the board of directors. The odd thing was it came with a formal letter telling him to proceed with this plan per the details of the contract. He took it all to Margret's office to ask her about it.

"What is so unusual?" asked Margret. "Oh, I forget, you haven't been here that long. Any time the board actually has to sign off on a capitalized project they include a letter stating they only authorize what is explicitly stated in the contract. The legal department tells them it protects them against cost overruns. It doesn't really, but they think it does. Yes, we have legal grounds to not pay the bills for an overrun, but what usually happens is the vendor stops working until they get paid, the lawyers get involved, then the project dies."

Margret could tell Kent still didn't believe her.

"Ever been to our branch in Des Moines, Iowa?"

Kent shook his head.

Margret picked up the phone and called Carol. "Can you please pull out the pictures of our branch in Des Moines, Iowa, for Kent? He's sitting in my office and this is a story which really needs pictures."

A few minutes later Carol came in. "Here is the file. Dare I ask what this is about or do I not want to know?"

Margret laughed and handed Carol the letter. Once Carol had finished reading it she looked up and said, "So?"

"Kent doesn't believe the board always sends these with a project sign off. It helps if you explain why that is with pictures," Margret responded.

"You don't need Crayons!" Kent said in a combination of disgust and embarrassment.

"Here, look at the pictures of our branch in Des Moines," said Margret handing Kent the folder.

There were a lot of shots of a construction site and a partially erected building. Not enough was completed to tell for certain it was supposed to be a bank.

"What does this tell me?" Kent asked.

"That's as far as the project ever got. The board didn't include one of these letters when they signed off on its construction. The builder bid the project with a concrete mix which wasn't up to code. When the building inspectors called him on it he tried to bill us for double his bid price. The lawyers got involved. Court case lasted nearly a year. We ended up not building a branch in Des Moines because of it. I have no idea what happened to the lot or that partially constructed disaster," Margret said.

"They did finally sell it," Carol volunteered. "After the city of Des Moines fined them for an eye sore and public safety hazard."

"So Kent, this letter now comes with each and every project the board signs off on," continued Margret, "or should I say the new board signs off on. None of those board members are still around are they?" she asked looking toward Carol.

"Nope. There was a meeting of the shareholders after that debacle and we got all new blood" said Carol. "It was the first and only \$5 million loss this bank ever put on its books."

"Surely they've issued notes larger than that which went bad," Kent said.

“Totally different. We hold a mortgage less than a week. They get bundled up and sliced up into financial instruments. Wall Street and investment firms hold them, we don't. All we have to ensure is that they meet the initial requirements when we issue the mortgage. If you are talking about business lines of credit, the shareholders don't tend to hold the board accountable if some publicly traded company has a line of credit with us and goes under. We've usually terminated them long before that happens and if we haven't there has always been some kind of criminal investigation. The shareholders hold the board accountable for projects they authorize, not standard banking ebbs and flows.”

“But they didn't do this for the data center project,” Kent retorted.

“They didn't sign that contract, you did. They told you to go ahead since the cost of the project was going to be paid for in large part by the sale of the unused assets,” said Margret. “All funding for that project came out of the IT budget. They simply agreed to let us have the proceeds from asset sales to fund the project to completion.”

Kent hadn't thought of that. He did sign the off-shoring contract. The initial dollar amount was within his authorization limit and he had told Kathryn to keep each invoice below that dollar amount so he could approve it rather than having to go to the board. Sometimes they got two invoices per month and other times they went two months without getting an invoice. Kent had only received a phone call from a board member telling him to go ahead. There hadn't even been an email message. Then again, where the data centers were and what it cost to run them was under his realm of responsibility. The board simply needed to know how much he was cutting costs, not the details of the plan.

This conversation seemed to alleviate Kent's fears. He went back to his office and left the women to continue laughing at him. At least they had the decency to close the door. He was a manager, and some times your employees laughed at you. He did feel better now that he heard it from a lawyer. Now all Kent had to do was send this contract off to Kathryn and figure out a way to put in the annual report to shareholders that he saved the company \$12 million per year. If they fired the entire board of directors over a \$5 million debacle they should more than support his elevation for saving such a princely sum of money.

After Kent left, the girls closed the door and began to laugh. “Do you think someone is finally catching on?” ask Carol.

“I don’t think he is that bright,” responded Margret. “At first I was completely against him getting that position, but now I think the board brought in a Grade-A patsy.”

“Oh well, someone has to take the fall, might as well be him,” Carol laughed.

“How true!” responded Margret. “At least I can profit from it.”

“How so?” asked Carol.

“I probably shouldn’t say anything, you are a lawyer after all,” Margret responded.

Carol got a serious look on her face, sat down, and said, “Tell me about it off the record.”

“I gave a friend some money to open an on-line trading account for me. It isn’t in my name and nothing ties to me directly. I told them to buy as much Pytho stock as they could before the announcement. The stock for this company I buy as part of the employee purchase plan. Once Pytho goes public with the product I expect their stock to jump quite a bit. Ours will bounce once Kent gives his interview saying how much we are saving. Once they have both peaked I plan on liquidating all shares of both.”

“Definitely not something you want the SEC finding out about, but as long as you don’t get greedy and you didn’t write a check for them to trace you will probably get away with it. Pytho didn’t make anyone here sign a nondisclosure agreement, so it isn’t like it was insider information, they handed out product literature,” responded Carol.

“Well, that only makes you a little,” responded Margret. “Once I’ve dumped all of the shares, I plan on using all of the money to short the hell out of this company’s stock. When the news hits about the data center issue we are going to tank and I want to be paid for it. As far as being greedy, I should be able to retire if we go below \$20 per share.”

Carol’s eyes went wide with that statement.

“I never got married or had kids. Never bought a fancy car and rarely bought a new car. I paid my house off years ago. It's not a palace, but it is more than enough for me. I've been putting money into that trading account for over 10 years. My friend is pretty good at picking and I've had my own information to work on from time to time. It's not DOT COM-type money, but it is more than enough for me to retire anywhere I want. This last round will cement that fact.”

Carol knew what the bank paid and about how long Margret had been here. She must have had a friend that was amazingly incredible at picking stocks. “I don't want to know how much,” she said finally. “I like what we have now and I don't want it to change.”

“Speaking of that,” Margret continued, “What are your plans for the next few weeks?”

“Summer vacation before the kids go back to school. I think we are taking them to Disney since they are both about the age to really appreciate it.”

“And I'm sure you will be swamped when you get back.”

“I've already told hubby I will end up having to work late the first three nights back just to catch up,” she replied with an evil grin. “I wanted to have some options after playing super mom and adoring wife for two weeks.”

Both women laughed.

Hans had been sent to locate and identify the new email hub in Pakistan. Naturally, the new center was far away from the existing headquarters. He used the cover story of being a reporter and even had a couple of the other team members act as his camera crew. There was little in the way of what they could use for a headquarters in this area and there was no way to set up an operation undetected. The new email hub was operating near the Khyber Pass close to the lawless Northern Area. While they could set up headquarters easily near Islamabad, the capital city, they would be nearly 200km away from where the communications center was. This was not a good situation.

When Hans got back to his hotel room in the capital city, he phoned the man in the suit to inform him of the situation. There would be no way to put people in under cover this time. Even if they could turn the operative, they could not monitor him as they had with Nedim. Given the tribal warlord factions in the Northern Areas, it would be suicide to send anyone in.

The new communications person was located in a remote village. He had a generator, solar power unit, and a satellite Internet connection. Al-Qaeda had definitely seen to it he couldn't be turned without them knowing about it. They still had no idea just how much the authorities knew, but given the cell round ups, Hans figured it wouldn't be long before the coding system would change. True, the operatives already in the field would have to be notified of code changes via some riskier means such as a phone call or personal contact, but in a short while, all of the good intelligence they had gathered from Nedim would be useless.

"Were it up to me," Hans finally said, "I would tell the Brit to stay where he is and give all of our information to Vladimir. He has the time and the skill to do the analysis. It is not like we are going to be working this one closely. Perhaps we can get to the new Indian communications center."

The man in the suit didn't like Vladimir. He was always being shown up by Vladimir. He was loath to give the guy any further information about this operation than he had to. Still, Hans' assessment was correct. Vladimir had both the skill and the time. Obviously he had the time given all of the other things he had done without direction. He couldn't even be punished for those things now because those things gave them their only solid leads.

Some day one of the very same agencies Vladimir was now working with was going to be sent to arrest him for his work in the Russian mafia identity-theft rings. The man had to know that, but didn't seem to care. Perhaps he assumed his ties to clandestine organizations would always keep him working like he was currently. There was some truth in that. If you were good and had a reputation, there was always a government who could give you a new identity and put you to work in a back room somewhere. With the man's skills he would be most difficult to find unless you were trying to hire him.

One thing the world didn't need right now was an outright war with one or more factions of the Russian mafia. Every government needed them to ensure al-Qaeda never got any of the stockpiled Russian nuclear or chemical weapons. They had already taken it upon themselves to handle one such situation and every government involved in this operation knew it. Kiss them off now, and al-Qaeda would be able to purchase the entire Cold War stockpile for next to nothing.

"We need to put some kind of long distance surveillance on him somehow," the man in the suit finally said. "I can let the Brit work remotely from here for a while since he is already on his way, but we need to find an excuse."

"An excuse?" Hans asked.

"We need someone high enough up in al-Qaeda visiting this location to warrant an air strike taking him and his hub out. Something which can be on the news and my government can use to state publicly they are helping in the war on terrorism. Any one of the major cell coordinators or attack planners will do. We cannot just strike him now as that would tip our hand and the others will go to ground on us."

"Agreed," said Hans. "Since anyone monitoring from a hillside will need to look native ..."

"I will make the calls and get the people," replied the man in the suit.

"There is another option available to us since you are ready to burn this lead. The tribes run a lot of drugs through that pass. He is close enough to the Afghanistan border that we could send the GPS coordinates to the Americans if we had a contact we could trust. Even someone in the Afghan military could send some troops across the border to clean this up. They just need a good excuse."

"That is a risky play. There has already been a lot of saber rattling about prior incursions. If a drug caravan stops there for the night, we would be better off having the Russian mafia come in, take the drugs, and kill everyone in their usual fashion."

"Long way for them to fly choppers, especially across a war zone."

“True, but it would remove all suspicion. Everyone can recognize the work of the Russian mafia. They specialize in brutal theatrical killings. The warlord who lost his drugs would be looking for them. At any rate, we need to get someone watching him. Stay at the hotel a few more days. I will send someone to contact you.”

The man in the suit hated to admit it, but Hans was correct. Given all of the radar and air patrols over Afghanistan today, there was no way the Russian mafia would be able to fly a squad of choppers across undetected. If they flew low, some al-Qaeda soldier would probably shoot them down. If they encountered fighter jets they wouldn't be lucky enough to encounter pilots who understood what was going on.

He also knew that his government was paying little more than lip service to the hunting down of al-Qaeda within its borders. This operation was almost completely shut down thanks to the news reports about Nedim. There were only a few in the intelligence service who knew anything about this operation. One of them would no longer communicate with anyone involved. So far there was no evidence that he had turned, just that he knew he had been compromised and was keeping his distance.

Many of the clerics in this country were supportive of al-Qaeda trying to kill infidels and, in particular, Americans. Quite a few distanced themselves from the methods after 9/11. A plane hitting the Pentagon would not have brought nearly every nation into Afghanistan. If a nation didn't have boots on the ground they had money or equipment there. Even countries that didn't like America were standing in line to get in on the action. China bought an unprecedented amount of U.S. Treasury notes shortly after 9/11 so the Americans would be able to fully fund any response they deemed necessary.

Indeed, the man in the suit wondered why China hadn't simply poured troops through that narrow little slit of a border they shared with Afghanistan. He assumed it was due to the Chinese culture having this deep sense of honor when dealing with officials and matters of state. They had lost citizens in that attack and were looking to dish out some retribution. The Afghan people may never realize this, but they should be thankful for that sense of honor. When the Americans said they wanted to build a coalition and lead the attack, the Chinese stepped aside and let them. The Russians had even offered to mix it up in Afghanistan once again. Had the Chinese poured in from their border

and and the Russians from theirs, the current population of Afghanistan would be about one third of what it is today.

Then again, Pakistan would have lost a lot of people as well. It was no secret that a lot of al-Qaeda members had slipped across the Pakistani border during the war. Because they had a coalition and were bound by United Nations treaties, coalition forces didn't invade Pakistan to get them. True, there had been some border incursions, but it was doubtful his government would have known about them had they not watched CNN. Sad to admit, but true.

The Afghan border had never been monitored in more than a few places. The lawlessness of the Northern Areas made that impossible. Those warlords owed their lives to the Americans as well, though they didn't know it. China wouldn't have thought twice about crushing that region on their way in. They would have occupied Pakistan all the way up to the Khyber Pass and given the size of their military, Pakistan would have had to submit to the occupation.

Yes, his government had nuclear weapons for quite some time, but that wouldn't have helped. China had more of them and Russia more still. As soon as Pakistan lobbed one at either army everything between the Indian and Russian borders would cease to exist. If anything was left, India would be certain to come in and finish off the job.

The man in the suit wanted all al-Qaeda members executed. He made a mental note to have Nedim killed as soon as this operation got to a more normal pace. He had no special love for the Americans or any other country targeted by them. No matter how you did the analysis, al-Qaeda was going to be the reason his country got exterminated. How he wished more members of his government could see that!

Nikolaus had been out of the office for three days this week. He was arranging for the quiet marketing and distribution of new embryonic stem-cell lines. Thankfully the party had some scientific members who understood these things. Nikolaus was simply there to discuss the business side of the arrangement. The first lines were less than a month away. Team members at the secured location had already done the extraction and were culturing the cells. They had taken over one of the small pilot labs that had been equipped

for just such an operation.

In the back of his mind, Nikolaus was already thinking of a plan to build a second secured location in a country without a ban on the creation of such cell lines. Getting these cells into the American markets was a bit tricky. You could only approach private institutions that weren't receiving any government money. Thankfully, there were some and they had deep pockets. They were banned from creating any new lines, but could purchase any lines in existence, even if they were new. Selling to locations that received government funding was a much tougher needle to thread and Nikolaus wanted no part of it for now.

There were several countries where this corporation had operations that didn't have bans on creating new stem-cell lines. He was kind of shocked that some enterprising companies hadn't started doing just what he was doing, but there was always that religion issue to deal with and most of them had some leaders who were religious or highly religious influential stockholders.

Getting a second site constructed on a smaller scale should be an easy sell for the board. True, the party controlled many of them, but he still needed to come up with a story they could sell to the media and shareholders. Now that the first site was turning a profit from the storage contracts, it would be easy to pitch the need for a second location to spread out the risk.

After the Lutton bombing everyone was a bit on edge about an al-Qaeda attack. The recent public roundups of al-Qaeda cell members in Germany had many people on a heightened state of alert. The Lutton bombing was larger and more coordinated than anyone had expected. Several bombs of the size used in that attack, detonated at the correct locations, could damage, if not take out the freezer storage. They wouldn't need to make it into the compound, but if they did, replacing all of those doses would be a major financial loss.

When Nikolaus got back to his desk, he asked one of the lawyers working for the corporation who was a loyal party member to identify countries that did not have extradition treaties with either Germany or the United States. Once he had that list he would compare it to the list of locations the company already had operations. From there he should be able to easily identify a site and a plan.

The second selling point for this entire plan would be the reduced air time to some of the subscribing locations. Any country which didn't have extradition treaties would not be in Europe. It would make sense for Nikolaus to set up a residence near this site as well. Nothing too extravagant, just large enough for himself and several party elders in case they had to hide out for a while. There would need to be a secured room containing lots of cash in different currencies, passports and other identity-making equipment — your standard safe house fare for war criminals and other high-profile political refugees. They should also stock some of those language learning tapes. Anyone running from this operation was going to need to hide for a very long time.

With that thought done Nikolaus turned his attention to the reports from operations. The team must be staying at the camp these days. Black market organ sales had brought in a cool \$20 million. The nice thing about having a company this size was it was easy to hide revenue sources below \$100 million. Having some black ops contracts for government work made it even easier. Nobody questioned unnamed revenue sources when they closed the books on a quarter. The only problem was handling the cash.

Wall Street seemed to already be pleased with the results. Even some of the “ethical conscience” funds had been investing in the company because some of the board members appeared so religious to them. Nikolaus had to laugh at that. If they only knew! Then again, all of the really hideous crimes against humanity had been done in the name of one religion or another, so why shouldn't they be investing in this?

Briefly, Nikolaus wondered how short the careers would be of those Wall Street analysts who were going on business talk shows pushing their strong buy rating of his company once the truth came out. Eventually it would come out. How soon Nikolaus did not know. When the body count started approaching tens of thousands he was sure something would start to leak. It would take years for the team he had in place to reach that kind of count, but Nikolaus was a forward thinker.

They were already assembling a second team. Heidi had been helping him in selecting members from the loyal party roster. There were hundreds to choose from and only the surgeons needed real skills. Heidi said she could teach any dock worker to use the machine she was using for blood extraction as long as they weren't squeamish. It may seem ghoulish, but they tended to conduct the interviews in a room where people were either donating blood or a table with pouches of blood being sorted for shipment. Some candidates didn't make it five minutes.

Vladimir was quite shocked when he opened up the Web page for his personal email account and found a message from his cousin Lenny. It wasn't his birthday or a major holiday and those were usually the only two times he heard from the man. It wasn't like Vladimir made it easy to keep in touch. He set up this email address for family members and checked it a few times per month. The life he had led made cutting most family ties a requirement. You never knew when someone would try to use your family to get to you. As a result this was a nondescript email address paid for via a false identity he never used during an operation.

Vlad,

Long time no chat. Call me on this cell phone number when you are free to talk. Have a favor to ask of you. Need to hear from you before Friday.

Lenny

At the bottom of the email was a cell phone number Nikolaus didn't recognize. He assumed something bad had happened. Vladimir knew a little about his cousin's operation. He had even done some analysis for him many years ago. Lenny probably needed a place to hide from the law or someone to launder some money for him. Still he was family and one of the few Vladimir had any contact with.

He reached over and opened up a brand new disposable cell phone. Vladimir bought these a box at a time. Always the same model so he had lots of interchangeable chargers and batteries. He put a fresh battery in the phone and made the call. It would be the wee hours of the morning in the United States, but Lenny didn't specify a time.

After the third ring Vladimir heard a very sleepy “Hello.”

“Hello Lenny, been quite a while.”

“Vlad?”

Vladimir could tell the cobwebs were starting to clear.

“Let me go downstairs and get some caffeine. Call me back if I lose you.”

“What is the nature of the favor you need?” Vladimir could hear the sound of doors closing and feet padding down some steps.

“I was wondering if you still had an electronic trading account?”

“I have several and access to others. Why do you ask?”

“There is a series of stock plays we are doing which is simply going to be too big for us to do here and hide. I need to transfer some cash to one or more of your accounts and tell you what to do. Need the trading accounts to be completely off-shore and personal so the SEC can't really inquire on them if they try.”

Vladimir heard the distinct sound of a soda can being opened and someone swallowing.

“How much are you looking to transfer?”

“I won't have an exact number until later this morning. Need to do lots of small transfers to avoid suspicion. I'd like to put about half a billion in play if I can.”

“There is no way to do that through a personal account. Even through a dozen personal accounts. This would have to go through one of my contacts back home that has an investment firm like yours. I could only handle about \$5 million spread across 4 accounts.”

“What kind of margin would your contact be looking to make?”

“This wouldn't be the kind of contact you could sue if they tried to hang onto the money.”

“I pretty much figured that given the life you lead or at least used to lead. I was hoping you were set up to handle it yourself. Played correctly, we could be looking at a return of over \$20 per share in less than 6 weeks.”

“How certain is this Lenny?”

“Certain enough I can't risk making the play here. I've made too much this year to remain below radar much longer. I have one off-shore company I set up to do plays like this, but there is a possibility it could be tied back to me. I will have to keep the play there rather small. Two to three million shares tops.”

“Do you still have a passport?”

“Yes, why?”

“Will you have this phone with you a few hours from now?”

“Yes, but why are you asking about a passport?”

“I will run this past my contact. If he is up for it he will want to meet you face to face and hash out the terms. When you get to the office in the morning, call your travel agent and have them arrange a business trip to Nuremberg, Germany. Have them book you a suite at the Maritim Hotel in Nuremberg.”

“Why am I booking the travel before you know they are interested?”

“You will have to get a 1-3 day business trip visa so best to slam it through a travel agent. They will need the morning to push it through to get you on a flight out tomorrow. Above all, don't lie at customs. Tell them you are here on business to talk with another investment firm. Be sure to have your business cards with you and that your company pays for the flight.”

“They will probably want more of a cut than you are willing to pay unless you have more than this play for them to run with. If I still know you this is one of a series of plays you have orchestrated, but they have become too successful so now you need to spread the income around to avoid going to prison, correct?”

“Nice to hear from you again, too, Vlad,” Lenny laughed into the phone.

Vladimir laughed as well. "Bring some company letterhead with you so you can print up some kind of letter of intent for exchange of business analysis information. Nothing binding, just something which can be signed and placed on file in case there is some issue later with the authorities."

"This won't be a German firm will it?"

"Goodness no! That would be too risky ... well, too risky on such short notice. Bah! Couldn't risk going through the German legal system. Don't worry, the company will be Russian. The courts there are too busy prosecuting murderers and drug dealers to bother with people who made money in the American stock market."

"See you soon then."

"Looks like."

A few short hours later, Lenny arrived at the office and sent an email to the travel agency his company used. He retrieved his passport from his personal office safe and put it in his briefcase. While he had the thing open he went out to the receptionist desk and got some company letterhead and put it in a big manilla envelope to protect it.

With that out of the way he began checking the cash position of the company. There was over \$500 million cash on hand in the general fund after last night's clearing. The various other accounts had lots of cash as well.

Jeremy arrived while Lenny was still going through the cash positions.

"You're in early," he said as he walked into Lenny's office.

"Glad you are here!" said Lenny. "I'm going to be flying to Germany later today to meet my cousin and someone who can help us."

Lenny opened one of his desk drawers and pulled out some legal forms, then handed them to Jeremy. "We need to go to the bank and get these forms taken care of as soon as possible. The manager usually gets in around 8:30. Call over there and make an appointment for us."

"What is this about?"

“I will be in Germany closing the deal, so I will need to authorize you to sign for the wire transfer. We will have to get these forms signed and notarized there this morning, and they will have to get a user ID, password, and authorization code for you. Our bank won't let this kind of transfer go out without an authorized signature.”

“I already have an account to do transfers, I do them all of the time.”

“That account has a \$100K limit. We will be sending \$500 million out to be put into play. I'm assuming our new business partner will need the transfer to complete before I leave. If you haven't guessed, yes, I heard from my cousin and the play is too big for any of his accounts. He has contacts at a firm much like this one in Russia. To make it all legal like we will issue a letter of intent to invest in their company and let them put money to work for us.”

“We aren't going to handle the play through our off-shore company?”

“A small portion of it yes. The other accounts will all make small plays as well. I hate to admit it, but that Ivy League boy was correct.”

“Which one?”

“There's a difference?”

Both men laughed.

“When he said this play was too big to avoid scrutiny, he was correct. A Russian investment firm making a big play is outside of the reach of the SEC. We will get a much smaller return, how much smaller I do not know yet, but we will avoid prison and trial. I'm still worried about the off-shore company we set up. The lawyer who did it was a putz. I honestly believe he got a job there because he was someone's brother-in-law.”

Jeremy laughed.

“I'm serious!” Lenny said, still bustling around gathering things up.

“Perhaps your cousin knows a reliable Russian lawyer who can set us up a corporation in a country without a U.S. extradition treaty.”

That stopped Lenny in his tracks. “I hadn't thought about that. You know, this new investment firm might be able to do it for us as part of the deal. It will give them a clean place to park our money.”

“I just hope they have better lawyers than we had doing it,” said Jeremy.

“Isn't that the truth! I still cannot believe I let him do it.”

“Well, I had best go call the bank.”

“Yes, yes, off with you now.”

Critical Momentum

The team in India had located both the trainer and the recent trainee. They lived in the same housing complex built by some American company or its off-shore wing. They found a building which was suitable to use for headquarters, but not for interrogation purposes. Some members were looking around for an abandoned shed out in the country. The problem was housing in the city was so abysmal that people who didn't have money were going out into the country side and pretty much stealing the materials of any building that didn't have someone there defending it.

Even though the team was told to observe from a distance, they tailed both men to find out where they worked. It turned out that the trainer worked at a newly built data center which seemed to be hiring a lot of people at very low wages. That was about to change though because the workers voted to unionize.

The person running the new email hub worked at a call center a little farther away. How either of them was paying rent here given what their companies paid for wages should have been indication enough they were working a side job. You cannot make \$200 per month and pay \$300 per month in rent.

Since the man in the suit was still back at the old Pakistani headquarters, they decided to take matters into their own hands. Two members had fake backgrounds generated for them. One applied for a job at the call center and the other applied at the data center. The person at the data center was told the company was not going to be hiring until they had hammered out a deal with the union. Could be a day, might be a month, may not happen at all.

The rest of the team was beginning to worry about the member who applied at the call center. He had been gone 14 hours without reporting in. Finally he showed up at headquarters and said he was headed back to his apartment for sleep. He was hired and started that day. He was working on the same floor as the suspect and only a few aisles away from him. The team had dipped into the operational fund to set several members up with their own apartments in the same complex as the two suspects.

Three members shared an apartment, which allowed them to observe the entry to both suspects' apartments. One of the apartments they had gotten for a member just happened to be directly above the apartment where the new email hub was running. They obtained some tools and equipment to install both video and audio surveillance in the apartment below. Because this person was also now a coworker of that man, they had to hide the wiring and recording equipment. This meant they actually had to put the carpet back down and the cable under it once they had drilled through the floor and tapped into the overhead lights of both the living room and the second bedroom where the computer was.

While the team was checking out the video equipment, they noticed the man actually had a land line phone in his apartment. This was quite unheard of in India. They cobbled together an extension cord, an AC regulator, and a gator clip; then accessed the main phone panel for the building. Only four phones had actually been hooked up. They didn't want to risk a tap being discovered at the site, so they went to work with the AC regulator while one team member stayed inside on a cell phone watching the surveillance equipment. On their third try, they found the phone line.

Most phone systems had been based on the American standard of TIP and RING. A land line phone actually only uses two wires. The TIP is always positive and the RING is rather odd. When the ringer on the phone is idle, this line has -48 volts DC. To make the phone ring 90 volts of 20hz AC current is superimposed on the line. To find out which phone line went to this apartment, they simply put the correct current on the ring line for a second and waited for a report on the cell phone. When the person observing the surveillance equipment heard the phone ring, he reported it.

As the men returned to the apartment one of them asked the man who built the ring generator, "Why are the lines called TIP and RING?"

“They are names which stuck around long past their usefulness.”

“You sure you're not an MBA, because you gave me a response, not an answer and that is exactly what they do.”

“Have you ever seen old black and white photos or newsreel footage, on the History Channel or any other place, of women wearing these big headsets sitting at a funky table with a lot of cables sticking up, and a big board to plug them into in front of them? The old telephone operator footage?”

“Yes, so?”

“Each one of those retractable cables had a special pointed connector on it, much like the connectors you see for AC adapters to power 12-volt or lower DC equipment, only much larger. Inside of the cable was two wires. One wire went to the tip of the connector and another wire was connected to one of the rings on the larger part of the connector. You've noticed how some of those pointed adapters have those ridges going around them haven't you?”

“Yes, but I thought it was just to keep them in place.”

“In part it is, but it also makes for a different connection point. That is why they have different colorings. At any rate, most telephones still use two wires and most people still call those wires TIP and RING.”

With all of the prep work done, the team set in for a long boring surveillance routine. At least now they were doing it from an apartment where they could keep food in the fridge and easily use the bathroom. They had heard what a team was going to have to do to observe the new email hub in Pakistan. None of them wanted any part of that duty. Oh, it wasn't just the lying in the sun under desert temperatures, the bug bites, scorpions, and having to shit in your own den to keep from making any more footprints — it was the region itself. There was no telling when a drug caravan would come along and kill you simply because you were there.

At last they wrote up a summary of their work and all current information they had on the two suspects. The summary was attached to an email which was sent to both Hans and the man in the suit.

Stacie returned home to her roomies after nearly a month in France. To some it sounds really nice to say it out loud, but Stacie didn't want a trip like that again. Three grueling weeks moving from location to location staying in a different hotel each night and packing each morning. It didn't help that she had the vocabulary of a second grader in French and most of the tellers they were training wanted nothing to do with the PC that showed up at their window the day before.

There was one bright spot though. Because First Global had to obtain a standardized computer and get it installed at each teller window in each location, they had agreed to shut locations down as the roll-out progressed. Each location would be down for about half a day while the new computers were installed and the first bit of training happened. The rest of the day was spent walking around answering questions as best she could. Thankfully she had been assigned a Pytho training person who spoke French natively.

On her next to last day in France, Stacie emailed Jeremy.

Jeremy,

It has been a long grueling road trip. We work until the bank closes every night, then drive to the next town with a bank location or as close as we can get where there is still a hotel. Wake up at 5AM local time and arrive at the bank to begin a training session at 6:30AM.

This weekend we ARE going to Salish. Make the reservation and be sure to book a two hour session in the Spa for me on Saturday. Massage, mud treatment, the works!

Miss you

Stacie

Part of her was worried about putting the little affectionate closes on these email messages, but the other part of her knew that if they turned up in an audit it would be better for both of them to be dismissed as young lovers using the company email rather than what they were really doing. *Then again*, Stacie thought, *if he makes anywhere near the money I think he is going to make from this information, he should be setting me up as at least a 'Kept Woman' if he doesn't have the mettle to make an honest woman out of me.* That last thought really shocked Stacie. She hadn't thought about getting married since she was a little girl. Stacie wanted it all. The good life, the expensive clothes, the international travel, and the career. She was in no way looking forward to totaling out her body by having someone's kid. *It must have been something I ate which made me think that.*

When Stacie's roomies got home from their jobs, they couldn't wait to badger her for all of the details. Of course Stacie had to fill them in on the grueling pace first and they dutifully listened, considering it the toll that must be paid to travel this road. Then Stacie pulled out the road map of France she had bought. On it she had marked every town and put a number by it. In a document on her notebook she had a trip diary that she planned on sharing with Kathryn. It listed the date and each location as well as the hotel they stayed at the night before.

On those rare occasions when they were in a city large enough to have more than one branch, the girls actually were taken out for supper by the branch manager. One branch manager decided that these ladies had eaten in too many restaurants and actually took them to his home for a meal prepared by his wife and mother-in-law.

Little was done in the way of sightseeing except on Sundays. Many branches were open on Saturday so this was a six day work week. There were only four locations in Paris and Stacie wasn't senior enough to pull rank for those. She had gotten to see some smaller museums and tour some wineries. Her roomies took the opportunity to thank her for the bottles of wine she had sent. They had all been torn between trying it and waiting for her to return so they could share. When she was finished one of her roomies said, "Wow. Sounds like you didn't have a good time."

“It was a working trip, not a vacation,” responded Stacie. “Besides I’m taking Friday off to fly out for the weekend. Won’t be coming back until Monday.”

“Where are you taking off to now?” her roomies asked.

“Salish Lodge for a weekend of pampering and incredible sex. I’ve got two hours in the spa on Saturday afternoon for massage, mud bath, the works.”

Total jealousy filled the room. It was the honor of those achieving a new plane of womanhood to feel an elevated level of satisfaction and achievement from such a swell of jealousy, much like a surfer riding a wave. It was the duty of all girls who claimed to have achieved some level of womanhood to provide said jealousy in the air when another of their rank scored such an achievement.

Stacie looked right into their eyes with a smile, laughed lightly and asked, “What?” Their eyes screamed back the phrase “I haven’t had good sex in over a month you bitch!” but outwardly one of them asked the question they both wanted to know: “Same guy as the restaurant?”

“If you must know, yes.” Of course they must know! Asking is part of the unwritten law of womanhood!

“You must have him totally whipped!”

“Guess we’ll see,” smirked Stacie and the rest of the girls laughed. “If you are still working him over at Christmas you should have him bring friends and take us all out on New Year’s,” suggested one of her roomies. “Hear! Hear! I second that!” chanted the other roomie. “You’ve dipped into the wealthy and eligible pool, time to share the pool pass.”

“Ladies, this is only the second weekend away with the guy. It’s not like I own him yet!” laughed Stacie.

“It’s your second FANTABULOUS weekend with the guy!” one of her roomies exclaimed. “New Year’s is only four months away so tell him this weekend. You know how long it takes guys to get organized for something like this.”

Stacie got a wicked gleam in her eye as she became silent and looked at them. They sensed something was up and got quiet, too. Finally Stacie broke the silence by saying, "So ladies. Are you both telling me that you agree here and now to sleep with whomever we bring for your dates from his pool of friends?"

Glances went back and forth. Cheeks blushed. Heads nodded. "Is that a yes or a no?" asked Stacie to stretch out the tease. "Yes," they both said in unison. "Does that mean you're going to do it?"

"Get me some digital pictures of yourselves and I will email them to him tonight. Then you ladies need to think about what hotel you want to have sex in on New Year's. I believe he still has quite a few good looking single friends."

Both girls hugged her and scampered off to copy some pictures of themselves for Stacie. Neither of them had ever managed to be dating a great guy who had both the resources and desire to take them to one of those all-inclusive, grand hotel New Year's Eve parties. Stacie knew this would be special for them. She also knew that both girls had done a few one night stands in their day, so this wasn't going to be that difficult for them. She didn't bother to tell them that she knew some of Jeremy's friends from college. This should be an easy setup. Jeremy wasn't about to turn down guaranteed great sex with her on New Year's and his pool of still-single male friends weren't the type to get tied down so they would be able to commit to a sure thing. Four months lead time would give them time to put away some cash for the evening, perhaps even get themselves better suits.

Hans had just finished hooking up the satellite Internet connection and satellite phone system in the new headquarters. He booted the main server, then, when it was done, booted his laptop to check email. It had taken him all of six hours to get this far. He still had to set up the wet erase board in the room they would use as a war room and set up what would serve as an office for the man in the suit. When it comes to the assignment of office space in a new temporary headquarters, rank was irrelevant. If you expected others to set things up for you, then you got what they gave you. Hans' office was a full six square feet bigger than the one for the man in the suit.

There were only three other office type rooms and one other large area meant for some kind of cubical furniture. Most of the team would make do with some office folding tables, secretary chairs, and locking file cabinets. They were only here for briefings and coffee. This wasn't supposed to be as involved an operation as the one they ran in Pakistan.

Plowing headlong though his email, Hans got to the one sent by the team already on-site. He let out a long low whistle when he read what they had done. The man in the suit was actually going to show emotion over this. They went way beyond their orders. Hans was one of the few allowed to go beyond orders. Still, what they had done had been correct. Had Hans been here to pass it by, he would have authorized it. One thing was certain, this team was mostly professionals. Because none of them knew about Vladimir, Hans forwarded the email onto him just to see what came of it. Then he sent the team an email telling them where the new headquarters was. He also scheduled a meeting for the following day while their suspects were both at work.

Hans sat back and wondered what the odds were for one of the team to get recruited by al-Qaeda. They certainly knew where two of their communications people were working. Did these people also do recruiting? Nobody really knew. Until now it was always assumed that the clerics and a select few recruited, but that assumption didn't seem to hold water when it was compared to the stories coming back from the interrogation camp. Most were recruited locally by someone they knew and specifically for an objective.

The cells didn't seem to be like unions, which simply wanted body counts paying dues. They seemed to have a couple of leaders, then swell their numbers for a particular strike. Once the strike occurred they would scatter and regroup somewhere else ... those who had not been chosen for martyrdom. Hans still had to laugh at that phrase "chosen for martyrdom." What it really meant is the fat cats told you to die and like an idiot you did it. Hans had been on his fair share of suicide missions. At least with a suicide mission there was some probability, however small, of coming back alive. If there wasn't, Hans wouldn't be sitting here today.

He wrote all of these thoughts down in an email which he sent to Vladimir and the man in the suit. He felt Vladimir should be brought into the decision making level. The man could really think things through, and without him their operation would have been over. Might as well completely piss off the man in the suit today by letting him know Vladimir's opinion was to be included.

"If the man in the suit actually managed to get in country in time for tomorrow's meeting, it should be entertaining and educational for all," laughed Hans. "He has little choice but to come now, we are way off his game plan and running with the ball."

The Brit was rather angry when he got back what was left of the old headquarters. He barely had a place to sit or a machine to work with. He thought he would be sent to a new temporary headquarters somewhere close to the communications center. When the man in the suit told him the reason they hadn't set up a new headquarters in this country, he was rightly coked. He threw stuff, he cussed, he hollered, and most of all he wanted to go back home to continue with the roundups. "Working on a remote server is working on a remote server," he argued.

When it came to the man in the suit, there were a lot of rumors and very little fact. Some said he had organized death squads for some militant regime, others said he was a war criminal who really came from Afghanistan and was simply doing this job to keep security forces off his back. All of the rumors had one thing in common: They described the man in the suit as the kind of guy who would put little sore ass ducks in salt water for no other reason than he could. Today, the Brit was learning the truth behind that statement.

"I have decided we will work as best as we can from here until we can deal with this communications center."

"Deal with it? We can't even get close to it."

"Some special-forces, long-range recon personnel have been dispatched. They will observe from one of the mountain peaks about a mile or so away and look for a high-profile target."

"A target? Just whack the site."

“There would be no believable cover story and al-Qaeda would know we are onto their trainer. We have to sit and observe, waiting for an opportunity to have the Pakistani military blast it off the map. They will put out a story about the high-profile target being there and that will be the reason the hut was blown up. Everything else was just collateral damage.”

“Just how many targets like that visited our last communications center in the time we had control of it?”

“None. This one is different though. Being located in Khyber Pass, it will be where field commanders go into and out of Afghanistan when their communications equipment is down. There is a very high probability we will identify someone on the international most wanted list.”

“In the mean time, I’m stuck here working remotely with most of the office equipment gone. You can’t even get a bloody cup of coffee here!”

The man in the suit was not having a good day. He knew Hans was correct and the Brit should have been sent on. The simple truth was that the man in the suit was old school Pakistani. He hated India and was looking for any excuse not to go. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of money then stuck it in the Brit’s hand. “Go buy another coffee pot and coffee. Don’t forget cream and sugar. See if we still have any cups before you leave.”

Lenny touched down in the early morning hours, at least his body clock said it was early morning. It looked like noon outside. He managed to get through customs with his briefcase and one piece of luggage. He was lucky enough to see a big display board with the hotels listed in separate squares. Each one had a three digit number to dial on the special phone for the shuttle service. *Thank God the person spoke English!* Lenny thought as he heard them pick up. He said his name and the airline he had just arrived on. They told him to watch for the shuttle bus. It should be there inside of 15 minutes.

Within the hour Lenny was checked into his room and calling Vladimir via his disposable phone. Vladimir told him the meeting was in five hours. He should eat something and get to sleep. Keep the phone by the bed with the ringer on loud. Vladimir would call him one hour before the meeting. The meeting was to occur in his hotel suite. Vladimir would contact room service and arrange for meals to be delivered to the room. This would be a meeting where you ate and drank. Lenny agreed to everything, then went in search of some fast food. The hotel restaurant was still serving a breakfast buffet. Lenny really had a taste for a burger and fries, but after starving on the flight the “all you can eat” part was starting to sound good.

Lenny was later pulled out of a coma-like sleep by a bizarre noise. He fumbled around in the fog of his brain and searched with his bleary eyes around a room he did not recognize for the source of it, but then it stopped. *Where the hell am I?* he thought, rubbing his face and eyes trying to wake up. Then that noise came back. He saw it was coming from a cell phone on the night stand so he grabbed it and answered “Hello.”

“You must have really been out of it,” said the voice on the line.

“Still am,” responded Lenny.

“You have just under an hour to get ready for the meeting,” said the voice.

“Meeting?”

“Go take a shower. I will be there in half an hour.”

“OK. Vlad?”

“Good. Your synapses are beginning to fire again. Glad I’m not there as I think it would be a frightening sight.”

“At least I know where I am now. I’ll get a soda out of the vending machine to wake up, then take a shower.”

“Just be done with the shower before I get there. I haven’t seen you since we were kids and don’t want you answering the door in a towel like you were expecting some prostitute.”

Lenny laughed and hung up.

Vladimir's comment struck home at least partially. Lenny found some pants to put on before wandering the hall looking for a soda machine. He also managed to find his room key before walking out of the room. *That would just be perfect*, he thought. *I know about three words of German and none of them would help me get the hotel staff to unlock my door.*

Lenny finished his shower and got dressed. He was sitting at the table in the other room his suite came with going through the documents he brought with him. The hotel had a business center downstairs so they would be able to write up some official looking letter and print it out on the company letterhead he had brought with him. Then there was a knock at the door.

They had not seen each other since they were about 9 or 10, but Lenny had not expected the site of Vlad in a wheelchair.

“Greetings, Lenny.”

“Hello Vlad. Please forgive me, but you said nothing about being in a wheelchair over the years.”

“Wasn't much point. I am what I am and do what I do. I just get shot at less now. The food should be here inside of 15 minutes. I checked downstairs before coming up in the elevator.”

“When do you expect the others?”

“Knowing them, following the scent of food and Vodka up the elevator to this room.”

Lenny laughed. “At least we will have something in common.”

“So, you have been doing many of these plays?”

“Never one this big. Well, that's not true. Never one where I had this much cash to throw at it. I've had a lot of plays which returned far more, but never had half a billion to throw into them. Probably a good thing or I would be in jail and unable to visit you, cousin.”

Now it was Vladimir's turn to laugh. “In Russia I can help keep you out of prison. You should consider moving there.”

“I couldn't have run my company remotely before now.”

“And now you can?”

“I have one guy working for me who is a natural at this. He isn't far from being able to fill my shoes. In truth, he came up with the information which allowed for this play and designed much of the play. As long as he could reach me by phone from time to time I could reside anywhere.”

“Then why don't you move?”

“My wife would divorce me in a heartbeat if I mentioned taking her away from her favorite American shopping malls for more than a month. Then I couldn't afford to live in a cave.”

Both men laughed.

“Thankfully, my occupation kept me from engaging in the most dangerous of habits.”

“You don't realize how dangerous it is until you are already married and starting to really make money. Then it is just too late to get out.”

Another knock on the door interrupted the conversation. The joke became a reality at that point. Standing behind the room service cart were four men. One of them was obviously a hotel worker and Lenny assumed the others were the ones he was to meet. “Gentlemen! Come in.” He stood aside and gestured them all through.

Lenny shook hands then removed his briefcase from the table as the hotel worker began setting up the table for the meal. Once the table was set and the hotel worker tipped with a \$20 bill, Vladimir began the introductions.

“Gentlemen, this is my cousin Lenny from America. He is bringing some almost legitimate work to you.”

The other men chuckled at such an introduction.

“Lenny, this is Dimitri and his two assistants. I must apologize for not knowing their names.”

Lenny shook Dimitri's hand and Dimitri took over. “On my left is Boris and my right is Gleb.” Once again the hand shaking continued.

“Let's all sit and eat,” said Lenny. “I don't know what Vladimir ordered for us, but I'm sure I paid for it, so eat heartily.”

More laughter filled the room. Things were relaxing between the men. During the meal Dimitri asked, “So tell me Lenny, what is it your company actually does?”

“Well, given that you are friends of Vladimir, I will tell you the truth. On the surface we are simply industry analysts. While we do invest some money for others, we are not a licensed investing firm. At least we don't have the kind of license and regulation which would be required to open regular mutual funds. In truth, what we do is find information at least three days in advance, then act on it. We will not use information if it doesn't have at least a three-day lead time.”

“And in your country this is not considered legal?”

“Not even close. Nearly everybody does it, but when you get caught you tend to end up paying huge fines, or going to prison. You may have seen the news reports about Martha Stewart?”

The men nodded.

“It is highly profitable though,” chimed in Boris. “A three-day lead gives one time to spread trades across many accounts to avoid detection.”

“Exactly why we need the information at least three days in advance. In the matter of the current play I came to talk with you about we have had the information months in advance. We have already done several plays and more than doubled our assets. There are several big plays yet to be had with this information, but we cannot put all of the cash into it via our normal channels without getting caught. It is simply too much money. Like trying to hide an ocean liner in a bathtub.”

All of the men chuckled at that one.

Gleb finally entered the conversation saying, “We tend to be very good at taking people's money.”

Now everybody laughed heartily.

“What is the nature of this *play* as you call it?”

“We have known for many months that First Global Bank was in the process of off-shoring all of their data centers. While the cost savings has helped their stock some, they are going to run afoul of banking regulations when they off-shore the last two data centers. That time is approaching. At that point they will lose their FDIC insurance and most likely be taken over by the government to be liquidated or forced to bring operations back into the U.S. That play is a ways down the road though.”

The other men at the table weren't that interested until the final sentence. Now they were all paying attention.

“You might have noticed some stock movement for Pytho Corporation lately.”

Dimitri nodded.

“We were a big part of that movement. We found out some time last quarter that Pytho was about to rollout a new software product for a niche market. We made our buy while they were low, then sent out the leak about the new software product. I assume you have also heard that leak?”

Dimitri nodded again.

“Do you know what the niche is?”

Dimitri shook his head.

“Banking”

The other two gentlemen sat more forward now and began to pay closer attention.

“The first client they have signed is First Global. They have just completed or are about to complete the roll-out of this software to all French banking operations. As Pytho delivers other countries it will be rolled out to them. We don't have hard estimates yet, but they should complete roll-out to everywhere inside of six months. At some point soon Pytho will announce the new software product and some time shortly after that First Global will announce how much money they intend to save using it.”

“Just how much money will they be saving?”

“Using a third-party product allows them to terminate all IT staff in every country except for a token few kept around for whatever reason. It also lets them get rid of all the other computer systems. My own estimate is that they will reduce operational costs by at least \$10 million per year. France alone will save them nearly \$2 million per year.”

There was silence and some glances. It was obvious to the men that Lenny was laying it all on the line. They could refuse to invest the money for him and use this knowledge for their own profit if they wanted.

“What would you have of us?”

“I need to set up some kind of investment arrangement with you, get some money in your hands as quickly as possible, then have you start buying an awful lot of First Global. I will tell you when to dump it. I will also tell you when to start selling short.”

“You have no interest in making more money from Pytho Corporation?”

“I’ve already made over \$8 per share from it in 72 hours. Yes, it will go up some more after the announcement, but not enough to warrant my attention at this time. First Global is currently trending down thanks to other financials and is now below where it was before I did the first play. That is where the money is to be made. Once they announce the use of Pytho software, the rest of the industry will find out about \$10 million per year in cost savings. Coupled with the dramatic drop in data center costs, plus the profitable sale of a few data centers their stock will be up another \$20 per share after they announce this quarter’s numbers. I’ll be getting out once it crosses the \$18 bump threshold.”

“And you wish to start shorting as soon as you are out?”

“I’ll contact you and tell you when to start shorting, if I decide to make that play. We will be shorting Pytho Corporation and Big Four Consulting, but some other country may force me to walk away from the First Global shorting.”

Even Vladimir was paying attention now.

“We haven't finished our research yet with respect to the insurance requirements and restrictions put forth by other countries. In the U.S. there is a restriction that all workers with significant access to a bank's computer system must go through government background and security checks. When the data center is in a different country and not owned by the bank, it is quite hard to enforce the background checks and/or do them well. There may be another country on the list with the same restriction. First Global is converting the foreign countries first because they have the highest cost of operation and least positive impact on the bottom line. I know for a fact the announcement will come soon and that the French migration isn't going to cause this problem. I will get to make the first play. The others will happen if no other country gets in the way, and if that happens the others just won't be as big of a play.”

There was silence in the room now. Dimitri was looking directly at Lenny contemplating. Finally Dimitri spoke. “You don't mind us and our clients riding along on this big play?”

“They can ride along, but they cannot ride along big unless you can spread the trades across hundreds if not thousands of trading accounts held by individuals. Too much money being put into this will alert suspicion before it is time. Once you notify me that all of my money has been invested I will put out the rumor that First Global is the first client of Pytho's software. After that they can ride with as much as they want. The rumor will spread like wild fire.”

“You have no objection to some of our clients taking a small gain with Pytho on its way up after the announcement?”

“That information is out there, do with it what you will, I can only handle so many angles of this at once.”

Again Dimitri nodded. “And you are looking to put half a million in play?”

“Half a billion” responded Lenny. “That is why I need someone who can spread the trades around. If all of that hits from one place on one day it will attract too much attention. When it comes time to do the shorting there will probably be three quarters of a billion sitting in the account that will allow for a lot of shorting credit.”

“We have quite a few customers we advise privately. Being able to bleed them the Pytho story and being able to tell them when to get out would make them very happy. If they can make \$8 per share in a week, they are more than happy. We have some old people we do investing for. They don't have a lot of tolerance for risk since this is all they have. That kind of turn around will go a long way to making their lives easier. Call me soft, but when I find a small score like that I run it for them. Most need more than a 6% return to survive.”

“Then they should be very happy. When I tell you to start shorting First Global you should take half of their profit from that trade and use it to back some short sells, it will net them a much larger return and be almost the same risk level.”

“Assuming we get to make that play.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Until then, you have the short hop of Pytho, then the major bump of First Global. Even if some country does out First Global before we can play it, we should still get to play Big Four Consulting in full.”

“You did not inform us as to the play with them.”

“They own a big piece of the company providing the off-shore data center services. They are also the ones who sold the idea to the board at First Global. They are the ones assisting with the role out of Pytho software at First Global. The only play for them is a shred, and it doesn't matter who blows the whistle on First Global to make it happen. Of course, it will be better if they wait until the U.S. data centers have all been migrated. The shred will have a lot more effect when it comes with congressional hearings and criminal indictments.”

Vladimir had believed himself the only one in the family with this gift until that moment. Lenny obviously had the same ability, just far less desire when it came to dodging bullets.

Prior to coming here Vladimir had received several emails from Hans. He knew for a fact Big Four Consulting was basically running the operation in India for data center migrations. He had not heard who the client was other than it was a large bank from the U.S. that handled close to one-third of the world's finances thanks to all of its recent acquisitions. There was no way he

could tell them how he got that information. He had taken it out of a message he found in the “sent items” box of the trainer's email system.

“It is good you don't need to make the shredding play on First Global to be happy with your return,” Vladimir finally offered. “They may tumble hard for other reasons.”

Now everyone was paying attention to Vladimir.

“One of the data centers to which they have been relocating is being canvassed by al-Qaeda. We don't know what, when, how or even if, but we do know the where.”

“And you are unable to tell us who the *we* is?” asked Dimitri.

“Naturally. I have not figured out what they intend to gain by any attack on the data center. The bank has twin data centers and fault-tolerant data storage. If one location goes down, the other will simply handle all of the transactions. Worst case, some of the tellers will need to log in again. Bombing just one location won't do any more than kill a handful of people. A bus bombing kills more and affects more.”

“At any rate, it will not affect the other shorting opportunity. Big Four Consulting has had a significant revenue increase since the migration project began. I expect they will have a larger revenue increase when they announce their new quarterly numbers due to participating in the sale of this software and its roll-out. That will push their stock up. Once First Global gets nailed for violating federal regulations by migrating the data centers it will be a short matter of time before Big Four is fingered as the one doing the sale. Their stock will free fall while they are under investigation. That's an easy \$20 per share play, but I start getting out around \$15 unless they free fall so fast they are well past a \$15 per share loss before I can get the orders in to cover shorts.”

“So, you are asking us to facilitate some trades for you based upon your instructions. We are free to ride along on those instructions as long as we don't get too greedy causing all of us to be put under investigation. At some point in the near future you will want most of your money back. Correct?”

“Actually, if you are up for it I have one more task for you.”

“Go on.”

“Quite some time ago I had a law firm set up an off-shore company in a country which doesn't have an extradition treaty with the U.S. I don't trust what they did, so haven't done much with it. I would like you to set up an off-shore trading company for me in a country which has no extradition treaties with the U.S. Most of the money should be put into that company rather than sent back to me.”

“Russia does not have extradition treaties with United States. Setting up a company will take a month or so. We will have our people do it. Do you mind if it is in the same office building as one of our locations? We have offices in Moscow and the Ukraine capital, Kyiv. If you want to keep costs down Kyiv will be your location.”

“No, that would be fine. I would want an actual office with air conditioning, Internet, the usual business tools. Would need a couple actual offices in the office space itself. I may send someone there to train some staff so it doesn't look like just a shell.”

“We might be able to share some staff. We have two part-time secretarial people there and one wants to go full time now that she is married and thinking of having a family. It would be good if the other was working part time for you so we could call her in when the other goes on maternity leave.”

“That might work out. I haven't approached any of my staff about running another location yet, so might have a hard sell in front of me. Depends on what trappings could be had. The one I have in mind is rather young. He would want a nice place, clubs to hang out in, fancy car, the usual trappings of wealthy youth.”

Dimitri thought for a while then said, “I like that you are up front about this. I do my investing much like you do. Getting information ahead of everyone else allows one to make a killing as long as they don't get too greedy. We have recently had a few bouts with greed in my company so have been using the off-shore company to handle a lot of our transactions. It has been a long time since I had inside information this far in advance. We can even structure this deal legally.”

“Please continue.”

“Write up a letter of intent to enter a business relationship. For a 10% establishment fee we will establish an off-shore company meeting your requirements. You will invest your half a billion in that company. In that letter also state that we are contracting your firm to provide investment analysis services to us on a per transaction basis not to exceed 10% of profit. Once that letter is filed and posted on the Internet in a PR-type place, it will allow just cause for funds to flow freely between our two companies.”

“That does sound rather clean. Do you have that all down Vlad?”

Vladimir had started taking notes as soon as Dimitri stated the content for the letter. “Yes. I can go down to the business center with your letterhead and have four copies up for signature in under half an hour.”

“Do you want to be included in this deal Vladimir?” asked Dimitri.

“No. Lenny is my cousin. You do have one of my trading accounts in your possession. Simply invest according to the play Lenny has laid out. At some point I may have a new identity when I hit Lenny up for a job at his new off-shore company. Make sure the office building has wheelchair accessibility.”

Everyone laughed.

“Not a problem Vlad!” said Lenny. “I honestly hadn't thought about retiring until today. If I had you running the off-shore place and the guy I'm grooming back home running that company, I could even afford the divorce my wife would serve me with if I decided to move to Russia.”

Now everyone really laughed.

“Only if we set it up so her lawyer cannot get to it,” put in Dimitri.

All the men roared at that one.

It was the wee hours of the morning when the disposable cell phone Lenny had given him rang. Jeremy fumbled around groggily for it. Lenny had instructed him to keep the phone by his bed along with a pad and a pen.

“Hello.”

“Hello Jeremy. You need to get into the office as quickly as possible.”

Jeremy looked at the clock. “We don't open for another five hours,” he replied.

“There are a pair of faxes on the fax machine which are for your eyes only. The first is our signed letter of intent with Dimitri's company to enter a business relationship. I'm bringing the originals with me in my briefcase. The second is the instructions for where to send the wire transfer. You can enter the wire transfer information long before the bank opens. It will happen once they can call to verify. We need them to get on this as soon as they open.”

“OK. Is there anything I need to write down?”

“No, I put it all in the second fax. I didn't know if I would be able to fax to the United States from here. There is something you need to think about though.”

“What is that?”

“How would you feel about spending a couple of years in Kyiv?”

“Doing what?”

“Running our new location, at least until we can bring someone in and get them up to your level.”

“I'll have to think about it.”

“Fine. Just remember that Russian women are beautiful, willing, and few people here make much money. A man with a car, even a Ford Taurus, could get lucky nearly every night.”

“It's not a matter of luck,” laughed Jeremy. A little more awake now, he said, “Apparently you forgot about the weekend you are funding for me. I fly out this afternoon.”

“I haven't forgotten. Already got your receipt for the jewelry. I was impressed with your restraint. You only hit me for \$5K.”

“Wasn't like I was buying a wedding ring, just enough to flatten all her girlfriends when they see it.”

“You do know how to play the game son. Cruise on into the office and deal with the faxes. Be sure to put your real cell phone number in for the confirm phone number. Put my cell phone in as the second confirm in case they cannot get you. Leave your cell phone number with the receptionist so she can try contacting you if the bank fails. Take the rest of the day off, you've earned it.”

“I planned on it,” laughed Jeremy.

After hanging up Jeremy wondered what it would be like in Kyiv. He put on some jeans and drove to the office. He retrieved both faxes and logged into the bank's secure system and keyed in the information for the wire transfer listing both his cell phone and Lenny's as numbers to call for voice confirm. He then left a note for the receptionist stating the bank may call if they couldn't reach either himself or Lenny on their cell phones. At the bottom he put his cell phone number.

With his work duties done, he grabbed a soda and started doing a few Web searches. Just to keep Lenny honest his first search was “Ukraine women.” Just like in this country more porn sites popped up than a person could visit in a lifetime. One thing he noticed is that most of the Ukraine women posing for porn didn't have a bunch of discarded credit cards pumped into their breasts like American women. They pretty much seemed to be natural beauties. He had run into some Russian women at college, so he knew something about them.

His next search was “Ukraine Income” which turned up a report from the CIA. Using 1995 U.S. dollars as the constant, in 2001 the per capita Gross Domestic Product was \$4,200. The World Bank put household consumption at \$558 and 29% of the people had incomes below the poverty line. “If you wanted to retire as a dirty old man this would be a place to do it,” he laughed.

Why he was still interested he had no idea. Perhaps it was just the analyst lifestyle. His next search was “Kyiv historical weather.” That turned up a page stating the climate was much like the Midwest U.S.; cold in winter, hot in summer. Average winter temperature was around 19 degrees F and average summer temperature was around 67 degrees F. Not out of range he thought.

Might as well round out the search, he thought. He did one more search for “Kyiv real estate housing.” This brought up quite a bit of information, but only one site was close to what he expected to find for real estate. It had other information such as in Kyiv they drive on the right side of the road. Always good to know something like that. A new high-end apartment complex was being built. For around U.S. \$320K you could buy a “3 room plus kitchen” apartment. It wasn't until he looked at the floor plan that he realized they count each room in Kyiv. It wasn't a three bedroom unit like he thought. “What a scam!” he said out loud. Of course when he changed the search to “Kiev Real Estate” that brought up sites more like he was expecting. You could purchase a one bedroom condo (apartment) for around \$30K U.S. and the higher end ones seemed to top out around \$250K. Then again, he had come across a few apartments that were charging \$14,000 per month in rent. He wondered how many fresh women they came with? An ex-wife wouldn't cost you that.

How long does it take a couple to pay off a \$30K note at \$500 per year, Jeremy pondered. Lenny was correct. There were high-end condos at reasonable prices and a *severe* poverty level. No wonder so many European women seemed to be on those mail order bride Web sites. It is simple desperation. There must be quite a few of the mafia types living in Kyiv or other highly crooked individuals. There could be little other justification for \$3.4 million condos being within a mile of \$30K condos.

Still, Lenny was correct. A young guy could go there for a couple years, be a drunken womanizing pig, and live on \$20,000. If your retirement account had barely a million dollars in it, you could buy a nice condo and live better than most of your neighbors for the rest of your life. Hell, if you only had half a million, you could eek it out buying that condo that was under \$40K. How the hell do they even eat spending an average of \$558 per year? That wouldn't buy most people in the U.S. five weeks groceries, not counting the fast food stops, etc.

Jeremy logged out and locked up the office. He couldn't believe he was even entertaining the idea. Oh well, he had a weekend of incredible sex and food far too good to be described. There was nothing quite like relaxing after a great meal and fantastic sex in a jacuzzi which happened to be near the fire place in your room. Nothing quite like that at all. Add to that the fact his date could give a blind man whiplash and he would be walking her around the

place to show her off.

Speaking of showing off, Jeremy made a mental note to put both the jewelry and receipt in his carry-on bag. Only a fool would let a \$5K diamond necklace with matching earrings go through baggage claim now that they hand-inspected luggage. Jeremy had heard so many horror stories he was planning to pack two incredible suits to wear. He figured if he packed two, they might only take one. Yes, he had heard some tales of people losing expensive suits. They wouldn't bother to pilfer a Wal-Mart suit, but a \$1,200 imported Italian stood less than a 50/50 chance of making it through the flight unless it had an equally good looking \$1,000+ suit in the garment bag with it.

What Hill?

If the man in the suit thought the Brit was well and truly corked off with his last tirade, it was nothing compared to this one. He had spent three pointless weeks here doing what Vladimir could have and probably was. *Good thing the Brit doesn't know about Vladimir*, thought the man in the suit, otherwise he would kill me and toss my body out in a street somewhere with a note allegedly from al-Qaeda on it.

What had the Brit on a tear today was the local news. The Pakistani government was up in arms about a U.S. incursion onto sovereign soil. In truth it had been Afghan troops with Brits and a few other nations, but around here, everything was blamed on the Americans.

The incursion itself was small and wouldn't have happened had the Pakistani government sent troops to occupy the Khyber Pass. That request came almost weekly and had been coming for a year. It came from every government involved in the operation and lately even from governments not involved. Support for al-Qaeda went too high in the government for that to happen though. As a result, this incursion happened.

A force of Afghan troops along with several other countries had pursued a band of al-Qaeda troops into the pass. Everyone assumed they were al-Qaeda troops because they didn't stop to answer questions, simply started shooting. As a result, air support had been called in. When the fighters got to the pass their instruments picked up the transmissions from the hut the email hub was using. The rest was pretty much predetermined after that. Rather than strafe the troops in the pass, the fighters locked onto the hut and there now was a 15-foot-wide crater where it used to be. After that they went back and helped mop up the force desperately trying to get away.

Some of the al-Qaeda force had even been taken prisoner according to the news reports. Now the government was raising hell over both an incursion and an abduction on their soil. The man in the suit had done hundreds of abductions on their soil, but thankfully he never had a reporter embedded in his unit. Yes, once again “film at 11” had buggered up what would have otherwise been a nice clean operation.

There was only one other person in the room. That other man was pure muscle, no brain. He could do what you told him if you didn't use too many syllables or talk too long. *By the time that man realized the Brit was trying to kill me I would be dead and he would be fetching a tarp and the car,* thought the man in the suit. *No, for this one I need to keep my distance and let him burn out,* the man in the suit decided.

There was no doubt the email hub was off-line. Vladimir had sent a note saying the site stopped transmitting to his server about an hour ago. Shortly after that the news report came. For a brief hour there had been the hope the hub was moving to a more accessible location. That hope was pretty much gone now. They didn't even know who the person was. Pakistani intelligence had sent a squad up to investigate the damage and potentially return the bodies, but even if they found a body this team could not be certain their guy had died.

It was at this point the man in the suit's train of thought was interrupted. Not by a knife or other attempt on his life, but by the silence. He realized the Brit had wound down and was staring at him. Apparently there had been some question he was supposed to answer.

“You will need to excuse me, I was trying to determine how we would tell if our hub operator had been killed. We don't know his name or have any real information on him. What was your question?”

“Can I go back to nabbing these guys now?”

“No. I need you to go to India and help Hans. They have the trainer and the new email hub under surveillance now and are short-staffed. Two of their team have taken jobs working at the same companies the men work at, which leaves them little time for email analysis. We need to know what they are up to there. It sounds like it will be the next big strike.”

“Are we going to just watch that one happen, too?”

“Our hands aren't tied there. The Indian government doesn't know what we are doing or even that we are there.”

“So, if anything goes wrong we are on our own.”

“To some extent, yes. We have taken over a farm about 20 miles outside of town and have some troops there with a pair of helicopters. It is unknown how long they can remain undetected.”

The Brit was a bit calmer now. He had heard that British Secret Service had been the ones demanding more intelligence before making arrests. They didn't know, at least openly, that this team wasn't bothering with arrests. Had they known they might have authorized it, but it was still dicey. After the bombings they were a lot more willing to look the other way when it came to abductions and planes making unscheduled flights to Germany.

In his current state of mind, the Brit mused out loud, “We could take them both now and really blind al-Qaeda.”

“The powers that be think al-Qaeda will write this one off as collateral damage. We hope they will send a new trainee to the trainer. If that happens, then taking these two down has merit. If that doesn't happen, then they are correct. We should know in about two weeks.”

“Correct about what?”

“That the email network is comprised of dozens, if not hundreds, of individuals. They believe we have only uncovered a small portion of the network and found it by luck.”

“Two weeks isn't so long to wait. What makes them think the network managed to get so large, or am I not authorized to know that?”

“Do you know how many new email hubs have been discovered when going through the machines of those you grabbed?”

“No.”

“None. Weeks with the best technicians going through them and none have been found. Even those working in Germany were using Nedim or the trainer as their hub.”

“That would make one believe there aren't more hubs.”

“Nedim is the only hub that was handling American operations and those of the African continent. We have not found email from any cells in France, Spain, China, or Russia. Do you think al-Qaeda isn't operating in those countries?”

“We know they are.”

“Hence, the decision from above. We would only blind them in a few countries for a while. Roundups have been occurring in those countries so blinding them would be of questionable good as far as stopping operations. It is possible that few cells in the other countries are using the Internet email communications method, we know the 9/11 hijackers were. So, we need to find the other hubs.”

“There has been little, if any, cross talk between hubs. At least there was some after Nedim was outed in the press. Perhaps another outing would force another scramble?”

“In two weeks time I will approach the powers that be. In three-weeks time we should have our final answer. There is still the possibility we will stumble into the new hub via the cell phones used by those you rounded up. It is the hard way, but we managed to find and turn Nedim. Turning the next one will be more difficult, but not as difficult as finding them.”

“The Americans could give that hub to us.”

“How so?”

“They have been scanning the images in every international email message since 9/11. They could at least give us the messages complete with headers so we could begin tracking.”

“How do you know this?”

“I have killed for many different countries. People whose lives depended on me keep in touch from time to time. They tell me things that may keep me alive or are simply as a warning telling me to stay frosty because a call may soon be coming.”

“Do you think they would contact you with respect to taking someone out?”

“They have before. Never an al-Qaeda member, but drug dealers by the score. Just what do you think I was doing when you found me?”

The man in the suit had forgotten that. He had met the Brit in Pakistan after being instructed on where to find him. The Brit had been sent into the lawless Northern Areas in Afghanistan to take out a drug lord who was shipping too much poppy product to drug buyers in the States. They could have easily sent him to that hut with a team he chose and he would have made it look like one of the warlords had offed the guy. Had Hans known of the Brit's background he surely would have suggested it. This operation was starting to have too many rings of complexity. Something bad was going to happen. The man in the suit could feel it. Just wasn't like him to overlook a solution that obvious.

Heidi was back at her place for the first time in five days. The second camp was operating beyond its capacity. She had trained six different people how to operate the machine and extract the blood. She had helped interview over 100 people as team members. Almost all of them washed out during the first half hour. Still, they had managed to bring in two more surgeons for organ harvesting. Getting the stem cell professionals was proving a bit more difficult. Too many Germans remembered the story of Dr. Mengele and they did not wish to have history remember them in such a way. They had even started searching on the Web to bring people in from foreign countries. It looked like one Russian doctor was going to be a good fit, but it was still too early to tell.

Thankfully there were laundry facilities at the second camp. Heidi had managed to carry far fewer clothes with her than she would have liked. When she left five days ago she thought it was just going to be a 48 hour stint, then the other trucks arrived.

It seemed like the interrogators were giving up early on people. Perhaps they were just as overwhelmed. Nikolaus had told her the interrogation camp was beyond its capacity. Round ups were occurring in every country it seemed and nobody was asking too many questions about where the people went, they were only asking what information had been gained. She knew they had set up a Web site to post much of the information and issued accounts to people in the intelligence service for each participating country. Everyone was keeping quiet about how the information was obtained. Some times an email would go out from the interrogation camp when the technicians found an email address, phone number, or IP address in a specific country which was used repeatedly.

Heidi had heard they had identified thousands of cell members and hundreds of new cells around the world. The one thing she heard was that they hadn't identified any new communications centers. That part was troubling Nikolaus a bit. She knew something of the team which was pursuing such things. A lot of hand wringing and head scratching was going on as to whether they took down the ones they knew about or let them continue choosing to track those using them. The tracking strategy hadn't worked so well for the people of Lutton. That reality was causing the urgency of cell roundups and thus causing Heidi to put in 90-hour weeks.

One thing was certain in Heidi's mind. She was glad she had sent the letter telling her contacts to keep their ears open. By her count over 1,000 patients had passed through the second camp and more were coming every day. Quite simply they couldn't keep pushing this volume through without causing a leak. It was too soon in the operation for other countries to be sufficiently implicated in the operation. If they could just make it a year, all would be well.

Nikolaus sat at his desk doing what he mostly did at his desk, wading through paper. He now had a team of people marketing the available organs and the cash flow was alarming. Nearly every organ had its own black market and there seemed to be plenty of buyers. The party had set up its own Web site in some location Nikolaus knew nothing about. One of the sites they had been using was about to be shut down, so they transferred all of their business to the new site and went into hiding. Eventually that site would pop up, hosted in another country. Hopefully it would pop up prior to the party site being compromised so they could transfer business to it before arrests came.

Some of the Russian mafia groups had even come poking around looking to obtain some of the business. Given the help they had been in the past and with the current operations in the field, Nikolaus authorized the marketing of some organs through them as well. It turned out Russian mafia leaders were good customers. All of that vodka and other drug use trashed their livers like car windshields splattered bugs in the summer time. They had the cash and the surgeons.

Cash was becoming a problem for Nikolaus. There was simply too much of it. This corporation wasn't set up for retail sales and didn't own any banks. The few banks the party owned or at least controlled couldn't launder the kind of cash coming in. Nikolaus needed this money to look like it came from legitimate corporations. He had asked the people who had dealt with the current Russian mafia families on the organs to help with laundering the cash. They were of little help. They simply didn't launder any money. Their response had been "buy and sell diamonds."

While it was true that you could purchase diamonds for cash, then sell them to jewelers and receive a check, there simply wasn't enough of them and this company wasn't in that business. At least the stem-cell sales were all to institutions which cut checks. The Russian mafia clients who had purchased organs had also opted to pay with a check when asked. In desperation Nikolaus had sent an email to Hans asking for help. Hans had sent him back an email address for someone named Vladimir who was doing work for the team and had quite a few Russia mafia contacts of his own.

Nikolaus had already been the Russian mafia route, but was desperate enough to email Vladimir. He received an email response asking him to call a specific cell phone number at a specific time on the following day. He was advised to also use a disposable cell phone when he made the call. Nikolaus made the call the next day.

“Hello.”

“Hello, are you Nikolaus?”

“Yes.”

“Who introduced us?”

“We've never met, but we were put in contact with each other by a person named Hans.”

“Good. I'm sitting here with some friends that run some investment and loan operations. We won't use their names for now. How much cash are you looking to run through such an operation?”

“Right now there is roughly \$180 million in various currencies. We need this money to come back to us in the form of a check to our special pharmaceuticals unit or one of our other business units. We can make up some bogus inventory items and conduct the transactions in that manner, but we need the money to come in the form of checks.”

“How much are you willing to pay for this service?” asked another voice on the phone.

“Depends on the level of service. Will you be picking up the cash and sending us an order for the items that will never be shipped?”

There was some talking in the room which Nikolaus couldn't quite make out, then the response, “That would depend on where the pick up would occur.”

“We have a secured facility not far from Nuremberg if you have your own planes to fly the cargo out. We can even pack some legitimate medical supplies in the containers to throw off the casual inspector if that makes life easier. “

Again there was some more talking in the room.

“Are you able to ship legitimate medical supplies to stores and pharmacies in Russia?”

“We are a manufacturer of quite a few things, but not a distributor. Traditionally we set up credit accounts with wholesalers and distributors then sell and ship to them.”

“That could work. Are you able to set up item numbers which are available only to certain distributors?”

“Yes, we do that all of the time, especially for privately developed drugs or drugs of national importance. Why do you ask?”

“Can you set up some form of Web page which would let a customer look at your current inventory products that a customer is authorized to purchase?”

“We already have that system.”

Again more talking in the room. This was beginning to infuriate Nikolaus. He wasn't used to being treated like a beggar.

“Is the email address Vladimir has for you secure?”

“No email is secure.”

“Some can be, but most aren't, this is true. Is there a fax number used only by you?”

“Yes,” he responded and gave them the number.

“We need you to set up a list of item numbers and descriptions. We also need you to add a distributor to your system which is the only distributor authorized to look at those items. This distributor should be able to look at any of your general items as well. Vladimir will fax you all of the information and the descriptions for the items. You will fax back the list of item numbers and the description in your system.”

“There will be one item number for each type of currency we can handle. You will tell us how much you have to launder by manually entering one unit for each denomination. One dollar, one rubble, one peso, etc. The price in your system will be .75 of the currency's value. You will pack the currency into medical shipping containers with these item numbers printed on the outside. You will inform by fax the method of entering an order on this system. We will check it at least once per week. We will also be ordering some legitimate supplies for sale to pharmacies in Russia. This will keep everything looking legitimate. You can send product literature and pricing information to the address we give you for the distributor. It is a small drug distributor in Russia that we own part of and has never done business with you. If there are any sales territory issues to work out you need to handle them.”

“I can take care of that,” Nikolaus said.

“Do you agree to the transaction?”

“You want 25% to make it all look legitimate. You also want to become a distributor for our products. I don't have a problem with that. I do have a significant word of caution for you. Once you are added to the system, you will be called on by the marketing department here. There is nothing I can do about that and they have no knowledge of this business. I can try to get you put under someone I can trust, but I've never really dealt much with that side of the business.”

“As I said, it is a legitimate distribution company. We will ensure they always speak with someone who knows what is going on and what is at risk.”

“Good. I can have things set up in about two days once I get the paperwork from Vladimir.”

“This should be a profitable arrangement for both of us. In fact, I know the person who will be handling your line on our end quite well. Your marketing types will only call on him a few times because he will badger them incessantly to make knock-off versions of drugs with expiring patents. That is a business your firm doesn't openly get into.”

“Traditionally we don't. We do own another company that does however. I can see what it takes to get your distributor access to those products as well.”

“That would be most beneficial. This distributor has three locations in formerly communist countries. The people there don't have much to spend. Products from China and Africa have been of questionable quality leading to problems.”

“I've heard. That is why we quietly bought into the business. I thought there were Russian mafia families in the business though.”

“They only make high-end drugs. Viagra and some others. Things they can make for a few cents per tablet and sell for over \$6 per tablet on the Internet. This distributor is looking for low-cost antibiotics, cold and flu formulas, pain killers, diabetic testers, etc. Very low-end low margin stuff the Russian families won't touch, at least not yet. If they could get you to supply them these things there will be many full tractor trailers coming to us each week. It will be much easier to hide the other packages in such shipments.”

“Agreed. The best place to hide a tree is in the forest.”

“I look forward to doing business with you Nikolaus. By the way, my name is Dimitri. The others in the room are my assistants, but you don't need their names.”

“I must confess I like the way you think things through. I have a much better feeling about this than I did when I made the call.”

“While I came up with some of it, Vladimir came up with most critical piece of it. I had forgotten about the distributor we owned a large part of. Once that was put before me it was easy to see how to make money from this arrangement.”

“Vladimir does come highly recommended.”

“One thing which would make life easier for all of us: If you could find a way to get your customers to pay you in either euros or American dollars it would be better. We have methods of burning through that. The other currencies we are going to take a loss on.”

“Understood. We have been trying to enforce that.”

“While I’ve got you on the phone, you wouldn’t have a method of selling diamonds would you?”

“How many and of what quality?”

“Unknown. Three small metal tubes full. Don’t ask. We had no choice. It was a bait and switch at the last minute.”

“That is the problem of dealing with African warlords,” laughed Dimitri. “Send them along in one of the packages. I will have some friends look at them and make an offer. We will come up with some method of paying you for them if they sell. Sometimes you get lucky and get a great stone. Usually you get Wal-Mart jewelry quality.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“After this has been set up and we have had transactions running for a few months I would like for us to meet and share a meal. That actually might be a good time to exchange cash for the diamonds so you could send it through for laundry or simply use it yourself.”

“Normally I don’t meet people who haven’t been vetted, but I have a good feeling about doing business with you. We will let Vladimir set it up when the time is right. I am a bit surprised you didn’t ask where the money is coming from.”

“As long as you aren’t selling weapons to al-Qaeda, I don’t care. I know a bit about your operation. No, Vladimir wasn’t the source. In truth, I was part of the chain of people who brought Vladimir to you.”

“Well, I certainly can’t thank you enough for that!” responded Nikolaus.

That last little nugget of information rocked Nikolaus to the core. He hoped his voice didn’t waiver during the response. He had believed this operation as more covert than a nuclear weapons program. This guy knew about it and Nikolaus had no idea who he was. Then again, this guy had brought them Vladimir. Until this day, he had not understood why Hans wanted Vladimir on the team so badly. There were rumors upon rumors about this guy. Some said he didn’t exist, yet Hans had managed to obtain him. Had it not been for Vladimir, the entire communications center surveillance project would be toast.

“Thank you for your assistance in this matter, Vladimir,” Nikolaus offered.

“Think nothing of it. I like helping out my team. Hans is on my team and he trusts you with his life. By extension, I am trusting you with my life.”

“Hans is a good soldier. You can trust him to always come through if there is any way possible.”

“I have noticed that about him. You will have your fax in less than two hours. I need to return to my office and write it all up.”

“Good. As soon as I get it I will start things going on this end. I will get people started on bundling up the various currencies and putting them into shipping containers. Once we have item numbers we can print up the bar codes and enter the inventory.”

Nikolaus was left there at his desk pondering how the problem had moved on him. At first he had a problem of trying to get the cash into checks so he could record it in the corporate books. Now he had a slightly bigger problem. The board of directors were a rather loose-lipped bunch and the accountants were outside of Nikolaus' direct control. If he created item numbers under this corporation, they would want any item booking more than \$10 million in sales for a quarter to be a line item on the quarterly report. It had basically taken a visit from government officials to get the black ops items all put under a non-descriptive heading.

With the low cost of these bogus items, they could easily hide in the generic drug division though. That division was a wholly owned subsidiary of the corporation. As such it appeared as a single line item on the quarterly and annual report. Adding \$50 million per quarter to its sales would spread around a little cheer to the people in that division. They had to sell millions of units to equal the profit from hundreds of units this company sold. Some of the lowest-margin products in the business came off those lines and you would find them in nearly every country under many different labels.

It was surprising that the Russian mafia hadn't gotten into that business, then he remembered Dimitri's comment “yet.” Nikolaus's current corporation hadn't started out there either. Once you start making buckets of money, every government on the planet wants you to do charity work. The generic lines was this corporation's answer to “charity work.” Low-margin basic

medical supplies for all.

Somewhere in China there was actually a factory owned by that subsidiary which made every kind of gauze imaginable. Nikolaus had no idea where the cotton balls came from or the generic Q-Tips. There was a factory somewhere in Germany which made aspirin, cold formula and the other over-the-counter generic drugs consumers bought by the truckload. It would be interesting to see just how much of their product actually moved through this distributorship. Nikolaus made a mental note to have himself copied on the monthly, quarterly and annual sales reports for this customer.

Nikolaus pondered a little longer while leafing through the pages on his desk. He came to the page which listed countries Germany didn't have active or good extradition treaties with. One name leaped out at Nikolaus: China. Nikolaus sent an email to a loyal party member in the generic drug division asking him for more information on the factory in China and asking him for a meeting tomorrow to discuss some additions to that business.

Jeremy had touched down at SETAC about an hour before Stacie's flight arrived. They had both agreed he should get to the airport first so he could pick up the rental car and be waiting for her at arrivals. The drive to the lodge was only 45 minutes, but seemed to take forever. Thankfully Jeremy had gotten some sleep on the plane.

As they drove to the lodge he chatted with Stacie about the events of the morning. When he got to the part about Lenny wanting him to spend a year or two in Kyiv Stacie started to realize just how big this thing they were involved in was. For some reason the half-billion-dollar transfer didn't phase her, but the Kyiv option made it seem like they were all putting together escape plans.

"You are going to go aren't you?"

"I hadn't seriously considered it, but I did do some research on it. I guess it would depend on how well Lenny set me up over there and how much he paid me to run the place."

"It sounds like you are all worried this play may be too big and someone might go to jail."

“Normally if you admit to insider trading you simply pay a fine and lose your trading license. Since we aren't a licensed trader, just running individual accounts for others, I don't think the latter applies. Oddly enough, you can be a financial advisor without much oversight or training.”

“Well, I think you should go sooner rather than later.”

Jeremy was rather shocked to hear Stacie say such a thing. He glanced at her and could tell she was dead serious.

“How come?”

“You said yourself what you are doing will play out in a few months. By that time someone will have gotten wise to it and you will need to be out of reach of the law for a while.”

“I'm not so certain that will happen. Just how many people went to prison for shorting Enron when they had insider information? How many did you even hear about getting investigated?”

“Lots of people went to prison over Enron!” she exclaimed.

“Yes they did. The company officials and the people helping them artificially inflate the stock price along with those helping them get creative with accounting. Nobody got investigated who shorted the company at its peak or when it was on the way down.”

“Martha Stewart went to prison for using insider information.”

“Martha went to prison for obstruction of justice. Anyone else would have said they asked their broker to call them when the sell off started and sold accordingly. They would have paid a fine and the broker would have went to prison for violating the terms of their license. She denied the arrangement and the broker testified the arrangement existed. There was also a tape of the phone call. It was a dumb play.”

“Oh.”

“By the time Martha went to trial the stock was trading for more than when she dumped it. Had she been as dense as a rock rather than pridefully stupid she would have made money and not gone to prison.”

“That's a rather cold way of looking at it.”

“It's reality. Insider information is only good when you are smart enough to actually read the play. Yes, the company was going to take a hit, but it wasn't the only product in the pipeline, just the most hyped one. A dump, a short, and a cover done quickly could have made some money, but she didn't have the information soon enough. You can't use insider information unless it is at least three days in advance. News the day of gets you in trouble.”

“You really are a natural at this aren't you? Don't you worry about going to prison?”

“Not really. I'm smart enough to know you cut a deal up front and admit your guilt. Then you pay a large fine and have to stay out of the trading business for a while. You cannot even have your own trading account during your probation.”

“Couldn't the fine be all of your money they can find?”

“There are prescribed limits, and even if it was, a lot of our money isn't here. Even less of it will be here once the Kyiv office opens up.”

“Oh. And they can't pull you back from Kyiv?”

“No extradition treaty and insider trading isn't currently a crime over there. They handle extradition on a case by case basis and the crime has to be a crime in Russia before they will even hear the case.”

“Wow”

“Lenny is good.”

“You are getting there from the sound of it,” she chuckled. “Anyway, I think you should go. Get a place big enough for two.”

That freaked Jeremy for a moment and caused him to swerve on the road just a little.

“Careful big fella, I want to get there in one piece.”

“Why two?” he asked once the car was under control.

“If they start digging I will probably turn up. I haven't signed any confidentiality agreements, nor have I told you anything particularly incriminating, but I would rather have a lawyer handling that part. I said two because if they start looking into this I expect you to call me and let me come live with you, at least until it is all settled. You are going to make enough from this you should be able to support me for a while.”

The girl had a point. Jeremy's bonus this year would probably be well over a million. There was absolutely no reason he couldn't support her for a year or two since she was directly responsible for the income. It would cut into him trying to sample the local talent but her talent was incredible.

Finally the lodge appeared. They parked, checked in, and had the luggage carted to the room. Jeremy was dumbfounded by the amount of luggage Stacie had brought for a weekend. It was even more odd considering they would be naked much of the weekend in the hotel room. He had learned early on you don't bring these things up before sex though, as they tended to shut off the sex.

Once they made it to the room and tipped the bellhop, Jeremy informed Stacie he needed to take a shower after sleeping on the plane. She told him not to get dressed after he got clean.

Jeremy walked out of the bathroom still drying his hair and was greeted by the most incredible stocking and garter set he had ever seen on one phenomenally hot lady.

“Aren't you going to say something?” asked Stacie with the most knowing seductive smile on her face she had ever had. “You never did answer about letting me come and live with you in Kyiv.” Stacie knew all too well that Jeremy couldn't answer right now, there wasn't enough blood left in his brain to formulate a response. That piece of information was easily obtained by taking a look at the dipstick. She was enjoying this!

A pounding in Jeremy's ears was how he first came to realize he hadn't taken a breath since coming out of the bathroom. Once respiration had returned to him he recovered quickly. “I guess that depends on how well you respond to this,” Jeremy said as he reached into his carry-on bag.

Now it was Stacie's turn to not be able to breathe. She had just been teasing, but if that was a ring instead of the jewelry she had asked for there was no way she could say no this weekend. There was a momentary breath of relief when she saw two Helzberg boxes come out of the bag. One was obviously a necklace and the other had to be the earrings. It was a good thing she had gotten that breath in, because when he opened the box for the necklace she lost all her air.

Several hours later they were lying in bed very exhausted and incredibly satisfied. Stacie sensed Jeremy was about to doze off again. She herself had just woken up from a brief journey in that abyss known as sleep. "We should probably try out the dual shower and then go find something to eat."

"We could just put on those robes hanging in there and order room service," muttered a groggy Jeremy.

"Oh no. I brought a killer dress and it will show off that jewelry grandly!"

"Are you going to wear that garter set under it?" teased Jeremy as he started to come around.

"I brought several different ones. Thought I might need all of them," she giggled.

"While I've got you like this, I need to talk to you about New Year's Eve."

"What about it? That is four months away."

"You received the email with the pictures of my roommates didn't you?"

"Yes. I hadn't really known what you were up to with that."

"I wasn't trying to set up a four-some Jeremy, just cool your jets. They invoked the girl code on me, so we need to talk about New Year's Eve."

Jeremy had been around long enough to know that "invoking the girl code" tended to bring about less than happy times for a guy.

"You still have some good-looking single friends from college who are at least as successful as you don't you?"

Now Jeremy understood where this was going. “You want us to go out as a group on New Year’s Eve?”

“Sort of. My roommates want dates for an all inclusive New Year’s Eve party at some posh hotel. They haven’t chosen the hotel yet.”

This was starting to sound like a guy was going to have to guilt a friend into going out with his sister. Stacie could see the look forming on his face and continued, “They’ve both promised to put out. For two of your friends this is going to be a sure thing. They simply have to wear a nice suit, make the reservations, and show up.”

Wow! thought Jeremy. She left me no wiggle room whatsoever.

Finally, he decided to risk the rest of the weekend with the one question he could use to get out of this. “Are they both on the pill?”

Stacie sat up with a shocked look on her face, gasped, punched Jeremy in the ribs and exclaimed “How can you ask that?”

Recovering, Jeremy sat up, looked her in the eye and said, “It is going to be the first question I’m asked.”

Stacie knew it was true, she just didn’t think she would have to give up the information. In truth, she had forgotten to make them promise that part as well, and now she was going to be forced to make a commitment for them. “They are, but that doesn’t mean they won’t want ...”

Jeremy interrupted her by holding up his hand. “That’s all I wanted to know.”

“But,” Stacie tried to protest.

“Don’t.”

There it was. She had violated the girl code by taking the choice away from them. Both dates would be infuriated if they had to use a condom now.

Kathryn was sitting in her office fuming. Migration of the final data center did not go smoothly. They had no significant problems migrating the other data centers, but this last one was under the impression they were being expanded, not migrated. As a result, everyone working there refused to assist in even the slightest way. The job to migrate final data changes never ran. Some buffoon on the team thought because the disk farms were integrated that all of the data should be there anyway and there was no need to migrate anything. Boy were they wrong!

On Sunday morning when the system restart test happened and the last data center wasn't booted, nothing worked. Each system in that group had a security ID file which had to be exchanged during system startup to allow the disk farm to be shared. Nobody had mentioned that little tidbit, so when they tried to start two data centers in India instead of one in India and one in the U.S. only half of the bank locations could log on.

Why didn't the fail over work? Nobody bothered to turn off the communications equipment in the U.S. location. In theory they would have all failed over to the Indian location, but a sequence of events stopped that from happening. The first problem was the communications equipment was still running. It would have noticed the system wasn't running if someone had turned it off. They never turned off the other system, they simply stopped the application. None of the IT staff working at the U.S. data center had reported for work on Sunday. Nobody had bothered to contact Kathryn so she could start ringing Kent and Margret's cell phones. This was a debacle and someone was going to be calling Kathryn on the carpet for it.

To add insult to injury Kathryn had come in late this morning. She didn't arrive at the office until 9:30 a.m. She didn't find out about the problem from her own team either. She found out when Kent called her cell phone. Someone was holding his feet to the fire and he was offering up Kathryn. So much for all of those short skirts and heels she had left to keep Kent's mind elsewhere.

Kathryn was on her cell phone to Margret as she was heading out to her car. She grabbed a couple of the young studs who were supposedly intelligent enough to be on this project to bring with her. They were supposed to have been at the data center this weekend along with one other to supervise the migration and the subcontractor. The third young stud who was on the short

list to be out the door had called in sick this morning. He would probably get his termination notice by courier later today.

Adding more insult to injury was the fact Kathryn had the worst case of cramps she had ever had in her life. She had been up half the night with them. That was the reason she was late this morning. She told the studs to drive their own transportation over to First Global. She didn't tell them they wouldn't have jobs by the end of the meeting as she needed them cooperating now.

"What happened this weekend Margret?"

"I don't know. You were supposedly handling this migration. I was just around to advise."

"Why didn't any of your people report to work on Sunday?"

"They all resigned on Saturday when the migration started. They assumed they wouldn't have jobs once the migration was complete since everybody else had been let go within two weeks of their data center being migrated."

"Don't they realize they won't be able to use your company as a reference when they go looking for other jobs?"

"We never provide references, only confirm dates of employment. We don't even confirm salary information, just job title. No way to legally deny providing that information."

"I'll be there in 20 minutes. What has been done to rectify the situation so far?"

"I had someone go in and power down the machines at the data center. Most of the branch locations are now up and running, but we are running on a single data center. This has to be resolved in under 24 hours now. The primary outage was less than the 12 hour window, but we have less than 24 hours left to get another data center up and running."

There was that rule again. The one Margret had swatted Kathryn between the eyes with nearly a year ago.

"Is the high bandwidth connection still up?" Margret asked.

“I have no idea at this point. I have two of the team who were supposed to supervise this coming with me. If this isn't resolved shortly they aren't going to have jobs.”

“Let me guess, these are the guys you had over in India before?”

“Yes,” responded Kathryn and hung up.

Margret wasn't slow, Kathryn had to give her that. She had caught onto the fact their careers would end long before their lives after getting a hint about their exploits in the Red Light District.

A while later they were all seated in the conference room at First Global headquarters trying to figure out how to undo this mess.

“If we bring up the communications equipment and the machines we will be right back in the same boat,” said Margret.

“Are we sure we only need one file copied over?” Kent asked. Everyone in the room was shocked he grasped that much of the situation.

“We won't know until we try,” responded Margret. “Since we cannot bring up the external communications equipment, we can only bring up the machine, FTP the file to a notebook, then communicate out via Wi-Fi or dial up. Do you have an email address of someone they can send it to at the site in India which needs it?” Margret asked looking at Kathryn.

“Yes, those two both have email addresses we can send to and cell phone numbers they can call to ensure the file got there. Is there anyone at the data center they can work with now?”

“One of the IT workers from this office is over there now.” Margret scratched out a phone number for them to call and told them to use the phone here in the conference room. She then turned to her laptop and followed through the links on the company Intranet to find the system startup documentation for the data centers. Once she found it she looked at Kathryn. “Tell one of the skirts you left here who has an account on the system to bring her notebook in here and work with these two.”

Kathryn didn't even notice the slight. She got up and walked out to get one of the skirts. Kent did notice it though and said, “Margret, there is no reason to insult people, they are trying to help us.”

“They are the ones who got us into this situation Kent. This should have all been fixed on Sunday. We are now less than six hours from the FDIC showing up at our doorstep asking for full accounting of the situation. Are you going to be the one waiting for them at the doorstep?”

“It's not so bad. We have a system startup problem.”

“We have a 24 hour recovery period per the FDIC regulations. After that, we are no longer insured. I'm certainly not going to be in the room when the board of directors gets that little bit of news.”

Invoking the board of directors, Margret now had Kent's complete attention. “What do you need me to do?”

“I need you to talk to Carol and let her know we have a situation. Then I need you to ask her if she wants to be in here while it happens or if she wants plausible deniability.”

Kent's eyes went wide, but he got up and left. Kathryn returned with one of the skirts who sat with the guys. Margret looked at her and said, “Send me an email so I can reply with the link to the information they are going to need.”

With the emails exchanged and the person at the data center on the speaker phone, the team set about getting the system started. They used the boot option to avoid starting the banking application automatically.

“Pete,” said Margret, “I need you to copy the security file off to your laptop. Is the internal network stuff still running?”

“Within the lab it is. I'm using a terminal emulator from my notebook to monitor the system.”

“OK. The others here are going to tell you what file to find keystroke by keystroke. Once you have it, ZIP it and they will give you an email address to send it to. Is the cable modem still working there?”

“I don't know. I only have one network port and there isn't a wireless hub on that thing.”

“I know, we didn't want them surfing the Web in a manner that wasn't monitored. Is there a modem compatible phone jack?”

“There is a bank of modems over here. I can just keep hooking up until I find one that works.”

“Good, you have the remote VPN software on that notebook don't you?”

“Yes, it is how I do support at night. I will be able to send the email once I have the file. Is that all you need me to do?”

“Sadly you are going to have to stay there until we get the system in India up and running.”

“In that case, you are buying me lunch. Send someone over now so they can answer the door. There is nobody here, not even a receptionist. FedEx already showed up to drop one set of backup media off and collect another. I had to tell them we didn't have an outbound today.”

Kathryn looked at Margret. “Do you have a link with directions and a street address on that site?”

“I'm looking for that now. Here it is.”

“Good. Send it to her,” Kathryn said looking at the skirt. “Once you get it, forward it to both of the others out there with a message to print it out and get in here now!”

Five minutes later both of the other skirts cautiously crept into the room.

“Pete,” said Kathryn, “I have two girls here who will be coming over to answer the door, phone, and help you any way they can. Do you want them to pick up lunch on the way there?”

“No, they could pick up a plain bagel with regular cream cheese and a bottle of iced tea though. Too early for lunch. Do they know how to get here?”

“They have the directions from the Intranet in their hot little hands. Is there an extension where you are sitting that they can call when they get there? I'm assuming they can't walk right in.”

“Yes, x5491. If they can't get through, have them call one of you there in the conference room on your cell. I don't know if the PBX is working here.”

Margret scratched her cell phone number down on the paper for the girls as did Kathryn, then they sent them on their way. "Save the receipts if you want to be reimbursed," Kathryn told the girls.

There was the sound of a modem dialing in the distance. A few minutes later there was a some muttering on the end of the phone. Finally Pete spoke. "The email is on its way to India. They should have it in another minute or two. You know, I'm looking at the system startup files an the application startup files. It looks like about six of them were changed last week. Did we have something that went into production then?"

"Yes," responded Margret. "A bunch of changes for the board of directors with respect to how things were reported. Those changes should have propagated out to the Indian site, too, since it was running in unison with this site."

"In theory they should be there. Tell you what, I'm going to do some cutting and pasting between windows on this thing and send another email to that same address with instructions for them to verify the dates on these files on their end. These files are on a local drive here. That is why I'm concerned."

"Sounds like a plan, Pete," responded Margret. "Can't hurt to be certain before we pull the trigger on application startup."

Kent returned to the room. "Carol says she won't join us in the war room, but would like to see the three of us in my office if we have a moment."

"Pete," Margret called out. "I'm going to leave the room with Kathryn for a quick meeting in Kent's office. If I'm not back and you need me you have my cell phone."

"That's fine. It will be about half an hour before they can get things verified and send back an email."

With that, the three walked out to Kent's office where Carol was waiting.

"I don't want details, but how bad is it," Carol asked.

"They needed to get an updated security file over to the new system in India and didn't do it. Once it is there we will probably have to run the program to update the system ID in it. There might be a couple of startup scripts which need to be copied over as well," responded Margret.

“Thanks for not giving me any details,” remarked Carol.

Margret gave a faint smile. “It is not a train wreck, I just don't know if we can sort it out within the time frame we have left.”

“That's why I want to talk with you. We have some severe legal exposure here. I need to find out exactly what happened this weekend. If this goes on much longer someone is going to have to answer to a board of inquiry.”

Kathryn didn't really believe this “end of the world” stuff she was hearing until she heard it from a lawyer. This was just a system outage to her. Embarrassing yes, but with legal implications? She hadn't thought it possible until now.

Margret started, “When I came in this morning I had email from everyone working at the data center tendering their resignations effective immediately. It appears when the migration team showed up Saturday morning it honked off the data center workers. They sent me their resignations, logged out, and went home. The data center was completely unstaffed from around 9:30 a.m. Saturday until now.”

Kent actually paled when Margret issued the last statement.

Kathryn continued, “I have not gotten a full report from my people. The two I need to speak with are in the room working through this. They were supposed to notify me if there was any problem. I never got a call.”

“I would think all of the staff from the data center walking out would qualify as a problem,” said Carol.

“So would I,” continued Kathryn. “They don't know it, but once they have filed what happens in writing they no longer have jobs.”

“Now for the ugly question Kent,” Carol continued. “Why didn't we have any staff overseeing the migration?”

“I had the data center manager and the entire staff of the data center. I had no idea they were all going to quit at the same time as some form of protest.”

“Do we know what they were protesting.”

Kathryn interjected, “From what I have heard, they were under the impression the data center was going to be expanded, not migrated.”

“Where the hell did they get such an idea!” Kent exclaimed.

“Probably from doing the leg work for a report the board requested. They wanted to know the currently available floor space, cost per kilowatt hour of electricity, and additional floorspace available in the building should a center need to be expanded. They also asked for a list of all employees working there who have undergone security clearance in accordance with FDIC regulations,” said Carol.

“Why was the board asking for that?” Kent piped up confused.

“It is part of an annual audit for insurance purposes. It is more important now that we aren't far from having a regulation that all data centers be staffed by personnel having a government security clearance of SECRET. It is the lowest level you can get from the DOD, but everyone with significant access to the banking systems must have it if the regulation goes through,” continued Carol. “Right now it is something that dramatically reduces our insurance rates. If everyone with privileged access to the system has this security clearance our insurance rate is one-twentieth what it would be with personnel who don't have such a clearance background check.”

Kent was really paling now. Nobody had told him the insurance rates would go up 20 fold. Kent didn't have the common sense God gave little green apples, which means he didn't have sense enough to ask when the project plan was being put together. He was quietly hoping this wouldn't happen until after his promotion so his replacement could take the fall. He also made a note to start looking for a new job once he got his new title, assuming he wasn't on the board.

Kathryn, sensing the fickle finger of fate heading her way, asked, “What is the process for getting this clearance?”

“It's a standard DOD clearance check. Fingerprinting, criminal background check of yourself and family, credit check, in some cases a polygraph is required. All applicants must be sponsored by a company either doing business with the DOD or in an industry having this regulation. All applicants must be U.S. citizens, either natural or naturalized.”

“Right now that is not our concern,” Carol continued. “The regulation may not become mandatory, and the insurance rates will be what they will be. Our concern right now is piecing together a timeline of what transpired so we have it all documented for the federal regulators when they arrive. Yes, I’m assuming a worst-case scenario of us not getting the system operational in time.”

Carol looked at Margret and said, “When you have your next lull in there, I need to come in and get statements from those two guys. We can mute the phone so Pete doesn’t have to hear.”

“Statements?” stammered Kathryn.

“If for any reason our systems aren’t running at the start of business, we have to run a mid-day audit to ensure all funds are accounted for. Not fixing this on Sunday caused a shit load of work for a lot of people. On Sunday, nobody would have known and nothing would have to happen,” Carol told Kathryn. “Now we have to comply with the letter of our insurance agreement or nothing will be covered.”

“Fine. Do you mind if I have some counsel from Big Four in the room as well?”

“Not at all. Just be sure they are skilled with depositions.”

And I thought my cramps were bad this morning, thought Kathryn.

Hans strolled into the room they were using as the meeting room and general room for those not stationed here to work from time to time. He was shocked to see the Brit in the room, but not surprised the man in the suit hadn’t made it yet. For a man who did international operations, he was picky about what countries he set foot in.

There wasn’t much to this meeting. It was a “Hello and thanks for coming” meeting. Really just to ensure everyone knew where the new temporary headquarters was, the satellite phone numbers it was using, and who else was on this team.

Hans looked at the Brit and said, "The man in the suit not coming?" He knew he was punching a button, but best to punch it in front of the others so they would all be aware of this guy's temper. It took a lot to set him off, but when you finally did, he went off like a fuel-air bomb, burning long and hot.

"No," responded the Brit. "The little bugger is not coming! He is still in Pakistan waiting for Pakistani intelligence to get done picking up all of the body parts they can find at the other communications hub. They are never going to find anything. Satellite photos show a crater roughly 15 feet wide. Anything inside was scattered half a mile down the hillside if it wasn't incinerated at time of detonation. He just doesn't want to bloody come here."

Some of the other team members had never met the Brit. The ones who had sat there with smirks on their face. They knew what he said was true and they knew he was just getting started. This kind of anger would brew in him all day. If you didn't suddenly become a focal point for it, the spectacle could be entertaining.

Hans interrupted, "For those of you who don't know him, we call this man 'the Brit.' He will be assisting you in processing the email communications. Those who know him know he was instrumental in our previous email hub operation."

The Brit gave a distracted wave to the room.

Hans began passing out slips of paper to everyone. "These are the sat phone numbers to this place. We only have two. I don't expect we will be here that long."

The Brit piped up, "Inside of three weeks we will know if this is a long haul or a short grab." Everyone looked at him, so he continued. "If they send someone new to the trainer, then the thinking is that this is really all they have left for whatever reason. We will take it out and blind them for a while. We won't have enough on the new hub operator to try and turn them as we did before. We couldn't get lucky enough for al-Qaeda to choose someone that spineless again."

"What if they do send someone?" asked one of the team members.

“Then we have to grind this one out, taking down every cell they lead us to and searching for some link across communications networks. Other than the first hub we worked in Pakistan, we haven’t found another hub handling cells in America. The cells these two are handling seem to have all come from that first hub in the mad dash to restore communications lines.”

“So, they either have very few operatives in America, another hub, or home-grown cells that don’t communicate with the leaders here,” Hans continued. “Within three weeks we should at least have an answer for these two hubs. We may not be able to help the Americans further.”

The Brit started speaking and Hans just stepped out of the way. “Yes, I will be helping you decipher emails and track them back to point of origin, I will be one of several doing that. Our real focus needs to be on the trainer though. Forget watching where the new hub operator goes and what he does. He is working too close to the trainer and handling far too big of a load to still be under his wing.”

One of the team piped up. “I have just been hired at his company and he will be my boss there.”

“Good,” said the Brit and Hans in unison.

The Brit continued “Without being obvious, we need to find out if he has any health issues like a bum ticker, etc. We need to rule out a biological reason for him passing the reins.”

The other team members hadn’t really thought about the big picture. They weren’t normally included in such discussions. The Brit was gaining credibility in their eyes.

“And if he plays soccer with us during lunch?”

“Then we really have to look at him. He is either moving out or moving up,” said the Brit.

“Up?”

“We have been using wet erase boards with little hierarchy trees on them to try and map this organization. That doesn’t work. Once you get beyond bin Laden and his inner circle there is no tree. All of the cells are autonomous. If the inner circle of al-Qaeda chooses not to bless and fund an operation they will simply get the blessing and funding from some cleric,” continued the

Brit.

“Perhaps you guys haven't been watching the news lately, but coalition forces have blown up a few people who used to be in the inner circle. There is no clear line of succession. Basically someone already in the inner circle must select you to become a part of the inner circle and the others or bin Laden must agree. The replacement members could come from anywhere in the bloody world.”

This realization floored most of the room. Hans had to admit he hadn't entertained that idea and he hadn't heard such an idea from Vladimir. The Brit was on a roll though, and he kept going. Since the roll was informative, Hans didn't try to choke it off.

“We know that some time ago bin Laden lost his head geek. The man was arrested and interrogated. He's not a lot of use to anyone now. This method of using email operators was probably a pilot or fledgling idea when he was nabbed. That trainer may have been tapped as a replacement simply because al-Qaeda needs this method of communications and he is the only one left who knows how it worked. If they pull him back and move him up, it will most likely be because they know they need to redevelop this idea and deploy it on a larger scale. Satellite communications tends to attract a lot of missiles, which shortens their life span.”

The room got a good chuckle out of that one.

“OK,” started Hans. “This was a meet and greet today. Just needed you all to know where the place was and how to reach it. If anything goes wrong here, we don't have friends in government. There are a couple of choppers not far from here, but they won't be able to stick around for long. Is there anything not in your written status reports that needs to be on the table now?”

Everyone looked around.

“Good. Get back to work. Fill in your teammate who is still at work with the new hub operator. Those of you handling email circle around the Brit.”

Hans then sat down and dashed an email off to Vladimir with this new possibility. He copied the suit on it out of politeness.

John was having an impossible day. The final data center migration did not work. His site was handling the full bank volume on a machine that was partitioned to handle slightly over half the banking volume easily. Adding insult to injury his boss' boss was calling trying to find out why the other data center had not come up this morning.

"I don't know," John answered for the 15th time. "Mine has been running for over a week just fine. Right now it is gasping for air trying to handle the complete banking transactional volume for a Monday morning in the U.S. Do you have any idea just how many cash station transactions there are to post right now?"

"Well find out and get back to me," said the voice on the other end of the phone line.

"I don't even know where that data center is, let alone have its phone number," responded John. "I don't even have enough people at work today to handle the things we normally handle without getting tied up in this matter. I've been told Big Four Consulting is working with the bank to solve the problem. That is all I know now and all I knew two hours ago when you called the first time. I have to go fill in for one of my employees who didn't make it in today. You were supposed to get me more workers here, how is that coming?"

John knew exactly how it was coming. The employees had voted to bring in a union and the company was refusing to pay union wage. Unions currently had a lot of clout with the government. There were soon to be some government officials dragging the company heads into a room with the union officials. If the union slapped down the same contract they had signed at several other places with government negotiators helping, it would be a kangaroo court. The government officials would simply tell the corporation this was the same contract approved at four other companies within a reasonable distance of here and that they must agree to it.

Everybody here knew the place needed more workers. The consulting company had brought in two more data center off-shoring projects. John needed at least three more people to handle the network communications configurations, let alone regular computer operators.

Judging from the number of developers requesting print outs, they must be selling a lot of software development work with these contracts. John was rather shocked when several high-speed continuous-form printers were installed. He had read about green bar paper, but never actually seen tractor-fed paper like that until the printers were installed. They were all manner of noisy and generated a lot of paper dust. It turns out some things still needed to be printed that way and some programmers preferred getting their listings on continuous form rather than off a laser printer. The laser printer could do far more formatting, but the line printer was faster and continuous form kept all of the pages in order. Laser-printed listings were impossible to keep in order they had told John.

The really bad part about today wasn't that John's data center was understaffed. It wasn't even the fact John's data center wasn't in the least way involved with the problem. The bad part was John's boss had pulled a duck and cover move. He offered up John's name and pointed his boss in John's direction. Now, they knew his name and his voice. John made a mental note to send an email tonight requesting a new identity kit.

Money and Things

Lenny was rather frazzled when he finally got back to the office. He knew the sun was up, but the sun had been up for well over 14 hours and it was still morning. He didn't quite know which morning, but it was morning here in the U.S. The receptionist brought him in a fax as he sat at his desk. She closed the door to Lenny's office on the way in. *Oh my*, thought Lenny *This can't be good.*

“Lenny, I don't ask much about what is going on here, and I don't want to know any details. All I want to know is if I should start bringing my passport into work with me along with enough cash for a plane ticket out of the country. I know we do some shady things and I'm starting to feel like it might be getting too big.”

Lenny had to laugh. “Jennifer,” he chuckled, “We are opening a branch in Kyiv specifically so it doesn't get too big here. I'm trying to talk Jeremy into running it for a few years. That fax should have all of the information about the office location, company name, and places we will have bank accounts. Would you like to fly over with Jeremy to help set it up? We could muddle through for a couple of weeks with you over there helping get the place organized.”

“That's a dangerous offer,” responded Jennifer.

“How so?”

“If they do come after us some day, I will appear as something more than a secretary.”

“We could change your title to Office Manager if that is what this is about,” grinned Lenny.

“More words and the same money isn't what I came in to talk with you about, I'm being serious here.”

“So am I. You deserve a bump in your income given all you do for us and a company paid trip might help you relax.”

“Might cost me my marriage. He's good looking and they like to drink a lot in Russia.”

Now they both laughed. “What you two do on your own time is your own business. Don't ask, don't tell is my policy there,” chuckled Lenny.

“That hasn't worked so good for the military,” quipped back Jennifer.

“Well,” responded Lenny, “When Jeremy gets in later today I will be hitting him up to do it. Since you will be the one calling our travel agent, simply let me know if you booked two flights or three?”

“Three?”

“I will have to send one of the IT guys along to get a network link up with our data centers. Will also need them to decide if we should give up our second site here and simply have it over there. I hadn't thought about that last part until just now. It would make sense to do that if the office has sufficient power and space. Might even cover the cost of the office space. Schedule a meeting with myself and the IT guys to discuss it.”

“You want the IT women there, too?” chided Jennifer.

“It was a generic guy,” responded Lenny.

“That's fine, we'll keep it between us girls,” Jennifer quipped as she walked out of Lenny's office.

Lenny liked her. She had the right attitude to work in a place like this. The only time she ever questioned things was when there was something to worry about. Indeed, there was something to worry about here, but Lenny couldn't bring himself to tell her. He did pick up the phone and call the service firm handling their payroll to change Jennifer's title to Office Manager and give her a \$10K annual raise. *Wait until she gets her next direct deposit stub*, thought Lenny.

Just as Lenny finished, Jeremy walked in. The boy looked worn out. “Glad you came in Jeremy, it looks like you could use the rest,” joked Lenny.

“I take it from your good mood you are still sleep deprived from your flight back,” responded Jeremy in kind.

“I will never understand why airlines let people with small children on board,” said Lenny. “I swear that brat cried all the way here.”

Jeremy laughed and said, “We should gather the others.”

“Get them. I will be in the conference room shortly.”

A few minutes later they were all seated in the conference room. Jeremy began his verbal report. “First Global has completed migrating all of the French banking operations to the new software from Pytho Corporation. We should be hearing an announcement about the product soon. I don't know how much longer it will take for First Global to come out with their announcement about being the first customer.”

Just then, Jeremy's cell phone rang. He looked at the number and saw it was Stacie. “Hello, I'm in a meeting, can I call you back?”

“No. I just stepped out to call you. The last data center migration that was supposed to happen this weekend was a disaster. Kathryn is over there now with a few others. Sounds like they are looking for asses to bounce out the door. I don't have anymore and probably won't until tonight or tomorrow. I knew you would want to know. Bye.”

Jeremy hung up then looked around the room. “Well, I was going to tell you that First Global was migrating the last data center this weekend. That phone call just informed me the migration was a disaster and they are looking for people to fire over it. I thought we were set for the shred to start any time we wanted, but it looks like it may have to wait.”

Lenny thought for a moment and said, “It may happen before we can get involved. There is an outage time limit restriction for insurance purposes. If they don't get things running in time, federal investigators will be paying them a visit.”

“I assume they had a fall back plan for this migration as they had with the others,” said Jeremy. “But just to be sure ...” he picked up the conference room phone and called Jennifer.

“Yes.”

“Your bank is First Global or a division of it isn't it?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“We were wondering if we could get you to drive over there and try to cash a check. We hear they might be having some systems problems and would like some firsthand information. Just put the phones on overhead ring.”

“Sure. Anything else while I’m out?”

“Oh, don’t tempt me to ask for bagels,” replied Jeremy.

“Funny. Is Lenny there?”

“Yes.”

“Tell him the IT meeting is at 2 p.m.”

“OK, thanks.”

“Lenny, the IT meeting is at 2 p.m.”

“Good. We might as well jump into the next topic then. Gentleman we have just begun the process of opening a branch in Kyiv.”

The other two analysts looked stunned. They knew Lenny was out for a few days on short notice, but had no idea he was somewhere in Russia opening a new branch.

“I just received the bulk of the information on the new office and company name this morning. I’m trying to guilt Jeremy into running it for a while, so you need to help me on that or I will have to guilt one of you.”

“Don’t look at me,” said one of the analysts, “I’ve got a family.”

The second analyst looked at Jeremy and said, “Congratulations Jeremy! You really deserve the promotion! It’s a great career move!”

Lenny roared as Jeremy hung his head. He had hoped to talk with Lenny about this before he turned a full-court press on him. “The company will have to set me up with a furnished two-bedroom apartment and I will need to fly back here to close on the sale of my townhome. I also will have to have time to get my stuff into storage and other stuff packed for shipping,” Jeremy said in an almost defeated tone.

Both analysts said in unison, "If Lenny gives us some time off work we can help you pack." At this moment neither of them envied Jeremy's cozy relationship with Lenny. The price tag had just been revealed and it was too steep for either of them to pay.

Jeremy had thought about it last night when he got back. He had even sent an email to the realtor who had helped him find this place and asked her to call him some time today. The housing market had been going up steadily since he bought that townhome so he stood to net a tidy profit on it. Possibly enough to more than cover two years of storage on his stuff.

"I have no idea how you go about getting a two-year work visa in Russia when you are a U.S. citizen. That is completely up to you Lenny."

Lenny nodded. He would fax Vladimir and ask him if it should be handled from his end or if the law firm Lenny kept on retainer should deal with it here. Lenny fumbled through the fax and said, "We will have to get some new business cards printed up for you with the new branch name. One side in English and the other side in Russian. Your new title will be Branch Manager."

"My meeting later today with the IT staff is to get one of them to go over there for a few weeks with you and survey the office we have acquired. They will need to set up network communications between here and there at a minimum. I'm also going to run the possibility of moving our second data center there. We at least need to look into the option. I may or may not have to offer some people from the second data center jobs over there if they will go."

Jeremy sat there looking rather shell shocked, then finally muttered, "I can't believe I just agreed to do this."

"We heard you!" said the other two analysts.

Lenny laughed again. He wasn't even going to ask about the second bedroom. He would simply include the requirements in his next fax to Vladimir.

“Don't worry Jeremy, it will only be temporary. My cousin has expressed some interest in running the place when he gets out of his current occupation. Even if he doesn't you should have found and trained someone inside of two years. You could probably hang onto the townhome so you had some place to come back to.”

“No. If I'm going to do this I want to sell the townhome while the market is still going up. We both know the housing bubble is going to burst at some point. By the time I get back it should have happened. I will be able to get a nicer place for less money.”

“Keep finding plays like this Jeremy, and money won't be one of your concerns,” said Lenny.

Money wasn't a major concern of Jeremy's as it was. He was young, single, and didn't party a lot. While he had started here at a measly \$40K per year and only climbed to \$50K recently, he had been putting as much as he could in his personal trading account. Every good play Lenny let him know about he had also played in his own personal account. What started out as a pathetic \$3K had bought him his townhome, his current car, and there was still over \$100K in that account. Jeremy had already bought a big position in First Global Bank anticipating a bump from the software announcement. After the news he had just received though, he was hoping they could get their next quarterlies out before there was some form of public investigation. That would give the stock a little to medium bump on its own. Jeremy might have to make the safe play and get out then. Making \$8 per share on 3,200 shares in just a couple of months was still an incredible rate of return for the average Joe.

Jeremy had been so lost in his thoughts he hadn't realized the others had left the conference room. He got up and went back to his desk trying to get focused on work again. Looking through his email he saw a note from Lenny.

Jeremy,

I don't know if you heard me, but Jennifer might come with you for the first two weeks to help set the place up.

The other two have identified Granite National Bank as a potential market for Pytho software. They have several locations and seem to be in a bit of a bind with the FDIC.

Lenny

This is getting to be quite a little menagerie, thought Jeremy. Me, Jennifer, someone from IT. Who knows who else Lenny will think to send with me.

Nikolaus greeted Abel with a firm handshake when he came to Nikolaus's office. Abel had been a loyal party member willing to do whatever was asked of him. He currently was a senior VP at this corporation's little-talked-about generic drug division.

“It is good to see you again Abel.”

“And you. It has been quite some time since you called me into service.”

“Well, I shall be calling you into service today,” said Nikolaus as he closed his office door. Both men sat down and Nikolaus handed Abel some papers.

“I need this company set up as a distributor in Russia. Here is their contact information, letters of credit, etc. They need access to the on-line inventory and ordering system for all of the items we sell to anybody and a list of items we will be shipping to just them.”

“Will my company be making these products, stocking them, or shipping them?”

“No. These products will come out of the secured location. I have the list of them here with their costs and the only description that will be available. They are the only ones to see these items.”

“No problem with that. I will have to coordinate with some people here at the main headquarters to get them access to the inventory system. I will assign one of my staff to set them up. How big of a territory do they get?”

“Doesn't matter. Simply ensure that all three of their distribution locations are in the system for shipping.”

“This is some rather low pricing for specialty stuff. Am I going to have to explain it to anyone?”

“No. Send them to me if they ask.”

“Should I flag them for no marketing contact?”

“I didn't know we had such a capability.”

“We do now that you have the secured location and the kind of customers who go along with it.”

“Can we flag them for marketing contact from your division only?”

“I believe that is an option. Are they actually going to buy our products?”

“They expressed a strong desire to have access to everything you make. Here is the contact information for an individual they can chat with. He is also expecting product catalogs, marketing literature, etc. They haven't expressed an interest in the primary products of the corporation, but you should have your people contact him and verify that before flagging them.”

“Will do. I can set them up with half a million in credit without having to do the letter of credit checking. Once that goes through they may get a higher limit. I assume you need this done yesterday?”

“Within the next two days, yes. The specialty products are almost ready for shipment from the secured location warehouse. They want the products shipped on the same truck as their other products though. You will have to handle how to coordinate that.”

“Normally, that doesn't happen, with items from there. I will have to see if that warehouse allows for it. We have what is called a 'transfer ship' capability. We will pick and pack an order leaving it waiting on the dock for an arrival from another warehouse before sending the truck out. I assume you want this stuff loaded in the front for when it crosses the border?”

“You would assume correct.”

“If you talk to them again, tell them to flag their orders as 'ship complete' when they place them. I will tell my people to do the same. It is the only way the 'transfer ship' process will kick in. By default we do a split shipment, but that is probably more than you care to know about our logistics system.”

“It is enough for me to know that you know,” grinned Nikolaus.

“I will get on this now and let you know when they have been setup,” Abel said, getting up.

“I'm surprised you didn't ask what this was all about.”

“I don't care. Right now my only concern is which distributor we are going to honk off by giving up some of their territory to this distributor. One of their locations is in the middle of a territory held by one of our bigger distributors. I have to get legal involved to see if we have any wiggle room in the contract.”

“We give exclusive territories for generics?”

“Generally no, but when you handle the primary product line and have an exclusive territory it is generally written into the contract you get the same territory for the generics. When it comes time to make a case, I'm going to have to point them at you.”

“Understood. I will simply tell legal that this distributor is participating in one of our black ops projects and they asked to get access to the generics in order to fill out the truck with some business that customs wouldn't question.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Abel.

“It had better be good because it is the truth,” responded Nikolaus.

Kathryn and Marget were in the conference room till almost noon on the Monday morning after the disastrous data center migration attempt. Finally, once all of the startup files had been verified and the new security file installed, the second Indian data center came on-line running the application. The machine load balancing operation began and the intra-day audit job was scheduled for about 1 p.m. The communications load balancer recognized it, had another machine to route requests to, and started splitting them off. The machine in India, which had been shouldering the entire load, had its utilization drop below 90% and response times began to improve.

Margret told Pete to power things down in the data center and come back after the girls took him out for a sit-down lunch. She told him to be sure and pick a nice place as Big Four Consulting was buying.

The legal team from Big Four had arrived about an hour ago and been holed up in Carol's cubical. The one brief comment Margret heard from Carol was that these were contract lawyers and not skilled in giving depositions, they may have been deposed a few times themselves, but they had never conducted a deposition.

At any rate it was in the lawyers hands now. The skirt who had been helping was told she could go back to her desk. Margret called Carol from the conference room to say it was all hers now. Kathryn told the other two to wait here and answer some questions. If they had half a brain she expected them to try and pin everything on the one who called in sick this morning. That wouldn't change anything. All three of them were supposed to be there on Saturday morning and contact Kathryn if there were any problems.

Once they were out of the conference room Kathryn asked Margret, "Can I use the phone in your office with the door closed? I need to speak with someone in HR about the process and to let them know the lawyers will be in with them shortly."

"Certainly," replied Margret. "I don't know if the two of them will be enough though. It depends on what Carol comes up with for our FDIC notification letter. They may wish to come here and have a chat with us. I don't know how she is going to gloss over the fact our entire data center staff quit in protest."

“The one and only question I have for them is did they even show up on Sunday morning? The only explanation that makes any sense at all is they conned the one guy into handling it who called in sick today. I don't know if he called in sick on Sunday as well, but that would make it all fit together. I assigned all three of them, but if they thought only one needed to be there and the one who was supposed to be there bailed on them, it would explain things. Nobody called because nobody was there,” concluded Kathryn.

Margret went to lunch and came back to see security escorting the two gentlemen out of the building. She saw Kathryn and went over to her. “We told them we would ship their personal belongings to them from our office. I took their badges so they cannot get in our building. Our lawyers wanted them escorted out of your building to reduce our liability.”

“And what of the third?” inquired Margret.

“I can't fire him. He did called in sick late Saturday afternoon. He called the office and both of their cell phones. They didn't take his call, they admitted to that. They partied until 4 a.m. and slept through it. The third guy had a legitimate excuse. He just called into work from the hospital still groggy. On Saturday night he was taken into the hospital with what turned out to be an appendicitis. They did surgery early Sunday morning once they figured out what was wrong with him. His appendix had actually burst so he will be in the hospital another three days.”

“Wow,” responded Margret. “He managed to make three phone calls with a burst appendix?”

“The wonder of youthful endurance,” said Kathryn. “It gets even better though. He didn't have my cell phone number on him because it was in the folder at home and he was on his way to the hospital in a friend's car. The voicemail he left was for me. Our voicemail system is supposed to either ring or text our cell phones when we get a new voice message. I didn't get a message because it was never sent. The voicemail system was being upgraded over the weekend.”

“Carol has all of this?”

“Most of it, yes. So do our lawyers. These guys didn’t even bother to try calling in sick. I guess they won’t be such good pals with the guy who is keeping his job. HR is putting it in their jacket that they were fired for cause. I believe Carol is going to state that you were changing out machines over the weekend, a problem was encountered, but the two people in charge of monitoring and notifying didn’t bother to show up for work. Their employer has since terminated them and the new machine was in place in a timely manner while the second data center shouldered the burden. We are going to have to adjust the capacity of the machine at that data center so if this were to happen again it won’t peg at 98% utilization.”

“Monday morning is the worst possible time for this,” volunteered Margret. “Since the bank systems are traditionally down on Sunday, the ATM withdrawals and deposits get queued up at the service bureau all day. They hit us as soon as the systems come back up, usually some time Sunday evening.”

“You allow withdrawals without your systems being up?” asked Kathryn.

“On Sunday, it doesn’t matter what limit you set for your account, you can only get up to \$200. A few have exploited the policy, but not that many. We are not usually down that long on Sunday and usually it is one data center at a time so it is a very narrow window for them to hit, not always at the same time of day.”

“Oh.”

“We also have a job which usually runs before shutdown suspending the cards of anyone who is overdrawn or has less than \$200 in their account, so it usually isn’t a problem.”

Margret went on to find out from Carol if she had all she needed.

“Yes,” responded Carol. “I have filed the report with the FDIC telling them we were changing out machines and had a problem with a security file that took us a while to track down.”

“So you told them nothing about the machine being off-shored?”

“Didn’t put it in the report, no. Will wait and see if they inquire further. We were up within the allotted time so I don’t think there will be any further inquiry.”

“Good.”

A few hours later Kent was sitting in his office when the phone rang. He feared the worst. He was surprised when the call was from an analyst from Langston Group looking to interview him over the phone. Kent knew this was part of the arrangement. He had a cheat sheet of things to say prepared by Kathryn. He dug it out and began responding to the questions. Odd how the cheat sheet matched the order of the questions almost exactly. When the interview was complete Kent asked, “I take it Pytho Corporation is about to announce their software product?”

“They announced this morning. This interview will appear in our newsletter going out next week.”

Vladimir was sitting in his office going through the faxes he had received from Lenny. He sent most of them on to Dimitri and told Dimitri to contact Lenny directly. They should be able to obtain an apartment easily enough. He knew Dimitri's people owned several buildings. The visa was a matter of greasing the correct set of palms to expedite the process.

Once that matter was dealt with, Vladimir turned to the email messages copied from the al-Qaeda hub accounts. He knew the team was focusing mainly on the messages coming in. They were trying to locate more cells to take down and possibly another email hub. Vladimir had been a covert geek long enough to know the outbound messages were going to hold the most useful information.

He had a particular interest in the trainer. Perhaps it was brought on by some geek bravado due to how long it took Nikolaus to actually get a simple Trojan installed on the operator's machine. Indeed, if the trainer hadn't been stupid enough to allow a trusted connection and account for the person he was training, Nikolaus might never have gotten in. Whoever it was, they had everything locked. They had even plugged the tens of thousands of security holes known to exist in Microsoft operating systems and products they were running. Nickolaus had to give whomever it was credit, they had managed to do what even the Evil Red Empire couldn't do.

Another thing which had peaked Vladimir's interest in the trainer was the analysis Hans had just sent him. Apparently the Brit thought the trainer might be on his way up in the organization. If that was true, then they couldn't allow anything to happen to the trainer or let him get suspicious. The odds were very high any new inductee into the inner circle of al-Qaeda would be granted a face-to-face pow-wow with bin Laden himself. All they needed to do was plant some tracking devices on the guy: His computer, a bag he normally carries, possibly even the heel of a shoe he wears. People had been chasing rumors in the mist trying to find that piece of shit called bin Laden, and this email operator could serve as a homing beacon for the missiles.

Vladimir then had a horrible thought. He had to write it down and email Hans.

Hans,

We need to plant some passive reflective tracking devices on the trainer. His computer, a bag he carries, etc. Your team should be able to gain entry easy enough.

It is most important that if he is elevated in the organization we do not inform the higher ups. Be sure the Brit knows. Don't even tell the man in the suit. He will be obligated to tell Pakistani intelligence and they will either warn bin Laden or run to the Americans who will want to capture him alive to stand trial. Either way the puddle of shit will get away once again.

If he is elevated, let this guy be a homing beacon. I will take care of getting missiles sent to dispose of him.

Vladimir

With that little bit of venting taken care of, Vladimir returned to skimming through the outbound messages from the trainer. Handling his email was easy. He had somehow transferred nearly all of the cells he was handling to his two trainees. Vladimir wished he had been trapping this person's outbound emails before they had managed to complete the transfer. Nobody on this team knew how the cells in the field were informed of a new email hub transfer. They were too busy trying to find cells to round up and a new email hub.

They weren't looking for the tool that would give them all of the hubs. Vladimir was looking for the Rosetta Stone. He suspected that some message was sent with a special phrase embedded in it telling the receiver to send to a new email address. Vladimir needed that phrase. He knew of one team in America that was storing every suspected terrorist email in a huge disk farm. The incoming system which filtered spam had a 500TB disk farm. The back-end system had four disk farms of 1,000TB each. The cooling and power consumption must be astronomical. Vladimir didn't currently have a contact with that covert team, but he could get one. He knew the team existed and he knew both Hans and the Brit had contacts in American covert Ops. The trick was in finding the phrase.

Finally Vladimir could take this line of thought no more. He picked up a disposable cell phone and made an international call to Hans.

"Yes," answered Hans, not wanting to give anything away.

"It's Vlad, Hans."

"Just reading your email. Are you serious about this?"

"Deadly, but that isn't what I called about."

"What has you in a tither?"

"Do we know if this trainer was handling cell sites in America before he transferred things to the others?"

"We are certain of it."

"What are the possibilities of you bagging Nedim for a session of questioning again?"

"Me, personally, damned low. The suit is looking for reasons to stay in Pakistan, so he might be up for it. Why?"

"You guys are letting the Rosetta Stone slip through your fingers. There is some message sent out to cells in the field which tells them to use a certain hub email account. All we have to do is identify what that phrase is and we can shut these two trainees down."

"OK, slow down. What the hell are you talking about?"

“Nedim was handling a certain group of American email addresses. When Nedim was outed those address went to this trainer, correct?”

“Yes.”

I suspect another email was sent to those addresses, either directly or indirectly which told them the new email hub to use. We have the email addresses, what I need is the phrase.”

“Don't you also need the email?”

“You can get that for me.”

“Sure, I'll just shit it out right here on the desk for you, no problem.”

“Never talk about shit to a man who rides a wheelchair.”

“Sorry, but you know what I meant.”

“Yes, and I need your full attention. There is a covert team in America which has some massive disk farms. Their mission is to archive every suspected terrorist email message. If the American public ever found out about it they would go ballistic.”

“That's a lot of email. How are they getting it all?”

“There are only a couple of international backbones going in and out of that country. These sites sit on them and snag a copy of every email going through. They have an up-front system which filters out the known spam. The text-only messages are run through a keyword system to see if they need to be archived. Any email message containing an image is archived. Any email message containing a compressed file or an image is archived.”

“That's a lot of storage.”

“They have several disk farms of more than 1,000TB each. Of course they use some form of data compression, but yes, eventually it spills over.”

“How does this help us exactly?”

“We have a list of email addresses in their country. If we have the phrase or keyword which tells someone to change communications hubs, we should be able to give them both and have them do a search of all email messages going to those addresses. They should be able to do the image extraction and search for the keyword or phrase. We even know the email address they are

using for the hub now, so we could give them that to make certain the information we have is correct.”

“How does this help us exactly?”

“Once we verify it and they come back with the hit, they can scan all other suspected emails in their database for this keyword or phrase, then hand the hub email address over to us. It also means the cells for the hub formerly in the Khyber Pass can lead us to a new hub. It helps us because we can simply off this new guy and see where his people get routed.”

“Say we squeeze this phrase out of Nedim; the Americans magically go along with your request and they verify the phrase is correct. What happens when we take out the current new hub and those cells go nowhere?”

“If we take him out in a way that doesn't alert suspicion it means that they haven't managed to get more hubs in the field. We can take the trainer at will, leaving them completely blind. They will have to go back to direct emails and cell phones until they can come up with something else. We already know how to inflict casualties on them when they communicate in that manner.”

“I will run this by the suit and see what he thinks. Too bad you didn't come up with this idea before he got outed. My suspicion is that Nedim is currently under too much surveillance from too many groups to risk bagging him. Everyone is waiting for al-Qaeda to kill him.”

“That was my suspicion as well.”

“Run this past the Brit as well. He might be willing to risk it even if the suit says no. Then again, if he has this idea in his head it will stop him from offing the current hub until after we've tried to squeeze them.”

“There is another option. If I'm able to make contact with the Americans, I can give them a couple of the email addresses which we know switched, and tell them to pull five days worth, from a specific date forward, of email messages sent to them on deciphering images looking for this new hub's email address, then ask them to share this information with us and run the same search across their entire database. It might have went out in a simple text message, and it might have been done via phone call.”

“True. The information would be more valuable if we managed to obtain it without going the Nedim route. If he really is being watched that closely the risk is high.”

“If it turns out you are correct, what do you propose we do?”

“The new operator must die in a very public and ordinary way. Hit by a truck, office fire, be standing within the blast circle of a suicide bomber or something like that. Something which cannot be tied back to this operation yet showy enough to make the news ... unless you can figure out a way for him to have a heart attack while talking with his trainer.”

“How often do you think something like that will work?”

“Depends how creative we get. It all hinges on the transfer being sent in an email though. If it is a phone call we will be pumping a dry well.”

“Agreed.”

With that, Vladimir hung up and returned to scanning through the outbound emails. The need to find out what this trainer was up to burned strong in him. He couldn't explain why. You simply develop a sense about these things once you had spent a long time in covert operations. He spent nearly an hour going through the accumulated outbound messages, then he came across one using an image he hadn't seen before.

What is this? he thought. He went searching through the network directory which held all of the known baseline images, it turned up nothing. He tried some software he had searching for single bit errors in the file and found quite a few. Now he had the long, drawn-out process of trying to reconstruct the baseline message. He sent a quick email containing the message to Hans and asked him to keep an eye out for a baseline image or another of this image in an email. He was certain this image contained something dramatically important. It had originated from the trainer's machine, but had not come in.

The trial-and-error process went on for hours. Even with all of the software and knowledge at Vladimir's disposal, it was difficult to pull a message out of a photo if you didn't have the baseline image. The baseline image would have been the raw photograph with a simple word or sentence encoded in it already. After that you simply had the bit differences between

the two images. Finally Vladimir managed to pull out what he believed was the message.

Need new identity kits for myself and team. Operation to move forward soon.

Nikolaus received his phone call from Abel stating things were currently setup. He gave Nikolaus the user account and password along with the Web address for the distributor to connect. It would take more time before they could use the XML interface to send orders, receive invoices, and check inventories, but this would get them going for now. They had a half-a-million-dollar line of credit, but that would change once the finance department got done.

There could be little doubt that Abel was a loyal party member. He had bulldogged this through in just over a day. Nikolaus picked up a disposable cell phone and called Dimitri on the number he was given.

“Hello.”

“Your distributor has been set up. I have the password, username, and Web site address for you.”

“Excellent. Have someone email it to the contact we gave you. He will get right on placing an order. Are you ready to ship our custom products?”

“Those were all packaged yesterday. You do have only a half-a-million-dollar credit limit to start. Finance hasn't had time to do the credit processing.”

“No problem. Inform him of that in the email. I must warn you that he will probably burn most of that entering an order for regular stuff, if not all of it. As I said, they have a large market for cheap generics, but simply couldn't get them.”

“I heard one of our distributors had one of the territories and might issue a legal challenge. We are prepared to handle that on this end. They had not bothered to buy much of the generic stuff.”

“Good. Now that I think of it, things might go smoother if the first shipment and payment is for the generic stuff. We need to get customs used to seeing large orders that are a waste of their time to go though.”

“As long as we manage to get your custom products taken care of in the next month or so, things should work.”

“I’m glad you are easy to do business with. This should be a very profitable undertaking for both of us.”

“I hope so. By the way, they don’t handle blood products do they?”

“I can ask, why?”

“We are getting quite a supply of whole blood, clotting agent, and plasma built up. If they are supplying some hospitals it would be nice if they could take some of those off our hands while they are still fresh.”

“I will make a call now.”

“Thank you.”

Nikolaus hung up the disposable phone, looked at the battery level, then tossed it in the trash. *No sense keeping something like that around or recharging it*, he thought. *Never know when this will all blow up.*

When he returned to his desk, he got back to work on his new mission in life, building a secured camp in China. Abel had provided him with additional information about the area where the existing gauze factory was. There was already a worker dormitory on site. The odd thing about building in China was that housing was so scarce you had to build a company town to set up a factory, at least if you weren’t Chinese.

There was a very large plot of land the generics company had an option on and it was about the right size for a smaller second secured facility. He already had his people approach their contacts in the Chinese government about building a facility on that plot to house the drugs for their plan. They were all too eager to give an approval and promise to keep what the site did confidential. The Luton bombing had them wondering about having all of this stuff stored in one place as well.

Crazy Man was Right

John had been walking on egg shells for the past three days. His request for new identity kits and traveling money had went unanswered. The stress of working nearly 18 hours per day, and actually having to work rather than supervise, was also taking its toll on him. The company had finally hired a few people, but they were almost non-technical by definition. They had done this to get around the union contract. They were all part-time people without any degrees. They were going to hire the maximum number of part-time people they could find at the shit wages they were offering and not replace a single union worker. The greedy bastards didn't care who keeled over in here.

Training the new people had been a big drain on John's time. He had little time to think about his plan or to do much about implementing it. He had quietly opened up the firewall on three separate ports to allow his machine to connect from home, or literally anywhere. In theory, the attack could be carried out from his apartment, but not if the company management found the open ports in the fire wall. John had been good about covering his tracks when he did that, logging in via the generic systems maintenance account the others used to do their work. Still, it was a gamble. If they ran a security audit, they would find the ports and close them. They may or may not try to find out who took the security off those ports and why, but with the ports closed he would be forced to be in the building (along with the three others) to carry out the attack.

A security audit was fast becoming a big risk. There was a lot of fall out from the failed data center migration. Even though the center was up and running the following day, a lot of people were being called on the carpet for it. Even John's boss had told him the Americans owned up to it being their fault. They had fired two people responsible for it and were looking at taking legal action against the data center that quit the day of the conversion.

That was not good news to John. He had read enough Internet news and watched enough business reports on satellite TV to know just how court cases like that worked. The former employees would get lawyers to file a class-action counter suit. There would be lots of news reports and media coverage stating the data center was being off-shored. They might even identify John's data center. Management would freak and lock down this facility like a fortress.

The Utopian vision John had for this attack was that he and the three others would enter a conference room under the guise of a software deployment meeting. This would be entered on the calendars just like any other deployment meeting. Since it was a software deployment meeting, nobody would think twice about the developers having their notebook computers in the room.

At the start of the meeting they would start each of the jobs that transferred money out of the accounts. One of the developers had come up with a wonderful idea. Rather than begin a bulk transfer of all moneys, they had written a program which would randomly take transaction amounts which occurred on each account over the past six months. Instead of going to their original destinations these transactions would be sent to the accounts in Syria, Iran, and Switzerland. John had already tasked one of the cell leaders with getting the accounts set up and getting software in place so when the money started coming in they could instantly transfer it out via the drug-dealer, money-laundering system.

The meeting would be held near the end of the work day. After they had monitored the jobs a little while, they would simply go home, pack their bags and disappear. Even if the banks began to catch onto the heist, tens of millions if not billions would be gone. Trying to get it all in one lump sum would send up too many red flags in the software. They would all be caught and the transactions would be reversed before the money could be snatched out of the accounts.

One thing John had learned in doing his research for this attack is that there is less printed money worldwide than there is wealth. If every single person went to their bank and stock broker trying to all get their funds in cash, roughly half of them would have to take IOUs. They didn't have to get all of the money to start a global panic, just enough to force a run on the banks.

This had been a hard sell for John. A lot of money had come in post-9/11 and the upper echelon of al-Qaeda did not have much interest in any attack which didn't take the lives of infidels. John had decided he was going through with this whether he got the blessing of the leaders or not. Apparently they had come to the same conclusion since they sent him employees and people to train for the email hub operations.

John believed the only reason he didn't get a new person to train after the hub in Pakistan had been so rudely taken out was the fact he sent an email stating the operation was to happen soon. The others on John's team had told him their cell leaders had a lot of support for this project. Weapons and people were being chewed up in Afghanistan. It cost cash to purchase small arms and explosives. Their Russian suppliers had all but stopped selling them anything good. Now they were dealing with the Muslim countries surrounding Afghanistan, but the prices were higher due to the risk for them and the fact they were buying from the Russian's and acting as middle men.

A strike like this could prove just how dangerous al-Qaeda really was. They had been unable to acquire decent biological weapons or any nuclear weapons, but the cash from this might tempt some of the more unstable governments in the region. It would also allow them to set up a disposal company for chemical and nuclear waste. They had some home-grown supporters in countries where that was a commercial business, most notably in the United States: Squeaky clean individuals who could get the licenses easily if they had enough cash lying around. As with most wars, money and industry would eventually win the day. If you had the money, you could buy the industry.

There were only two things holding up this operation. The first thing was the lack of identity kits. Security camera's made those mandatory. They would have to get out of the country before this was discovered. The second thing was that new banking software installed for French operations. The programmers needed some time to write a separate job to handle that database and application.

One of the programmers had lamented to John about no cell thinking of buying a black-market, credit-card imprinting machine. The database contained all of the information for nearly a billion ATM accounts along with millions of bank-issued credit cards. They could print up their own cards and

take the money a little at a time.

John was hit with a better idea. Why not create an ASCII delimited file of all the information and take it with them? Since an ASCII file was pure text, which could be imported into a spreadsheet, database, or any other application they chose to use, it would be perfect. There were dozens of chat rooms on-line where people sold identities. Granted, they only got about \$10 per card for them, but it would be a method of getting some cash while traveling the world in disguise. He instructed the programmer to create such an extract from every system. One file for each system, then quietly sneak it out. They would all have one or two of the files to fund their escape.

There were few illusions in John's mind about this operation. No place in India would be safe for him no matter how much money he had. His new identity kit would need to come with an H1-B Visa to the U.S. There were so many Indian IT workers there, nobody paid attention to them. He could hide in the forest of New York for a while, then move off to the Midwest or the West Coast. Identity kits or not, John set the meeting two weeks out. It was not unusual for his schedule or the programmer's schedules to be that backlogged.

Nikolaus used his own login to check the inventory levels of the special products for Dimitri's distributor. They had taken a couple of containers of Russian currency, a container of euros and, oddly, even a container of Indian currency. Nikolaus didn't want to know anything about what they were doing with it, he just wanted it gone. He was somewhat peeved they didn't take the one container of South African currency they had. He was about ready to burn that money. He had asked everyone in the party who ran any kind of covert operation if they had use for it and they all said no.

It was odd to still have all of those euros. Nikolaus had taken to paying the team doing the harvesting in cash. It was a big bag of euros every week and still they had a bunch bailed up and waiting to be boxed. At least they had gotten more strict in their organ dealings. American dollars, euros, or Russian rubles were the only forms of payment they accepted. Deliveries were now accompanied by special paramilitary units who made sure the terms were met or the buyers no longer had need for organs.

Getting rid of the odd currencies was still going to be a problem. Nikolaus had called Hans and asked him for a shipping address to send some special cargo.

“What kind of special cargo?”

“Local currency in containers which state it is medical supplies and not to be opened,” responded Nikolaus.

“How many containers?”

“Four.”

“Will they fit in the trunk of a car?”

“Not all four together.”

“Ship them one per week to the apartment where the three guys are staying. The can cart the package here. This location really isn't secure to be leaving that kind of cash around.”

“Use it to grease whatever palms need greasing. One of the sales from the other operation got paid in that currency and we aren't set up to use it or convert it. The laundry didn't leap at cleaning it. Since you are in-country you can pay your people in local currency and bribe who you must.”

It would be nice to have a decent hotel thought Hans. I can keep a low profile and have a place with flush plumbing for a change. Be nice to take a hot shower more than once per week as well. This time the people doing the surveillance had it good and the headquarters had it bad. There was one hydrant sticking out of the ground for water and it didn't have much pressure. No way you could take a shower, even if there was a shower or a hose.

“How is that going, if you don't mind my asking?”

“Beyond capacity. Took the risk of bringing in new people to boost capacity, but quite risky.”

“You need a second location.”

“I'm already on it. Presenting to the board later today.”

“Be a year before it is up though, won't it?”

“Six months. Much smaller site and a much bigger construction crew.”

“Won't that be difficult to hide?”

“They are being provided by the government of where it will be built. They use them for much of their military construction.”

“Oh. You managed a big hook.”

“A whale.”

“Good fishing then.”

Nikolaus laughed, then hung up. His stress level was dropping. While the money laundering was going slower than he wanted it was still going to add several million to the bottom line of the company this quarter.

That reminded Nikolaus to check the inventory of blood. He logged in again and found it had been cut in half from its previous level last week. He picked up the phone and called Abel.

“Hello.”

“Hello Abel, Nikolaus here. Is there any way I can see what this new distributor orders?”

“Are you logged into your inquiry page?”

“Yes.”

“Along the top menu there is an option for reports. Put your mouse over it and a drop down menu will appear. Should be an option for account history.”

“Ah, there is.”

“Select it and key in the account number I gave you. It should bring up a list of invoices after asking you a date range. You can look at each invoice individually. That will pretty much match their order, unless we had to back order some items for them. Do you need more information?”

“No, this is good enough. Thank you very much.”

“Always glad to be of service to the party.”

No wonder they hadn't taken much in the way of currency off Nikolaus' hands. Nearly half of their credit limit was used up ordering blood. Another quarter of it went to the generic products. They only had chump change left to order their private products. Dimitri wasn't kidding about this distributor starving for quality generics. They ordered enough cold formula and antibiotics to treat a city. He wondered what would happen in a few weeks when their credit limit was adjusted as a result of finance finishing their credit check. Hell, they ordered 1,000 boxes of gauze patches! Other than the blood and plasma, none of the stuff they ordered retailed for more than U.S.\$5 Nikolaus was interrupted by an email notification. He opened the message as he saw it was from the contact at the new distributor.

Hello,

I just wanted to thank you for allowing us to distribute your products. We have been trying to find a line of quality products for a very long time. I can't wait for your credit department to finish their check on us so we can order all of the things we really need.

We are updating our catalog now with all of your products and sending it out to all retail and hospital locations we supply. By the time our credit limit is increased we expect to have a very large order waiting for you.

It would be at least a week before their credit limit was bumped. Nikolaus had forgotten how bad off some parts of Russia really were. He assumed Dimitri would be providing the credit references in one way or another and that this influx of generic medical supplies into the region was his method of buying off the public. Still, doing some good along the way never hurt. After all, wasn't that how the other countries were going to be sucked into this operation. They were all buying blood components and their very wealthy were buying organs to extend their greedy lives.

The Brit was using every trick he knew to locate the actual destination of the email address which had Vladimir all in a tither. The Brit still didn't know who Vladimir was, only that someone remotely going through the outbound email had stumbled across something big. He used every mail distribution site he knew how to hack into to send every kind of spam he could think of with the ping utility embedded in it. He simply needed the remote location to get a ping to work from. The outbound email happened before the trainer's machine had been fully compromised.

Finally, he turned to Hans and said, "Can you have your remote guru connect in and send an email to this same address from the trainer's machine? We can get the ping utility to them that way I think."

"I can ask, but I think he would have done it already if he could. He was never able to get all the way in to that machine. He might be able to send it from the email service directly though."

"Why didn't I think of that?"

"Can you do it?"

"Yes, but I will have to do a full penetration of the site which he has already done. He can get the email out today. No content, just the ping utility."

"He's really got you going with this hasn't he?"

"Somewhere they have an identity shop. I am assuming it is a good one and used regularly since our trainer requested a *new* kit. That means he was given one to come here. If they have a shop that good, it probably has to do with an intelligence service in one of these hostile countries. Given the reluctance of the man in the suit to leave Pakistan, I'm assuming he fears it is his own country. Your man is worried about that as well since he didn't want you to feed any of the tracking story to him."

"Just as well since it is a bust now."

"Still. He sounds rather seasoned. I like the whole idea he came up with about getting help from the Americans. What I would like even more is to know how he knew about that operation. I was unaware of it, but it is real nonetheless."

“You verified?”

“Yes.”

“You didn't.”

“No. I'm leaving that up to you. You are the leader here. It's a damned good idea as long as we don't have to give up too much about what we do.”

“I would have jumped on it already, but I worry about that last little bit.”

“Don't wait much longer. I know it sounds like limitless storage, but they do nearly a full turn over every three months.”

Hans looked at him.

“Yes, there is that much email on the Internet. The word search tends to pull in a lot of needless chatter and everyone is sending naked pictures of themselves around the globe. Some poor schmucks actually have to sit and wade through all of that stuff.”

Hans contemplated the absolute torture it would be to weed through millions of emails per day and a shiver went down his body — it was visible, he couldn't control it.

“Nasty thought isn't it?”

“Yes.”

“Suddenly one shower a week doesn't sounds so bad does it?”

“Not at all.”

“If what you are telling me is true, they probably don't have the messages we need in storage anymore.”

“I would believe that to be true.”

“What good is contacting them then?”

“No new communications trainee has shown up for our trainer. Our existing hub has a new roommate. I'll wager you a week in a nice hotel with room service this new roommate will suddenly have a machine showing up on our ping server.”

“He has already received a computer and been getting lessons on how to install security on it. I give it three days, maybe four, before he is learning the ropes of email forwarding.”

“Make you a deal. In three days we take them both. Take their computers, their notes, everything they have. Bundle them up and send them to the interrogation camp. We can take them while the other is at work.”

“That sounds like a statement, not a deal.”

“The deal is, we don't go to the Americans this time with what we have. We simply give them all of the American email addresses we have and tell them we know someone reading email from each account is an al-Qaeda member. We don't tell them how we know, just that we have proof which cannot be revealed now. What they choose to do with this information is up to them.”

“You know they are going to ask for everything we have.”

“I have directories full of translated messages, original messages, etc. We could burn a CD for them and say this is all we can give them right now.”

“The suit would shit a brick!”

“He'll never know.”

That stunned Hans. “You don't trust him anymore?”

“I think he is the good soldier who files all his reports with Pakistani intelligence. I think they have been leaking information and holding us back. We both know the government itself has a lot of al-Qaeda backers in it.”

So far everything the Brit said was true and Hans knew it.

“Let me burn the CD, pass it on with what I've said, and tell my contact not to come looking for more, it is all we can risk letting slip out. If you think our operation is covert, just think how bad it is for their operation. Illegally eavesdropping on residents in a country full of unemployed lawyers and media moguls looking for a good tabloid story. 'Big Brother' sells a lot of copy over there. The person who gave me the confirm took an amazing gamble. I need to give them something to work with as payment in kind. If you don't want me to give them all the American email addresses, tell me how many and I'll limit it. I definitely want to pass along the Golden Gate Bridge

and Sears Tower stuff though.”

Now we are getting to the bottom of it, Hans thought. He needs to buy back the favor. Still, what he was asking was the smart play. Get that information into the hands of Americans today so they could start looking through it and begin monitoring of the email accounts which were about to lose their hub.

“I take it your contact is here.”

“A few hours away by bus,” replied the Brit. “They are running surveillance on an off-shore consulting company they believe is owned by al-Qaeda.”

That made Hans' eyes go wide.

“My reaction, too. The company has been sending workers into the U.S. under H1-B work Visas.”

“My God!” exclaimed Hans. “It's a major pipeline for suicide bombers.”

“It was only a matter of time before they came up with the idea,” responded the Brit.

“Why don't they just end the H1-B program?”

“Ah mate, you don't understand corporate greed and the politicians it controls.”

It had been a brutal week for Jeremy. He had put his townhome up for sale and moved most of his stuff into a storage unit. Lenny was giving him as much time off work as he needed to get the thing on the market. His coworkers had been only too glad to help cart his things out of his house and into the moving truck. They had even come along and helped put the boxes into the storage locker. Painters had been in as well as carpet layers. Jeremy now slept in a sleeping bag in his bedroom and ate only carry out. The open house this coming weekend would probably bring an offer.

All of this had been both stressful and exasperating. Nothing churned his stomach like Lenny handing him the envelope containing all his documentation for a two-year work visa in the Ukraine. It was really final then. The IT worker had left the day before to start getting the network set up and look into the building of a computer room. The following day Jennifer gave Jeremy his plane ticket and arranged for the shipping of his clothes and other personal items to the new apartment. Yes, she had given him the address of it and given him a phone number to call as soon as he touched down. Dimitri was sending some people to help them through customs. Because Jeremy was coming there on a two-year visa he was going to need someone to help push things through.

Jeremy's two coworkers offered to take him out for a final American lunch, but he passed. He needed to get some more stuff done before he could leave. The two employees Lenny had at the off-site data center had both been offered jobs in the Ukraine. The person with a family declined, but the younger kid fresh out of school jumped at the chance. Because he wouldn't have a housing expense, just food and laundry, it was a major increase in income and a chance to spend a year in a foreign country.

Jennifer strolled by Jeremy's desk and said to him, "Don't look so sad, I will be there for two weeks with you. It's not like you won't know anybody."

"The first week will be sheer hell just trying to get around. The second week I will be trying to bring in analysts. By then you will all be gone and I will be stuck there."

"Do you want us to hire a receptionist open to 'other related duties' coming with the job?"

Jeremy laughed.

"Oh well, I will want to check out your apartment before I leave. Perhaps we can take care of that massage and meal before I go?"

That got Jeremy's attention. He could tell by the tone of her voice it wasn't a tease. He looked her in the eye.

"I'm wed not dead," she responded.

"You just made the trip a little brighter," he said.

"Good, I'll pack some stockings then."

“Won't hubby wonder why you are packing them?”

“You really are a boy, aren't you? My husband hasn't packed a suitcase or watched it being packed since we got married,” she laughed.

He laughed, too. “I suppose you managed to get everyone staying at different hotels so they won't know you don't return to your room a few nights.”

“If you must know, the others are staying at a hotel within walking distance of the new office and I'm staying at a hotel about a mile from your apartment.”

“Nice bit of planning Jennifer, sure you don't want to work as an analyst?”

“No way,” she laughed. “I've been married over 18 years, I'm due a fling. Since you won't be coming back for at least a year, other than to close on your townhome, a fling is what it will be.”

“At your service m'lady,” Jeremy said mockingly.

“Just remember that,” she said with a smile as she walked away.

The one thing Jeremy had left to do was to set up a trading account for Stacie. He put \$5K of his own money in it. He had lifted her Social Security and driver's license numbers from her while she was in the spa at Salish. He would have set up the account then, but he forgot to bring his notebook with him. He opted to have them overnight the forms for signature to Stacie's apartment.

Jeremy logged into his personal email account. He sent Stacie an email giving her his address in the Ukraine and the phone number for the new office. Then he picked up the phone and called Stacie's cell phone.

“Hello.”

“Hi.”

“I wondered if you were going to call me before you left. Missing me already?”

“Yes.”

She laughed in response.

“I sent you an email with my contact information there, but that is not why I’m calling. I took the liberty of setting up a trading account for you.”

“I don’t make your kind of money to gamble with.”

“I put in \$5K of my own. You will be getting an overnight delivery before 9 a.m. tomorrow. Go into work late so you can be there. You just need to sign the forms and send them back to the on-line broker.”

Stacie was kind of floored. “So it is really your account in my name?” she asked.

“No, it is yours. There is no reason you shouldn’t profit from this as well. Besides, if you come to stay with me it will give you some of your own money to walk around with.”

Stacie didn’t really know how to respond to that. From what she knew about the play, the account would nearly double in the next couple of weeks. She knew that there were other plays going to happen after this one, and she had a general idea as to the kind of money Jeremy now had. Finally, she said, “That is thoughtful of you. I guess you will have to see if they have lingerie stores where you will be living.”

“Somehow I’m thinking they won’t have anything to compare to what you showed up with at Salish,” he laughed. “Expect the package tomorrow.”

“I will. You have a safe trip, and don’t forget about New Year’s.”

“Already on it. One last thing. If you have any influence with those who are helping target sales of the Pytho software package, you should point them in the direction of Granite National Bank. They aren’t a huge bank. Operate only in the U.S. They have a large programming staff and are on an FDIC watch list right now. The savings they could get from the package and being able to let go most of their IT staff would get them off the list.”

“I don’t know how comfortable I am with that, but I will see what I can do.”

“Pytho needs to make a U.S. sale to get revenue flowing. Should be a good deal for all.”

“I’ll drop a hint and see where it goes.”

“You really are more than a guy should ask for,” he said.

That line had Stacie blushing like a school girl. New Year's was starting to be too far off.

After hanging up Jeremy sent an email to one of his buddies from college. The guy was doing pretty well in some sales position and wasn't seeing anyone steady. He had been a football player in college, but not good enough to turn pro.

Hey Buddy,

You probably won't believe this email, but it is true. I have been hooking up with Stacie from time to time. She has a pair of roomies. They want to go out as a group on New Year's Eve to one of those all-inclusive, grand hotel celebrations. They haven't picked the hotel yet. I'm attaching pictures of the two girls.

Since you are the first one I'm asking, you get your choice. All you have to do is make the reservation and wear a nice suit. Both ladies are on the pill and promised to do their date. Long story, don't ask. Don't know if they will make you wear a raincoat though.

If you are interested, email me back and I will forward your email address to Stacie so she can put your choice in touch with you.

Jeremy

Next, he sent a similar message to another buddy from college who was running his own lawn-care and snow-removal business. Ordinarily you wouldn't think that such a big thing, but he had some high-end homes and two golf courses in his client list. He was making way more than Jeremy's salary now, but nowhere near what Jeremy was pulling in if you added in the stock trading.

Finally, he got back to focusing on Kyiv. He had to hand it to the group getting the office together, they had the phones turned on already and there was supposed to be furniture in the place. He had purchased a couple of 220-to-110 power converters so he would be able to use his existing laptop until the IT guys could get him a local one set up. Those were packed in the boxes Jennifer had shipped to the new apartment. He hoped that stuff actually arrived. If it didn't he was going to have only the two outfits packed in his

garment bag until he could find a clothing store.

Now Jeremy put on his headset and began going through the Russian language software he had purchased. He had spent the last two nights learning it and imagined it would be his primary source of entertainment for the first few weeks there, or at least after Jennifer left, unless she was serious about a receptionist open to “other related duties.”

Jeremy was listening to the software say phrases in both languages to him, but his mind was going through the list of things that needed to be done. He had gone to the post office and gotten his mail forwarded to the office. Jennifer had agreed to go through it and forward what needed to be sent to him. He had logged into his credit-card Web sites and changed his billing address to the apartment in the Ukraine. Naturally that brought a phone call from the security department at each company to verify the change. Thankfully, he had cut down to two credit cards a while ago.

Moving is bad enough, he thought, but going to a new country was a real pisser. Replacing something I forget will be almost impossible until I learn the language. He had no idea what was around the apartment for stores or food. True, he could rely on some of Dimitri's people for a while, but he was certain that kind of help was going to be short-lived. He then remembered the phone bill in his computer bag. He pulled it out and called the phone company to have his phone turned off. Then he called the cable company and went through the process again. He was just finishing up when his coworkers arrived back from lunch. Thankfully, water and power would be handled by the new owners as one of the sale conditions.

Stacie wore the necklace and earrings to work today. She wore them whenever she knew she was going to have meetings with some of the higher ups. Her roommates had absolutely died with jealousy when they saw them. Her coworkers had even commented on them enthusiastically. The cell phone call from Jeremy and her blushing had a few of them gathering around for gossip. The icing on the cake had to be when Kathryn walked by and asked what was going on.

“Those cost a bundle,” she said matter of factly.

“I have a man that absolutely loves me,” she replied. A couple of the engaged girls looked longingly down at the little chip on their finger when they heard that response.

“What does he do?” Kathryn asked.

“I’m not exactly certain,” said Stacie. “He is moving to the Ukraine this week because his company is opening up a division there and he is going to run it. I’m going to visit him on my next vacation.”

“Sounds like someone is going to be walking down an aisle soon,” Kathryn responded.

“I haven’t looked that far ahead,” Stacie blushed.

The girls behind Kathryn all said, “Yeah right!” in unison.

Everyone laughed and Kathryn walked away.

That was a close call, thought Stacie. I need to email Jeremy tonight and come up with an agreed upon cover story. I am not good at this!

Stacie turned back to her computer and did a Web search for Granite National Bank. A few clicks on the bank homepage brought up a page where they were priding themselves on their 35-member IT staff to ensure their customers were always ahead of the curve when it came to new banking software. She printed that page out and continued on with her searches. After about half an hour she finally stumbled onto a site containing the FDIC watch list. She found the entry for Granite National Bank and printed that out as well. Going back to the bank homepage, she clicked on the link for locations and found they now had 18 locations open with two more to open soon. Once again the printer was called into service.

She put all of the printouts into a folder and walked to Kathryn’s office. She didn’t have a really good feeling about this given her earlier performance, but she had promised Jeremy to drop a hint, and this was the only way to cover where the hint came from.

“Kathryn?”

“How’s the blushing bride,” chirped Kathryn.

Blushing was exactly what Stacie was doing when she responded with, “We’ve only been away a couple of weekends together, sheesh!”

Kathryn laughed, “Sometimes that is all it takes.”

“Anyway! I came in to ask you if you are helping Pytho target other banks for sales?”

“I could be, why?”

Stacie opened the folder and pulled out the pages she had printed on Granite National Bank. First she showed the FDIC watch list, then the page with 35 IT workers, and finally the page showing all of their locations.

“How did you come up with this?”

“I heard you commenting that they needed to make some U.S. sales to get their operation going better. Who better to pitch to than a bank already on a watch list which could save a lot of money by dumping their IT staff?”

Kathryn was gaining more respect for Stacie every time she talked with her. This was definitely worth putting together a pitch. Even if Pytho didn't make the sale there would be consulting dollars in it for Big Four. If they did make the sale, there would probably be even more consulting dollars in helping train the users.

“I'll make some calls and see where this goes,” she told Stacie. “It's definitely worth looking into. Have you come up with any others?”

“Not yet, but I can keep digging if you want.”

“Please do. We might as well try to leverage your training.”

With that, Stacie walked out the door and back to her desk. Thankfully she had bookmarked the FDIC watch list because she was now going to have to go through every bank on that list and check the size of their IT staff.

Speeding Without Brakes

Nikolaus was sitting in his office when the phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Hello Nikolaus, Abel here. I just wanted to let you know that the credit limit has been raised to \$2 million for that distributor. Just got the word a little while ago. I checked, and they have already paid us for their first shipment. A few more transactions like that and their limit will automatically go up.”

“Good to hear. Has anybody informed them?”

“I asked one of my staff to do it now. I see they are on the phone so I imagine it is being taken care of as we speak.”

“Excellent. I have a feeling they are going to bring your subsidiary a lot of new profit.”

“I can only hope. We don't get the bonuses or the margins you guys get. We need massive volume to make any kind of money at all. We shall see what their next order looks like.”

“Agreed.”

This was shaping up to be quite a day. The board had signed off on the second secured site almost before Nikolaus had presented the idea. The Luton bombings had them worried about keeping all of their eggs in one basket as well. The designers had already finished the specifications for the site and they were sent off to the construction companies who would be handling the construction. Just this morning the liaison provided by the Chinese government had called to inform him the necessary monies had been received and the first crew was out prepping the site. The major utility connections should be out to the site inside of a week.

“I don't know if you are the one to talk with about this,” Nikolaus began, “but I was wondering if there was any way we could speed up the construction process?”

“Depends on the weather. We have regulations about how many hours the workers can report on their time cards, but some of the crews have been willing to work extra hours when they are paid in cash without reporting the time. Usually they end up working an evening shift under the lights. Of course, you would need an on-site concrete mixer for that to be feasible.”

“Could one be obtained?”

“Easily, for the correct price.”

“Are you willing to handle obtaining it and paying the crew members willing to work the extra time at night?”

“Not for free.”

“Oh, of course not.”

“How would you get the money to me? It would be a lot of cash.”

“Will the crew accept euros?”

“It could be converted easily enough.”

“How about South African currency?”

“I could find someone from the South African embassy to exchange it for me.”

“Good. Do you have a shipping address? I will pack the funds in medical supply containers and ship it to you.”

“You don't even know how much I need.”

“I assume we could revisit that topic after you see how much I send you.”

The man gave him an address. Nikolaus used a disposable cell phone and called a contact at the secured location. He told him to pull all of the containers containing South African currency and two of the containers containing euros. Cover the bar codes on the containers with some other label, then he gave him the address of where to ship everything. He also told the man to adjust the inventory for those two currencies accordingly.

Even if this only speeds us up three days, he thought, it was worth it to finally be rid of that South African currency. He had been sitting on that stuff almost a year now and could find no takers for it.

With that done, Nikolaus decided to amuse himself and see if the distributor had already placed another order. When he ran the report he was stunned to see they had placed two orders. One apparently as soon as they had wired the money to pay the first invoice, and another as soon as they had been called about the credit limit increase.

A few mouse clicks showed they were only taking two and three containers at a time of the currency, but nearly emptying the warehouses of the generic products. The second order had moved up to generic prescription drugs for cholesterol and some other common heart conditions. A few more orders like this and the brand name division was going to demand they get access to their catalog. They had ordered almost their entire credit limit.

The Brit burned a CD containing all of the information they had pertaining to al-Qaeda operations in America. He also burned a copy of the CD and gave it to Hans after handwriting on it the date and that it was given to the Americans. He told Hans to send it some place for safe keeping. Hans looked at him rather funny and the Brit responded, "At some point this is going to all blow up. We are going to need to know what we told to whom when the hammer falls. Right now, the rest of the world hasn't decided to throw out the Rules of Engagement and open back up the wholesale slaughter counter. No offense, but the last time we did that was against your people and there is a lot of fall out happening from it even today."

Hans nodded, knowing it was the truth. There had been a lot of soft-life educated-type people writing articles about the Allied bombing campaign which exterminated entire German cities. A lot of party members back home still carried some resentment about it, but oddly not as many as Hans would have expected, and far fewer than in the countries which had actually carried out the bombings.

"You honestly believe there will be another international war crimes trial over this and we will be sitting in defendants chairs?"

“No. I think you and I will either manage to disappear or we will both be sitting at ground zero when the leaders of this decide to tie off loose ends. Give this to someone who will keep it in a safe place and let it surface if we happen to be tied off.”

With that, the Brit left and endured a four-hour bus ride one way to meet his contact. People from civilized countries tend to hate buses and use them only when they had to. As bad as the buses are in those countries, they look like a shiny new Mercedes compared to the bus the Brit was riding on. Thank God the windows opened. No air conditioning, the bus was packed, and some people had animals with them.

He arrived at yet another IT center. One cluster of shiny new modern buildings surrounded by squalor. He found a place on the street that wasn't too crowded and opened up a disposable cell phone to call his contact.

“Hello.”

“I have some information for you, can we meet?”

“Where?”

“I just got off the bus.”

“Oh. I'll be there in 10 minutes.”

The contact arrived right on time. The Brit handed him the CD.

“What's this.”

“All we currently have on al-Qaeda in the U.S. Don't ask for more or where it came from as I cannot say.”

“Understood.”

The man put the CD in his shoulder bag then asked, “What's the birds-eye view?”

“Email traffic to and from al-Qaeda members. Attack plans for both the Golden Gate Bridge and the Sears Tower.”

The Brit watched his contact's eyes widen involuntarily, then he asked, “Enough for an arrest?”

“If you don't have to divulge your source and go through the court system. More than enough to get a warrant and search for legal evidence. Doubt you will find it though. Most of these operatives seem to use libraries and Internet cafes to communicate.”

“That has been the problem, but right now we have to go through due process.”

“Well, if you can arrange for a covert flight in and out, I know some people who could snatch some of these operatives for you, interrogate them off U.S. soil, then you will never hear from them again.”

“I don't have the clearance to authorize it yet. Should be coming though. We shall see what the high-IQ boys think of this stuff and what they are willing to risk on it.”

“There's my return bus. Good hunting.”

“And to you.”

The Brit climbed aboard for another hot, sweaty and smelly four-hour bus ride back to headquarters. He made a mental note when he got back to go to one of the apartments and take a shower.

Hans had just returned to the headquarters from shipping off the CD to Vladimir. Of all the people Hans knew on this operation, Vladimir was the most likely to keep something like that safe in a manner that ensured it would be discovered when the time was right. He was pretty sure Vladimir would be one of the loose ends tied off with them if this all went bad, but his contacts in the Russian mob would ensure the world found out about what the Americans knew and when.

The phone started to ring before Hans sat down. It was the three-man team from the apartment complex.

“Hello.”

“A package just arrived here.”

“Good, I was expecting it. Bring it over when you come to report in.”

“It's a bit large for one guy to carry through the street unnoticed.”

“Will it fit in the trunk of a car?”

“It should.”

“Bring a cab most of the way and carry it from there then.”

“Will do.”

“Thanks,”

“Wait!”

“What?”

“I was really calling to tell you another person just showed up in the hub residence. It looks like they sent another trainee to this hub instead of sending him to the original trainer.”

“Looks like the Brit was correct. I will inform the man in the suit and we will schedule a time to nab them.”

“Can you get some dart pistols or sleeping gas?”

“Why?”

“We have been thinking. Someone will notice in this apartment complex if we make any noise taking them down. Sleeping gas could be fed in through the holes we already have while their air conditioning is running so they don't hear the hiss.”

“You don't think people walking around in gas masks will get noticed?”

“That is why we also thought about dart guns. We need to cart them out unconscious, then occupy their apartment for a few days quietly collecting their machines, or running them ourselves.”

“Bring the package to me and I will ask the Brit about obtaining some equipment.”

They hung up and Hans wrote an email to the man in the suit. He copied Vladimir on it as well.

All,

A second trainee has arrived at the hub. Need to schedule a grab. Team wants to take them quiet with tranquilizers of some kind and continue operating the hub for a little while.

Hans

With the email sent, Hans started reading through his own email to kill time waiting for the package. He had wished it could have been shipped here, but that simply wasn't an option. Any large package arriving at this location would be a major tip off to the local authorities something naughty was going on here. You simply didn't see FedEx and UPS trucks in this area.

Half way through his email he heard the sound of someone dropping a package outside the door and some cussing. He got up and let in the team member along with the package.

"Did we get an answer back yet?"

"It will probably be a day or two. We still need time to obtain a vehicle, some form of tranquilizer and map out an exit strategy. You forget, the government doesn't know we are here or condones our operation."

"Probably have to have a boat meet us at Mangalore" replied the team member. "Not just any boat, it has to be able to make it to Pakistan."

"Exactly."

"Do you think we could charter a plane, drug them, and fly them back in coffins, at least until we take off?"

"Quite a bit of risk for a few guys who probably cannot tell us more than we already know."

"True. I doubt we could talk the suit into flying a Huey out to meet the boat once we hit international waters. Harness and cable the guys up into it, keep them drugged, and fly them to the air strip for a ride to the interrogation camp."

"They may want to interrogate them in Pakistan for a while before sending them on. There is one piece of information we are looking for that they might be able to tell us."

“Am I allowed to know what that is?”

“How they do the transfer between hubs. This new operator and the one already in training will get some of the email load from either the original trainer or the one currently training them. How do they notify the people in the field that they are to use a new hub?”

“We are currently trapping all email messages in both directions are we not?”

“Yes.”

“Simply wait two weeks. We will have the messages trapped. Let our team try cracking them before we snatch and interrogate.”

“That might work.”

“While I’m here, do you happen to have some local currency? We don’t want to pass around foreign currency and there isn’t much of a place to do conversions.”

Hans opened his wallet and gave him all of the local currency he had.

“What will you do for food?”

“I will have more tomorrow. I will probably hand you each an envelope tomorrow so you have operational funds.”

“About time, rent will be due soon.”

With that, the man left and Hans took the package to a windowless room in the building to open it. The cardboard he could easily burn to get rid of, except he might use it under his sleeping bag. Given the way this operation functioned he couldn’t stay in a hotel that far away. The thought was appealing, but there would be too much risk and too much lost time. What if one of the band of roving hoodlums saw the satellite dishes and decided to rob the place? No, somebody had to be here at all times now.

Inside of the box was a big yellow hard plastic shipping case. It had every kind of language label on it indicating it was medical supplies packed in dry ice and not to be opened in an uncontrolled environment. He cut away the front side of the carton and pulled the container out. Two tumbler locks built into the case held it closed.

Hans picked up the satellite phone and called Nikolaus at his office.

“This is Nikolaus.”

“Hans here. Your package arrived, but I need the pair of three digit combinations to open it.”

“Hold please.” There was a shuffling of papers, then Nikolaus said “Do you have a pen?”

“Yes”

“9-1-1 and 8-8-8.”

“Not very secure.”

“You didn't guess them.”

“I didn't try. What is with the Chinese good fortune number?”

“I was feeling whimsical about the new secured location.”

“Wow! You did get a whale.”

“They are even helping build the facility. One more year of this and everybody's hands will be too dirty to wipe clean.”

Hans tried the combinations and the case unlocked. He lifted the lid and gave a low whistle. “Twinkies.”

“What?”

“It is what some grifters call shrink wrapped bundles of money. Twinkies with green filling is the whole phrase, but they are usually talking about American dollars.”

“Well, there will be another case of Twinkies coming to you next week.”

“Hold off on that for a while.”

“Why?”

“The current hub operator just got another to train. Waiting for instructions from the higher ups on when to grab them and how to get them out of the country. We may be tying this one off in a week.”

“Oh.”

“This will make the escape route easier to plan though.”

“How much is here?”

“I don't know.”

“What?”

“I know what the total amount we had was, I have no idea how much is in each container.”

“Oh.”

“Good hunting.”

With the conversation over, Hans started looking around for some envelopes. Large Manila envelopes. Even that wasn't going to use up an entire Twinkie. He definitely had to burn the plastic before anyone saw it. The container would have to stay hidden in this room with junk piled on top of it. When he finished stuffing the envelopes he remembered to reload his wallet. There was still a short stack of cash left over from the first Twinkie. He put a Twinkie in the bottom drawer of his desk and the Brit's.

Hans relaxed for a little while eating an MRE and thinking. Finally he gathered up the meal packaging along with the Twinkie wrapper, took all of the trash outside to the little burn pile he had set up and watched it all burn.

Some time later when Hans was dozing off, the Brit returned to headquarters. He only needed to report in, then he could bum a shower from the apartment where the three guys were staying at. The sound of him coming in woke Hans and a reflex had him drawing a weapon.

“Nice to see you've still got it,” said the Brit. “Why so jumpy?”

“One of us has to be here at all times now.”

The Brit gave him a puzzled look. Hans got up and walked to his desk. He picked up the loose cash he had left laying there and brought it back to the Brit.

“Get yourself a room for the night along with a good meal and a hot shower. I'll take tonight's watch.”

The Brit cocked an eye at him.

“We received some liquid assets to make the operation go more smoothly. Given the equipment we have here and the way people have been knocking over empty places, we cannot take the risk. It's not just our equipment anymore.”

“Fine. I made the drop. They won't ask for more, but they may ask us to do a snatch for them?”

“You didn't ...”

“Relax. They have to go through due process if they bag anybody on their soil. If they turn a blind eye to a foreigner and his plane they have deniability. It all depends on how much they believe what is on the disk. Their ability to believe seems to be widening given what they are finding with their own surveillance.”

“They volunteer anything?”

“No. Just that attitudes are changing at the top and they expect to be able to authorize wide-scale round ups soon.”

“We just asked for authorization to round up as well.”

“A new trainee?”

“Aye. Showed up today. Sent a request off asking for a when and an exit plan. Haven't heard a response yet.”

“That reminds me. Need to see if you can buy us a vehicle we could hide three people in that could make it to Mangalore. The team also wants you to get some dart pistols or other fast-acting tranquilizer capability. You've done quite a few ops here, so I assume you have the contacts for such things.”

The Brit held up the handful of cash and said, “This won't be enough to get all of that.”

“Open your bottom desk drawer”

“That'll work. What is in Mangalore?”

“Nothing yet. We are speculating we will have to bribe some kind of fishing boat to get us out to international waters where a Huey can rendezvous and hoist the guys up for a flight to Pakistan. The team is hoping to run the current email hub themselves for a little while before packing up the

equipment.”

“And the original trainer?”

“No word there either. With these out of the way we could watch him a lot more closely. Try to snag the courier when the identity kit is dropped.”

“The courier might be a dead end, but we could try following him to see if he visits the rest of the team after the trainer. Do you have some of those small tracking badges?”

“Yes, but we only have a couple of readers, what are you planning?”

“We can have more readers here tomorrow if we need them. I’m hoping he gets all three identity kits delivered to him one or more days before. We can do a black bag operation into his apartment and plant the badges, then track who gets them.”

“You almost need air cover for that.”

“We know where he works. We know he goes no place else except to buy groceries. If he is making the exchange, it will be at work. We only need people outside waiting for the kits to come walking out.”

“I wonder how well the courier will know the trainer.”

“Somehow, before we got to his machine, the trainer got photos of his team to the identity shop. Perhaps they already had them on file because they had issued them all kits to come here. Either way, the last courier is going to have a photo to look at before he makes the drop. If we happen to see someone standing in the parking lot looking at a photo of the trainer we could nab him, tag the items, and do the drop ourselves, but we won’t get that lucky.”

“Well, they are paying more attention to the former trainer now. They know the outcome for the other apartment, but they want to wait up to a week to nab them.”

“Why?” inquired the Brit.

“They want to have all of the email from the current hub operator over that five day window where they transfer a few addresses to one of the new hub operators. We know it is a reality now, and they want to see if you and the others can crack it. We need the messages in possession even if you

cannot crack it so we can test what they tell us during interrogation.”

“Sound plan. They want us to take them out quiet so there isn't talk in the apartment complex which makes the trainer nervous. I'm not big on the idea of them running the second hub for a few days. What happens if the trainer stops by to chat?”

“He hasn't so far.”

“He might want to say goodbye the night or day before his OP goes down. If we don't have his entire team identified by then, we will end up with him in custody and another Lutton on our hands.”

The Brit was still a bit sensitive about Lutton, but his analysis was correct. “True, it is a risk, but one we will have to take. If we can identify the message required to migrate an operative to a new hub, we could set up our own hub and possibly track things back to bin Laden himself.”

“Somehow I don't think that guy will type his own email. We seem to always find and kill those just under him, but never him.”

“Either way, we will be feeding your American contact more intel when we have the message. Perhaps we will get to do some wholesale roundups on their soil.”

“Sounds possible.”

Heidi dragged herself, her dirty clothes, and a two-liter bottle of wine up the steps to her apartment. Technically, it was a condo because she owned it. The man who headed up the condo association was a good and loyal party member. He never hassled Heidi about association dues being late. He would simply drop a handwritten note in her mail slot whenever she was really late with payments. As Heidi shoved her door open past all of the mail on the floor, she realized that she must be late again. There were two handwritten notes.

Setting everything down, she rummaged through her writing desk for an envelope. On it she scrawled a note for him to take care of her dues as she would be gone a lot. Whenever she left him an envelope like this he would keep an eye on her place as well. The head of the association was in his late 70s and enjoying a semi-retirement. It made him feel useful to run the condo association and keep an eye on people's places when they were gone. She pulled a wad of cash out of her purse and stuffed about half of it in the envelope before sealing it. Then she drug herself down two flights of stairs to stuff it through his mail slot.

He was probably home, but Heidi didn't feel like talking tonight. Tonight she was taking a hot bath and drinking that entire bottle of wine. The constant pace of execution at the camp was taking its toll on Heidi. Nikolaus had stopped in and offered her two days off when he took one look at her face. He actually told the entire first team to take two days off when they finished the batch of patients they were currently working on. He then called his contact at the interrogation center and told them to slow down the shipments.

Heidi didn't bother getting a lady-like wine glass while her tub was running. She grabbed the biggest water glass she had, put some ice cubes in it and filled it to the rim with white wine. She had seen too much red over the last stretch of days. She knew she should go through her mail, but right now she just wanted to soak.

An hour later, her tub grew cold and her glass was empty. She drained the tub, toweled off and put on a robe. With her wine glass refilled, she piled her mail on the table, then started a load of laundry. Returning to the table she drug over her kitchen garbage can and began chucking the junk mail. No matter what country you lived in or what name you had, it seemed junk mail always found you.

Each bill she came across she wrote a check out to pay and put a stamp on the return envelope. *It seems like you were always gone the week most of your bills arrive*, she thought. She had no idea how much money was in her checking account. Whatever company was paying her this time was direct depositing her pay check into the checking account. She made a mental note to look at the statement next time one came so she had a general idea.

Finally she got down to a handwritten envelope with no return address. It was postmarked from some place in America. She opened the letter and began to read.

Hello,

It was good to hear from you. The team is now back on leave, so we are starting to hear things. Doesn't sound bad yet, but we do have a general idea what you are involved in. We will be there to get you when you need us. Call this number when you need us and leave a message.

At the bottom of the letter was an international phone number. Heidi clipped it and put it into a special pouch in her purse. She didn't know when, but she knew she was going to need that number. They were simply processing too many patients at the secured location to keep it quiet much longer. Nikolaus had told her he sent cash under the table to the Chinese to add a second shift at the construction site along with an on-site concrete mixer, but concrete still took time to cure. It was still going to be at least another four months before the site could be staffed and begin receiving prisoners.

Heidi stretched out on her bed feeling much more relaxed now that she had the last glass of wine from the bottle poured and the rest of it consumed. When she woke up she would get to see what science experiments were growing in her refrigerator. Being gone for nearly seven days took its toll in the grocery department.

Jeremy's little menagerie touched down in Kyiv (Jeremy, Jennifer, and a programmer to install software.) The first thing he did was open up the disposable international cell phone he bought and call the number Jennifer had given him. The man who answered was already at the airport and waiting for the group at customs with two others. Jeremy went with the others to the baggage claim area to pick up their luggage.

Boris had asked for and received digital photographs of each person coming along with their names and other information. Each was on a separate sheet of paper and divided between the other two men who were immigration lawyers. Nobody expected them to be needed, but Dimitri wasn't going to take any chances. The men were being paid well to stand there with briefcases.

The others breezed through customs, but Jeremy had a more detailed questioning. He was coming in on a two-year work visa so they were required to put on a good show. His luggage was inspected and he was patted down and wanded.

Finally they got to the questioning.

“Why are you coming to Ukraine for a job?”

“My job came here, not the other way around.”

“What is it you plan on doing while you are here?”

Jeremy pulled out one of his new business cards and his old business cards and handed it to them. “My boss wants me to open another investment division in the Ukraine. I'm to get it operational by hiring local people and training them well. Once they are trained I can go home. We assume it will take about two years for someone to learn the business because I'm the fastest learner he ever had and it took me 18 months.”

“What kind of investments do you do?”

“Stock market mostly. We may start investing in the Russian stock markets, but for now we are focusing on the American stock markets and opening them up to more investors from Russia.”

“People in Russia do not have the kind of money you rich Americans have.”

“They would if they invested correctly. We put \$500 million into this branch. We are here to ride it out. My boss started this company with nothing more than \$10,000, now we manage around a billion in assets. We know how to do investing correctly.”

“You have proof of this investment.”

It was at this point Dimitri stepped forward and opened his briefcase. At first the customs officials made a reach for their weapons thinking this was going somewhere else. "I am Dimitri. I work for the company which helped establish their new office." He pulled out the paperwork from the bank showing the establishment of a company account under the name of Jeremy's new branch and the wire transfer of \$500 million. He also pulled out an office lease document showing the company had leased the office for five years.

"Where will you be staying while you are here?" the customs officials asked Jeremy.

Dimitri pulled out the apartment lease document showing a two-year lease on a two-bedroom furnished apartment leased to the same company.

The customs official doing the inquiry pulled out a clipboard and put a form on it. He looked at Dimitri and asked, "May we keep these?"

"Yes, of course, they are copies."

"Good."

"Do you have a phone number for the file?"

"The new office phone is on the business card. I haven't picked up a regular cell phone for this country yet. I was pretty certain mine wouldn't work here so just have a prepaid I bought at the airport now."

"The office phone will do." He put all of the paperwork together with the clipboard and turned to one of the others speaking in Russian. The other seemed quite perturbed. Dimitri volunteered in English: "One of those two can fill the form out for you if you wish. They are immigration lawyers we paid to be here."

That brightened both men's day. Being able to order an immigration lawyer to do a mundane task was a treat most of their ilk didn't get.

"You should have said something earlier," said the customs official. He stamped Jeremy's passport then looked at Dimitri, "Which one do you want to fill this out?"

"Your choice," Dimitri responded.

The man wavered his finger between the two men like he was playing a game of eany meany and finally pointed to one and motioned him forward. The man next to him smiled, but said nothing. You don't laugh until you are out of earshot when someone just drew the short straw. Neither man had filled one of these forms out in years. They had office staff to draw the short straw, just not today.

The customs official waived Jeremy and Dimitri on. When Jeremy got away from the customs desk with his luggage he noticed that the others had already left and asked Dimitri about it.

"Gleb has already taken them to their hotels. We will take you to your apartment. In about three hours we will come by and pick you up for supper. Your team will be picked up as well. Dress casual. Blue jeans are fine if you brought them as long as they aren't all ripped up. We are taking you to a family restaurant so you can get a taste of good Ukrainian food." He looked at Dimitri and said, "Don't worry, wine and vodka will flow."

Both men laughed. "Tomorrow morning around 9 a.m. local time we will send a car to pick up you and ... Jennifer, is it?"

Jeremy nodded to confirm the name.

"The others have been instructed which way to walk. It is only a couple of blocks. If it is raining of course, they can hail a cab, but your IT person has chosen to walk each day."

When they arrived at the apartment building, Jeremy was prepared for the worst. He was coming down from a two-story townhome with three bedrooms and a full basement to a two bedroom apartment. The rooms were quite small, but overall the layout wasn't bad. The kitchen only had cabinets between it and the living/dining area. Like a lot of American apartments there were no dividing walls between those areas, you were supposed to divide them with furniture. It seemed adequate for his needs, came with washer and dryer along with dishes and utensils. He could get some more blankets and things once he found a store.

Jeremy put away what clothes he had in his bags. There were two large boxes in the living room so most of his stuff had made it over. He didn't know where the third box was, but it may still be at the office.

The apartment had provided a welcome folder but it was all in Russian. Jeremy had seen a McDonald's on the way to the apartment. He suspected most of his meals would be coming from there until he learned to speak the language better. He opened one of the boxes and rummaged for his power adapter. There was a little writing desk which had what appeared to be a cable modem on it.

With everything hooked up, he tried getting to the Web page of his personal email. This was going to be a very boring stay if all he could do was play games on his notebook while at home. He needed to be able to get to the Internet from home. There was much anticipation as he hit return after entering in the Web address. There was much joy when he got to the site and could log in.

Not wanting to lose track of time, he logged out and started putting away the clothes from the opened box. He would have to deal with the second box after supper. *Did they even call it supper over here?* he thought. Once complete he flattened out the box and set it by the door. It was now time to get cleaned up for supper.

With his shave and shower out of the way, Jeremy went back to checking his personal email. His eyes were immediately drawn to an email from his buddy he had given first dibs to.

Hey dude,

You're right. Unbelievable email coming from anyone else. Since I know both you and Stacie, count me in for New Year's. I'll take the brunette. I attached a picture of me just in case she doesn't want this to be a completely blind situation. Feel free to pass along my cell phone number as well.

Jeremy laughed and forwarded the email to Stacie. For a subject line, he put "One Down." Since there still wasn't a knock at the door, he opened the email from his second pal to receive a New Years Eve offer.

You gave first dibs to him! You rat bastard!!

He can have anyone he wants as long as it isn't the red head. I've always wanted to add a red head to my resume. I know, I'm a pig, but at least I'm not cheap.

Pass along my email and cell phone. I'll send them a picture of myself when they drop me a note.

See you New Year's Eve.

Jeremy forwarded this email to Stacie as well. In it he took time to write a few words.

Looks like we are all set for New Year's Eve if I can get a flight home. Landed here a while ago. Car is coming by to pick me up for supper. Apartment is small but rather nice. Get to see the office tomorrow.

He did regret writing so few words and figured he would pay a price for it later on, but he didn't know how long he had. He heard a knock at the door and logged out. Upon answering, Jeremy learned his driver was here.

The meal was way too much food. Everybody focused on having a good time. There was no pressure to make a sale or close a deal. Jeremy had talked with the IT person who seemed quite pleased with the office layout.

It was a small three-story office building and most of the second floor was theirs. Since the company wanted to put in a computer room, they had taken over the lease of a company directly below them and the raised floor was already getting installed. Electricians were showing up tomorrow to route in the power. An order had been placed for a new computer and disk array just like the one they had in the remote office.

The networking equipment was installed, but they did not have a T1 connection out, only a cable modem, which was shared. Dimitri had made arrangements for the telco company to install a T1 for them, but it was going to take several weeks even with bribes being paid. A docking station had been installed on Jeremy's desk for his notebook and all of the other desks had locally assembled computers up and running on the company network. Things were going far smoother than Jeremy expected.

Stacie was nervously pacing back and forth in her apartment. She was dressed and ready to go to work, but was waiting for an overnight delivery. She had called into the office to let them know she was running late, but didn't say why. In truth she didn't need to call in as she wasn't scheduled for any meetings before 10 a.m. She certainly hoped to be in by then!

Finally there was a knock at the door and Stacie nearly jumped out of her skin. She didn't know why she felt so nervous about this. Her hand shook as she signed the electronic delivery machine. With the delivery man gone, she quickly opened the package and began fumbling through the documents. There wasn't any time to read it all. Thankfully they had included two copies of everything. She was to sign and return one. She found the four places she needed to sign and verified her Social Security number.

Something about this felt so illegal to her, but people opened stock trading accounts all of the time. She had looked through the employee handbook on-line and nothing in there said she had to report to Big Four Consulting any trading account she opened or stock trades she made. Besides, Jeremy was right. She should profit from this little venture. It may be the only chance she has to score really big in the stock market, even if it was using Jeremy's money.

Included in the package was a deposit slip so she could add more money to her account. Being a lowly paid single girl, Stacie only had about \$3,000 sitting in her checking account she didn't need. She wrote out a check for \$3,000 making it payable to the clearing firm and included that with the bundle to go back. The UPS store was a block away. She circled the overnight address they had provided for return shipping, gathered everything up to go back and walked out the door. She made a mental note to email Jeremy tonight about the extra money she had placed in the account.

This all seemed so naughty, but technically, her part was all legal as far as she could tell. At any rate, if things went bad, she was going to need the money.

Kathryn was sitting in her office with the sales rep for Pytho Corporation. She had wanted Stacie to be there to take credit, but the girl had called in saying she was running late.

“Thank you for coming George.”

“No problem. Always happy to show up when there is a hot lead to be had. How is the car?”

“When the weather is nice enough to have the top down, it is wonderful. When it is raining, it is pretty noisy.”

“That’s why convertibles don’t sell so well. Everyone loves them on the perfect days and can’t stand them the rest,” he laughed.

Nice and subtle way of telling me you’ve already paid for this lead, thought Kathryn.

“I’ll cut to the chase. One of our consultants who helped out with the training took it upon herself to do some legwork for you and came up with Granite National Bank.” She handed George the print outs and he scanned through them.

“Looks like they need it but couldn’t afford it,” George responded.

“Financing can always be arranged George. First you have to let them know they need it. We had an account rep for them at one point. I took it upon myself to get you the IT director’s name and phone number.” She handed George another sheet of paper.

“You need a U.S. bank to begin recouping your investment,” she continued. “Do you know that Kent’s interview is coming out tomorrow?”

George’s eyes popped open.

“That’s right. Call them today George and let them to read about it tomorrow. If the IT director shuts you down, we have contacts on their board of directors. We could still make a presentation, but it would be better if this came through channels.”

Tossing the Dice

Two days went by at waiting for a response from the man in the suit. It was unlike him to simply not acknowledge a request for instructions. Hans instructed Vladimir to start watching the outbound messages closely from the email hub. The surveillance team had been watching the progress of each new trainee and taking very detailed notes about how security was set up. Live video and sound feed had been a good idea. As soon as the trainees had went to sleep with their machines on, the team called Hans who called Vladimir. In under an hour Vladimir had installed all his software on their machines and could monitor them at will. Each time they started they would be hitting the ping server he was running.

On the following day, email started coming into the first trainee's machine. The surveillance team made copies of all video and sound footage for the past four days. They hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary, but perhaps the rest of the team could spot it. A copy was put on the operation's server so Vladimir could access it. Everyone was frantically looking for what caused the switch in hub addresses. Nobody was finding the email with the message.

Hans had some technical skills, but he knew he couldn't play at the level of either the Brit or Vladimir. Five different email addresses were now transmitting messages to the new hub. Everybody was grinding through those messages byte by byte. Vladimir was going through the messages as they appeared on the ping server he was running. Absolutely nothing was showing up. Hans sat there watching the surveillance video looking for something out of the ordinary. He could find nothing. Then again, there was a lot of dead time, so he started keeping a time-index spreadsheet while going through. At least it would save others the trouble of fast forwarding through the dead time.

Everyone was taken quite by surprise when the man in the suit walked in.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” said Hans.

“It’s nice to walk in and see everyone so hard at work,” replied the man in the suit. Yes, even here, he wore his suit. “Catch me up.”

“We are all pouring over the last few days of messages from one hub operator before they started going to another hub operator. Well, I’m watching the surveillance video to see if they made any phone calls or did anything unusual. The Brit is well beyond me in the tech world. So far, we cannot find what is triggering the cell members to send email to the new location consistently. They flash cut to the new hub and haven’t slipped up sending email to the old since.”

The Brit stood up, stretched, cracked his neck and back then said, “I need to walk around. I really need a proper pint when I’m doing this kind of digging. I can’t find anything in the image that contains the new email address or any instruction to switch. According to our translation script, these are the regular communications that go back and forth.”

“Let me take a look at the email,” said the man in the suit.

“Be my guest. I’ll start you off the way it appears when viewed in an email reader.”

“Please turn off full header viewing.”

A couple of clicks later a normal email screen displayed the message. The man in the suit read the message and began to chuckle. “What is so funny?” asked the Brit.

“Whenever my best minds can’t find something, they are generally “overlooking a stupid.” In this case you gave your opponent too much credit. The new email address is in the ‘reply-to’ and the Holy Quran quote is what tells them to use it while deleting the other.”

“I don't read Arabic, what does it say?”

As for those who disbelieve in our communications, We shall make them enter fire; so oft as their skins are thoroughly burned, We will change them for other skins, that they may taste the punishment. (4:56)

“You were busy looking for an umbrella gun when all they used was a club.”

“It couldn't be that bloody obvious!” screamed the Brit. “I really need a bloody pint now! Why can't we ever be stationed in a country that drinks?”

The man in the suit simply smiled and walked over to the carry-on bag he had brought with him. He opened it up and began taking out bottles that were wrapped in towels. Six bottles of Bass Ale. The Brit was absolutely drooling. “They aren't cold, but they are yours,” the man in the suit said.

Hans had stopped typing his email to Vladimir to watch this show. The man in the suit didn't drink and was against it entirely. He must have feared for his life buying beer and bringing it here. The Brit was already gathering every big container they had to put cold water from the well in. Hans had to laugh.

Nothing diminished the Brit's performance like the lack of a proper pint. He was OK for a week or so, but then he was hard to be around. He never got drunk when he was in the field. He simply needed a proper pint at the end of the day to keep himself functioning. It literally was just one pint. Hans had never met anyone who could stop at one beer until he met the Brit.

The man in the suit walked over to him and saw what he was typing. “Do you need me to repeat the phrase he asked?”

“Please do,” Hans responded. “Sorry, I was being amused and forgot what the phrase was.”

With the message recited and the email off to Vladimir, he turned to the man in the suit and asked, “Did you bring orders for the nab?”

“We are cleared to nab these hub operators and to run the hub for a while if we think it will benefit us. I don't really see how now that we have found what we were looking for, but that much is cleared.”

“Starting today, I had most of the surveillance team monitoring the trainer. We want to nab whomever brings the identities.”

“That we do!” chimed in the Brit. “They have an actual identity shop cranking those things out and I want a crack at finding out where they are made.” All the while he was speaking he was spinning one bottle slowly in a bucket of cool water. The rest were soaking in a pail.

“I thought you would be trying to prove him wrong,” smirked Hans.

“Can't be done. I don't read Arabic, but that exact phrase was in every final email message that went out. Our previous hub operator had informed us only that a valid phrase meant the recipient should use the email and an invalid phrase meant they were a decoy. Until now, we never knew any of those phrases had meaning. We can prove it soon enough if we let those guys live another couple of days. The second trainee will be receiving a few cells to handle in pilot mode. We will see the same sequence occur with the same phrase and new email address in the 'reply-to' address. It is too bad we don't get a better screen shot with the surveillance cameras.”

“We don't yet have an exit plan,” said the man in the suit, “so I expect you will get your few days.”

The Brit responded, “I picked up a car which can hide two drugged out people in the trunk. If you want to take all three at the same time the third will have to ride on the floor of the back seat. It is in good enough shape to make it to Mangalore.”

“Why Mangalore?” asked the man in the suit.

“It is the closest place with a port we can get to by road. We were thinking you could charter some kind of fishing trawler or other boat that could get us out to international waters,” offered Hans.

“Then what?”

“We assumed you had enough connections you could get a Huey to fly out and cable up our guests for a trip to Pakistan. After that, we assumed you had a way to get them out,” answered the Brit.

“Here I have little in the way of connections. I assume you are already procuring the equipment needed to knock them out and get them out quietly. I also assume you wish to do this quietly because you were planning on leaving the original trainer in place for a while.”

“At least until we know the identity kits have been delivered,” said Hans.

“Kits?”

“He has a team that we cannot identify. We have some passive tags, but are trying to get more scanners. We assume they all work with him, but don’t have a single clue as to who they are.”

“I have placed an order with a supplier here,” volunteered the Brit. “I should have them tomorrow along with the chloroform and handcuffs. Of course, one of you will need to check into my hotel, preferably on the same floor so I can drop the stuff in your room. I won’t be able to come back here once I make the purchase. You will have to sneak it back here. We really need a second car though.”

“Why?” asked the man in the suit.

“The two trainees usually only work for a little while when their trainer is at work, then they go to sleep. Once he gets back he gives them a little more training and they practice while he sleeps. I want to take the two while they are asleep and the other is gone. We can be waiting for the other when he returns from work. Doing that means we want two cars. It’s a long drive to Mangalore,” said the Brit.

“This assumes we can find a ship there, and a small boat to get us out to the ship,” said the man in the suit.

“I won’t be able to return here, are you telling me you want me to go there and make those arrangements as well?”

“Do you have that level of contact in this country?” asked the suit.

“Pretty close, but another Twinkie will help ensure it.”

“Twinkie?”

Hans opened the bottom drawer to his desk and pulled out the Twinkie he had stacked there. He tossed it to the Brit. The man in the suit got a stunned look on his face.

“One of our sponsors sent us some liquid assets in a care package. All local currency so we don't stand out any more than is necessary.”

“Does he have another care package available?” asked the man in the suit.

“Only in Indian currency that I know of. Why?”

“Oh. I was going to have him ship one to the headquarters in Pakistan to rent your Huey. Indian currency is near worthless in Pakistan.”

“If you have another one of these I can get it exchanged for euros,” volunteered the Brit. “They charge a lot to do the exchange, but they don't ask any questions.”

“A smaller brick of euros would be helpful. Something I will be able to stash on my person with only a little bit in my carry on bag. Do you have some loose local currency I can use to rent a hotel room with?” the suit asked Hans.

“I feel like a dad handing out allowances,” said Hans as he opened his wallet.

The other two men laughed and the Brit chimed in, “But dad, I'm buying you another car.”

Now they all laughed. In truth, it was the only time Hans could remember ever seeing the man in the suit laugh.

With the money handed out, the man in the suit mused, “It is possible we already know who his team is.”

“How so?” asked Hans.

“It might simply be the other operators. They might all be about to disperse to different parts of the world. Given the loss of Nedim and the rather sudden loss of the hub in Khyber Pass, they might be trying to spread out their hubs just in case.”

“That is a possibility” said the Brit.

“I don't buy it,” responded Hans. “He has had absolutely no contact with the other operator since the guy moved out. There is no way for him to know how the training of the others is progressing. He has a team elsewhere, probably at work since that is the only place he goes other than to buy food. Our man inside has learned nothing about what they are planning. The only thing we know is that it is not a suicide attack involving them.”

“Well, involving them wearing the bombs anyway,” the Brit concurred.

“Has either of them had any visitors at all?” asked the man in the suit.

“None,” responded Hans.

“We have video on the one apartment, so we know bombs aren't being made there. Wish we had video on the other apartment,” said the suit.

“We have a tap on his phone, but he never makes a call,” said the Brit.

“Well, once you have the exit plan in place notify us and we will do the take down of these three,” said the suit. “It might be good for the surveillance team to occupy both apartments for a few days. If we are all wrong and that is his team, someone carrying an identity kit will show up there soon.”

“It's a play worth making. We will learn a lot more about what they were doing by getting an image of their machines and sending it on to the technical team,” said Hans.

“We will have to go through it ourselves if we want it done in a timely manner. The technical team has been swamped with computers and cell phones from the British and other round ups” said the suit. “What hotel are you staying in?” he asked the Brit.

“First one you find on this road headed into town.”

“Write down your cell phone number and I will call you once I'm in a room.”

Paper and pen changed hands, then the man in the suit left. The Brit finished his one bottle of beer, bagged up the Twinkies and was about to leave when Hans spoke up. “I need another case of MREs here while you are out shopping.”

“Will do mate. Why don't you call the surveillance team and have them bring you some food on their way over to file reports? At least some local bread and bottled tea. You can't keep much else here.”

“Hence my need for MREs, but the bread isn't a bad idea. It keeps a few days on a shelf.”

The part-time receptionist Dimitri had allowed them to hire had been a godsend. Susan (it wasn't her name, but she agreed to let them call her that since it was close enough) spoke some English, enough she could understand much of what Jeremy said. She had helped Jennifer place the job ads for analysts on-line and in the local paper. She could drive, but didn't own a car. That small matter was quickly taken care of at a local car rental place where they leased a car by the month for her to drive. The rental place carried all necessary registration and insurance so it was cleaner for the company to lease it that way.

Quite possibly the nicest thing she did for everyone was find a map of the local area on-line and circle things. Each circle got a number and on the following page there was a description of what that number was. She flagged four restaurants, a dry cleaner and two stores where Jeremy could buy food. Lunch was catered to the office every day she was there. Dimitri had put them in touch with a payroll service to get people set up on payroll.

Jeremy had exchanged several emails with Lenny over the course of the second day. He had also received the email from Stacie about adding additional money to her trading account. As soon as it appeared he bought her some more First Global stock. He had basically spent all the money they had deposited into the account and some of their credit buying First Global.

The day after they had obtained a car for Susan to drive, she took Jeremy to a bank that was within walking distance of his apartment so he could set up a local bank account. He needed her to help with translation as not many there spoke English and his Russian was horrible. That evening she drove Jeremy and Jennifer to the store so Jeremy could get food and other things for his apartment. At least the store was large enough to take Visa.

Once Jeremy was home and the groceries carted in she offered to drive Jennifer home. Jennifer declined, saying she was going to cook something for Jeremy once they got the groceries unpacked. The rest of the team had opted to eat and drink in their hotel at the company's expense. Once the receptionist was gone, Jennifer gave Jeremy the key to her hotel room and told him to fetch the black backpack from there.

“Don't look inside, just do what you are told,” she admonished him.

He chuckled and set about walking to the hotel leaving her to put away the groceries and cook a meal for him. The meal was basically done by the time he had made the round trip. Walking a mile kills a lot of time, it was getting dark out by the time he knocked on the door to his own apartment. He made a mental note to get some spare keys made.

The place smelled incredible when Jennifer let him in. He had some fine Russian meals over the last few days, but he was dying for some American cooking. Even McDonald's was sounding like good American cooking to him at this point. He made a point to compliment Jennifer on the meal several times. When they were done and just drinking wine she told him to gather and do the dishes.

It wasn't really something Jeremy had thought about. There wasn't a dish washer in this place like most American apartments had. He had wondered why they bought a bottle of liquid dish soap, now he knew.

Jennifer disappeared into his bedroom with the black backpack and closed the door. Just about the time Jeremy had finished washing everything, he heard her call his name. He nearly dropped the plate he was drying when he saw her. She had packed a lot more than stockings!

After an amazing night, Jeremy heard Jennifer get up early. It was barely light out and she was dressing, then stuffing things into the backpack. Apparently the backpack had also contained gym shoes and a jogging outfit because that is what she was wearing and Jeremy didn't recognize it as his. She kissed him lightly and apologized for waking him, but she needed to get back to her hotel and get cleaned up for work.

“I don't think the boss will dock your pay,” he said groggily.

She laughed and said, "I don't speak enough Russian to tell Susan to wait for me." Part of Susan's duties with the car was to play chauffeur on the days she worked. Making her work every day the team was there would have been a burden, but she was on break from university and wouldn't return to taking classes for another few weeks. Jeremy promised she only had to work when she didn't have class once the semester started. Her friends all wanted to work at Jeremy's company when she showed them the car. None of them had a car, but most had a driver's license.

The last full day Jennifer was there was kind of sad for Jeremy. In all of the hustle and bustle he had lost track of the days. First Global had made their announcement about being the first customer for Pytho Corporation and their stock was climbing dramatically. The nice thing about the brokerage accounts his firm had was that they all participated in after-hours trading. With another office on the other side of the world, Group Lenny could now work their plays around the clock without someone having to sleep at the office or stay up all night at home. Still, Jeremy was going to miss Jennifer. She had spent three nights at his place and cooked him three incredible meals. With her and the rest of the team leaving the next morning, he felt kind of like the vacation was ending and he was the only kid left standing on the beach.

Susan noticed his sadness the morning after the others had left. At first she thought it was a hang over because they had all went over to the hotel and drank like fish. When lunch arrived, she struck up a conversation.

"Don't look so sad, you're not alone."

"I'm a long way from home and a fish out of water here," he responded.

"At least you will be busy all next week. We have resumes to go through and your computer operator arrives early next week. Should I pick him up at the airport?"

"That would be wonderful if you could. Do you have his flight schedule and a photo?"

"Yes, Jennifer got that for me before she left."

Hearing the name made Jeremy think about how his nights were going to be from now on. Susan noticed a change behind his eyes and decided it was time to broach the subject.

“You have some clothes suitable for going to a club tonight don't you?”

Jeremy's mind definitely spun trying to figure out where that came from. “What kind of club?”

“A dance club.”

“I try not to dance unless I'm drunk at a wedding. I'm more of a sports bar kind of guy.”

“Well, you have plans to go to one tonight.”

“I do?”

“Yes. It was obvious between you and Jennifer. I asked. She told me about 'other related duties.' I have boyfriend so cannot perform. Five of my girlfriends would like nothing better than to hang out with good-looking, rich American though. Your needs will be taken care of tonight, I am certain of that.”

“I'm not rich.”

“They see the car, that is all they need to see. Most people here cannot afford car. One thing I must say though, because I like you and like working here.”

“Go on,” Jeremy said, dreading where this was going.

“Most girls at college also cannot afford to be on, how you say, 'pill'?”

Jeremy nodded.

“Don't believe them if they tell you that. Girls here, attracted to money, tend to latch onto it with a child.”

“Good information. I wouldn't want any form of relationship here. There is someone I care about back home, not dating, but sleeping together. I am flying back to see her for New Year's Eve by the way. I do plan on training people here and leaving once they are capable of running the place. It is doubtful I will ever return.”

“Well, if things don't work out with my boyfriend I would consider performing 'other related duties', but you need to provide for the pill.”

“You don't have to Susan. I rely on you far too much to lose you.”

“I know, that's why I offered.”

Nikolaus had just gotten off the phone with his liaison provided by the Chinese government. Even with the container of undocumented cash buying everything possible to push the project along, they were still a full three months from having the site up and running.

Concrete simply took too long to cure. All of the power and utilities had been roughed in, but once all of the footings were poured they had to wait three days for them to cure. The crew erecting the security fence was the only crew that could work during that time. Once the footings had cured, both shifts welded up rebar and poured so much concrete they ran out of forms. Again they had to wait days because there were no more forms to be had. It was the peak of construction season over there. The only crew working then was the truck drivers hauling in concrete mix and rebar.

No doubt about it, Nikolaus was in a pissy mood just like his team doing the harvesting. That situation was nearing open revolt. He couldn't blame them. They worked 12 days straight and got two off. One worked all day harvesting and the other worked all night. The incinerator simply didn't shut off. It was not supposed to happen like this. It was supposed to be another six to eight months before they were trying to handle this quantity. The Lutton bombing had really screwed the operation. Granted, it made selling the second secured location easy, but Nikolaus was thinking about finding a place to build a third now.

He had sized the second site for about half of the freezer storage of the first site. There were twice as many labs and dorm rooms at the new location. The incinerator was now a double incinerator. Nikolaus still hadn't had time to put together a team to work there. Not a lot of people were going to want to go to China.

Nikolaus had some people looking for an abandoned factory or some other large site which could be taken over. The party would purchase the land and Nikolaus would pay for the interior modifications with some containers of cash. There had to be a factory in a somewhat remote location which they could obtain. The only trouble was it needed to be within driving distance of the interrogation camp. OK, there were two problems. Nikolaus would need

to find a team to work it as well.

While he was thinking about money, he used his logon ID to check inventory on the special products for Dimitri's distributor. "Egads!" he said when he saw the numbers. "This stuff is piling up like snow in the winter."

He clicked over to the page with their latest invoices. Every week they placed close to a \$2 million order and paid for it within three days. The latest invoice showed the head corporate office had gotten their way. Some of the premium drugs were on this invoice. They had taken only seven containers of currency, but at least they had cleaned out most of the non-euro, non-dollar currencies. There were still the two containers of Indian currency which Nikolaus hoped Hans would use, but at least all of the other stuff was gone.

The problem appeared not to be on the distributor's end. They were taking a few containers each time, just like they said. The problem was the money coming in. Nikolaus did not know how much money was in any given container. His conversation with Hans had educated him about Twinkies. Each Twinkie was a stack of money roughly one third of a meter high. They were only one bill wide and tightly wrapped in plastic shrink wrap. The container Hans had received had five of them in it.

When you think of someone strongly, there is some force in the universe which communicates that fact to them. Nikolaus was reminded of this force the same way everybody else is reminded. The phone beside him rang and it was Hans.

"Hello Nikolaus."

"How are things going?"

"We are getting ready to bag three operators, but going to leave the original trainer in play for a few days. We are still trying to determine what his plan is and who the team members are."

"I trust in your judgment."

"You wouldn't happen to have one of these care packages in a different flavor would you?"

"Such as?"

"Euros"

“Yes. Once again, I don't know how much would be in it.”

“No problem. One this size should be way more than they need.”

“I will fax you a shipping address, if you think you can get it shipped to Pakistan.”

“Why there?”

“It's where we need to hire the chopper to pick these guys up at sea. We don't have friends in government here. Getting people out of the country means finding a boat to sneak them on and getting them picked up in international waters.”

“We should consider using some of the care packages to purchase a long-range deep water boat, like a yacht, but a fast one.”

“I wouldn't. We never know where we will be or how we will need to transport. A nine passenger private jet registered to someone squeaky clean with landing rights in Nuremberg would be more useful. Then again, a Huey set up for troop transport would be even better. They have a 1,200 mile range if I remember correctly. Still, you have to have some place to land it and a crew to fly it and clearance with air traffic. It is probably best we simply grease palms and let others take the transportation risk.”

“Fax me the address in Pakistan. I will have the shipment arrive there tomorrow. Someone will need to sign for it.”

“We have one person there now. I will call and make certain they are there tomorrow morning. Then I will let the suit know about his care package.”

“Can I send you another care package?”

“I still have two Twinkies left.”

Lenny read the article from one of his other analysts and then forwarded it to Jeremy so he could read it when he woke up in a few hours. It was Kent's interview about Pytho Corporation's new banking product. He was even kind enough to state they hoped to save \$12 million per year by switching to it. The stock was spiking. The banking sector needed some bright news and this was timed just about perfectly. The company was due to release a quarterly report in a couple of weeks and all of the financial analysts were racing to raise their projections higher than the last analyst.

It was nice the way Dimitri had set up the company on the other end. Rather than Dimitri making all of the investments, Jeremy was handling most of them through the other division. There was only about \$100 million in play through Dimitri.

He had sent them a very bland email that auditors couldn't charge him on telling them they should start unloading when the stock went up over \$18. Of course, by the time he finished typing that email the stock was up over \$22 and still climbing. Lenny did something he didn't usually do. He instructed the trading system to do a Market Sell of their entire First Global and Pytho positions. Both were well above the initial targets, which meant there was no reason to hang around. Those who get too greedy go broke or go to jail.

Due to the way the other division was set up, it had to be an isolated entity on the shared computer system. It ran all of the same software, just had a different database to store account, position, and transaction information. Lenny had the ability to log in and start the selling, but he decided to let that money ride until Jeremy woke up 12 hours from now.

He picked up a disposable cell phone and called the office in the Ukraine. When he got Jeremy's voicemail, he left a message. "Jeremy, dump all of your Pytho and First Global as soon as you get in. It is up well over our target. Watch it in after-hours and start shorting when it looks like it has hit a plateau."

He couldn't wait for Jeremy to start finding Russian and European stocks worth a play. Group Lenny would really be able to grow then. Indeed, after this series of plays, they were going to need to find some losses or issue some loans to get the cash out of the accounts.

Lenny decided to run the intra-day position report. When he scrolled down to the bottom and looked at total cash on hand his mount went dry.

Stacie was dressed for success today. Kathryn had tapped her to assist with the Friday presentation to Granite National. The Pytho sales rep had gotten nowhere trying to go through the director of IT. Stacie's impression of the guy was that all he could do was fill out an order form when it came to sales. Kathryn managed to pull some strings and now Big Four Consulting was leading the presentation to the board.

The Director of IT was dead set against this deal. Kathryn had been unsuccessful in keeping him out of the conference room. He wasn't invited, but he barged in anyway. This was going to be a cut-throat presentation. Since the man barged in, Kathryn wasn't pulling any punches. After George got done with a small Pytho dog and pony show about the wonderful new reporting, Web accessibility, and international aspect of the software, Kathryn went into her PowerPoint presentation.

Kathryn went straight for the jugular. Her first slide was a spreadsheet showing what Granite National listed in their last quarterly report as IT expenditures. She admitted to using a national average when figuring in the cost of benefits for the large IT staff. She had brow beaten George into low balling the price to them so the "after" picture looked so much rosier. Of course Big Four Consulting would be getting a cut from helping train all of their locations. Naturally, when you totaled up the proposal and compared it to their cost now, the bank would be saving over \$2 million per year.

The Director of IT was putting up quite a struggle in the conference room, but Stacie admired the way Kathryn handled him, by answering some questions, ignoring and diverting others. Her killer stroke was asking the board if they had heard about First Global's purchase of this system. She pointed out Stacie had just gotten back from France, having helped train the tellers for the French roll-out, which completed in only a couple of weeks and was running smoothly.

When the Director of IT took the bait and asked the board if they could afford to be down for a couple of weeks operating only a handful of locations, Stacie volunteered the two week roll-out was because First Global had to put standardized PCs on the teller desks and they opted to do it as part of the roll-out instead of in advance. If their tellers already had PCs running at their windows, then the bank could literally bring them in for a Sunday afternoon training session and start operations on a Monday, assuming the data mapping and conversion was completed either late Saturday evening or early Sunday morning.

Kathryn was loving this girl! The other skirts and heels were simply there to drain blood from the brain, but this girl could drain and punch. She continued on, "Since your tellers already have PCs at their windows, a flash cut will work best for you. Simply have them log into the new application on Monday morning. If some horrible problem is discovered they can simply log back into the other application and we can migrate the transactions they did over to the new system once that problem is rectified."

The only friend the Director of IT had on the board spoke up to try and save his friend's job. "This is all well and good, but the conversion won't be free and the cash position of the bank is not such we can do a huge cash outlay to purchase a new system which does what our existing system does."

Finally, George did something. "We can set up a payment schedule so you don't begin paying until you have started to recognize the savings of the new system. We realize you will want to have it in place for at least a quarter to give you time to reap the benefits of staff reduction and terminate the maintenance contracts on your heritage equipment. Coupled with the other business changes your company has spoken about publicly, this system should have the bank off the FDIC watch list in less than a year."

There was the knife in the back. The bank was on the watch list and in danger of being seized by the government to prevent a failure. Migrating to this system and showing the regulatory agency the amount of money they will save in salary and benefits alone would buy them a good six months, if not longer. If the first payment wouldn't come until the quarter following installation, the board had no choice. Were a proposal like this leaked to the shareholders after it was turned down they would all be summarily tossed out. It was no longer a sales pitch, it was a bum rush.

Of course the board of directors thanked them for the presentation and said they had to discuss matters among themselves. They would get back to Pytho Corporation some time next week with a response. Everyone in the room knew there was little they could do other than stall the payments off for as long as humanly possible. If they opted to take a pass, news of this presentation would be leaked to financial analysts and all over the business news a few hours later. Then they would be seized. *Nothing like holding a gun to their heads to make a sale*, thought Kathryn. She made a mental note to have her broker buy some more Pytho stock.

Stacie returned home and dashed off an email to Jeremy telling him about the sales pitch today and that Pytho was sure to be announcing another sale in about a week. She asked him if he was going to buy some more Pytho stock for her based on this news or just let it ride. In closing, she told him she loved him. Truth was, she knew they would both sleep with other people while apart, but she was starting to fall for this guy. Perhaps it was just the thought of the life she could lead with the money he was going to make. At this point, she didn't care. He was fun to be with and great in bed. When you add in about to be very wealthy it was difficult for a girl not to imagine herself wearing a ring.

The Brit returned to the hotel carrying a couple of knapsacks full of gear. Knap sacks seemed to be common locally and nobody looked twice at someone carrying them. He went straight to the suit's room and dropped them off. Out of one sack he pulled a small bundle of euros and handed them over.

"Perfect. I should be able to carry that amount on my person and in my carry-on without attracting too much attention. Do we have the car yet?"

"I'm off to get that now. Should be back in an hour or so."

"Good. Then you can make our other arrangements."

On his way to buy another vehicle, the Brit's disposable cell phone rang. He recognized the number so he answered.

"Hello."

"Quite a pile of information you gave us."

“Thought it might come in handy.”

“You mentioned being able to perform some round ups if we could get you transportation.”

“It's possible.”

“There are three cells we would like rounded up. We can get you a plane to Germany from the U.S.”

“You have my email address, do you not?”

“The Hotmail one?”

“That will work. Send everything you have to it. I will talk with my people and see when we can get them. You wouldn't happen to have a boat around here would you?”

“Why?”

“Need to extract three members from here and get them to international waters for pick up. Planning on driving them to Mangalore and finding some place along the shore line to quietly leave.”

There was muttering in the background, then the conversation resumed.

“Will your cell phone work there?”

“Presumably. If not I will pick another up while there and call you.”

“In three days we can have a rubber duck team on the beach north of Mangalore. They can take you and your guests to a sub. How many people?”

“Three of them and myself.”

“I will call you in two days to confirm.”

“Very good.”

The phone call ended. Hans was never going to believe this. That little information payment they made was returning dividends. He knew the man in the suit didn't want the Americans involved, but these guys were working so far off the reservation nobody knew they existed, much less any reporters. He dialed the man in the suit's cell phone.

“Hello.”

“We need to have an emergency pow-wow. I’m going to sneak to the office. Call Hans and tell him we are both coming.”

The Brit knew this was going to be trouble. Best to get it all out in the open now. If the man in the suit didn’t want it played this way, then he wouldn’t leave India. Here, one could make his death look like a hate crime. You didn’t have to bother getting rid of the body.

An hour later they were all back at headquarters. The Brit had actually bought the second car and parked it behind the building. He was a few minutes late because of it. At least he brought some fresh bread and bottled tea for the meeting.

“In two days we get a phone call to confirm we are ready to extract,” he started the meeting. “A rubber duck will meet us along the coast just north of Mangalore. They will take myself and the three members to a sub that will take us out to international waters.”

“How did you get a sub? How did you do this without leaving town?” inquired the suit.

“Received a phone call from some people needing a favor. Told them I needed a favor before I could give them a favor.”

“What favor do they need?” inquired Hans. He knew, he just wanted to hear it.

“I need you to check my Hotmail account for the next few days Hans. We will be getting one or more files of cells and or cell members to be rounded up in the United States. Flights in and out will be taken care of, we just need to provide boots on the ground and local transportation.”

“These people who need the favor, they don’t want any information about where the suspects end up?”

“No. They just want to know what they know and be done with them. They have more evidence than they need for conviction, but due process would be strategically inconvenient.”

“Meaning it came from an illegal covert OP,” said the suit.

“All covert Ops are illegal somewhere. These guys own big planes, have use of airports and landing strips around the world. They say getting us from America to Germany is nothing. We just have to perform the nab and get them to the airport or landing strip.”

“Why do they want us?” asked the suit.

“In case it goes bad,” Hans said without looking up. “If there is an explosion, fire fight, or film on the news we will be left hanging out to dry. They can't protect our people once the media gets some footage of them. With us being the ones to get caught, they can say it was done by foreign nationals without the knowledge or consent of the government.”

“One thing is certain. Neither Hans nor I should be in the United States handling this. At least not in the field. Film at 11 of a Brit will make it difficult for them to deny.”

“Yes,” said the man in the suit, “If there are white guys involved, the press won't buy the cover story. It needs to be Arabs and/or Chinese doing the actual round up, probably just Pakistanis. If one of them is nabbed, my government can play it up saying they were rooting out terrorists wherever they found them, which is what they had publicly pledged to do.”

“Either way, film at 11 will eventually be a major problem,” said Hans.

The suit concurred. “I am heading back in the morning to arrange for the Huey. I will see what we have left for a round-up team that can be sent. Find out how much coordination and technical support they are going to provide when the email comes in.”

“Speaking of the Huey,” Hans interrupted.

“Don't tell me you already have one!”

“No! I wanted to tell you that there will be a care package at Pakistani headquarters first thing in the morning. The guy who was there a little while ago said he would sign for it and not open it.”

“Indian currency won't do me any good.”

“Euros.”

“Oh.”

“If you send the team on commercial flights, they can exchange their euros for American dollars at the airport.”

“Not an entire Twinkie.”

“True, but there are currency exchanges and they could take turns coming to Germany escorting prisoners. The Americans won't be able to know about the rest of the operation, so best to have our own people on the plane to handle the loading of the vans.”

“OK said the Brit. I've relayed my information. I'm going to take the rest of these bottles and spend the next two days in my hotel room. I will put my phone on a charger there, simply let me know what to say before they call back.”

With that, the meeting was over. He handed the car keys to the suit, grabbed the remaining five beers and walked out the door. The suit fired up the car and drove back to the hotel beating the Brit by a long while. He parked where he could find parking, but it was getting late and people were bedding down in the street. *Pakistan may be poor*, thought the suit, *but it doesn't allow this kind of squalor.*

Back in the three-man team apartment, the one watching the external surveillance cameras saw something he had never seen before. Someone actually knocking on the trainer's door. He quickly woke the others since the man was carrying a small bag. Once they cleared their eyes, he played those few seconds back for them. The other two gathered a bag and a club along with the car keys and went to wait for the man in the dark. If he was just a courier, he would be coming out soon and never seen again.

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