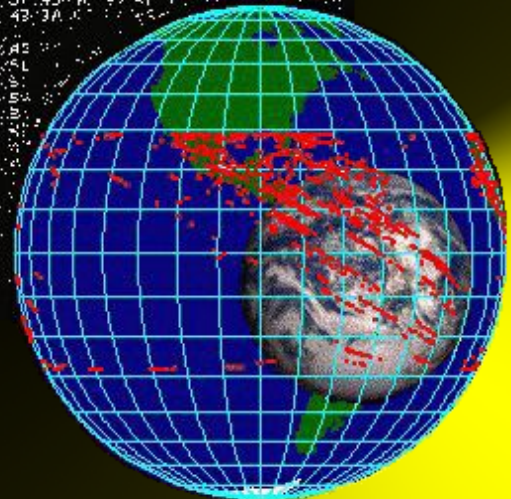


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44 7A 2C 57 49 68 44 4F 53 44 40  
45 32 30 43 3A 41 41 41 41 41 41 41 41  
46 47 40 44 48  
47 75 78 00 51  
48 45 04 8  
49 73 0F 84  
50 41 7E 8  
51 50 51 41  
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53 57 49  
54 53 59  
55 7E 31  
56 44 4F  
57 70 20  
58 51 34  
59 41 48  
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*World Within Worlds*

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### **Dedication.**

This book started with a discussion with my sister, Jane, while visiting with our father, Stephen, who encouraged me after reading the first rough draft. He died on November 7<sup>th</sup> 2005. He will be with us always in our memories.

This book is dedicated to my wife Sue, who has a special place in my heart, and to my two daughters Sarah and Rebecca.

Thanks and credit are due to my sister Jane, who proposed the idea for this book.

Thanks are also due to my brother Reed, and my many friends who were kind enough to read the raw first drafts and offered greatly appreciated criticism.

\*\*\*\*\*

## ***Prologue***

"You will have a lot of fun with Aunt Jane. She'll take you to the zoo, and the aquarium and the museums. You particularly liked the Museum of Industry the last time you were there. Maybe you can even talk her into taking you on the submarine."

"The submarine?" young Lee Yokura asked. The last time he'd visited Chicago, they hadn't had time to tour the submarine tied up at the pier. It was something he always wanted to do. He knew his father was just trying to cheer him up. They had talked about it before. His Dad and Mom were going on a vacation, so he was staying with his mother's sister. He didn't like their leaving, but there was enough happening in Chicago that the week should pass quickly.

They had also promised a baseball game at Wrigley Field. He gave them both a hug, as their flight was called, then waved to them as they walked down the boarding ramp. It would be a vacation for him too, and he had been looking forward to it.

As soon as they were out of sight he said to his aunt. "Let's go where we can watch the plane take off."

"All right." She answered, "but take it easy. It will take a few minutes before the plane gets to the runway."

They went in search of the observation deck. Lee had his camera with him. He wanted to take a picture of the plane when it left the ground so he could show his parents what it looked like when they got home. The plane was a large one, a safe one.

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"There it is." Lee called excitedly pointing to the distinctively marked plane.

His aunt stood beside him and watched the giant bird line up. Finally it was at the head of the line. They saw a cloud of smoke billow out of the engines as they powered up and the plane started rolling down the runway. It picked up speed, then as it neared the end of the runway the nose

came up and it started to climb. Lee took his picture, quickly wound the camera, to snap another. As he advanced the film, his eyes on the climbing craft he saw something fall from one wing. "What's that?" he asked his aunt. The plane tilted, turned and flew straight into the ground. His aunt screamed.

\*\*\*\*\*

***Part  
One***

## Chapter 1

Buried in an office sub-basement a computer screen glowed. Fingers fly across the keyboard as Lee writes up the next mission for James, one of his agents.

The tendrils of the International Intelligence Agency stretch around the world. In this case, the dictator of a small third world country dreams of glory as he plans his next conquest. James' mission is to infiltrate, extract the data from a strategic data base, and replace it with misinformation. Low key, that's the trick. Lee is good at his work. He has never lost an agent. One more piece of a complex international game.

Lee sighs. Fighting these brush fires seem to be the only assignments now. Not like the good old days when you had an opponent who could challenge you. Sometimes he wonders if it is worth the effort. The suddenness of the Soviet Union's breakup had sent everyone scrambling. It was almost as if some cosmic game player had gotten bored with a contest that seemed destined for global destruction, and decided to change the rules. Lee pauses in his work for a minute to think. He needs a cover name for the agent, someone from Japan. He smiles to himself, thinking of the irony and enters the name Lee Yokura, his own. You need to keep a sense of humor in this business he thinks. He realizes his mind had been wandering when he catches himself. His fingers, seemingly of their own will, have added the phrase, memorize before shipping. He frowns, then thinks why not. He pulls up a masking file and encodes the message.

\*\*\*\*\*

James opened the post office box and pulled out the envelope. It had the appearance of typical junk mail. He knew the envelope was untraceable. It didn't matter.

Noting the postmark on the envelope he tucked it into an inner pocket of his coat. He was not far from the beach. He headed towards the sound of breaking surf. It was early morning. This far north, and late in the season, it took a few hours for the sun to coax tourists to the beach. The sand trailed away to nothing as he headed for the rocky point, near the abandoned lighthouse.

It was an isolated spot. No one was near. This was the part James hated. He had exactly one chance. Focusing to clear his mind he opened the envelope, and proceeded to memorize the two pages of closely spaced random characters. Before he could let go, the chemically treated paper turned to ash in his gloved hands. Nothing but a few flakes were left to blow over the waves.

James closed his eyes, his mind calm, and called up an image of the two pages. He used the postmark date as a key and mentally scanned the string of characters. Decoding the abbreviations and double speak he pieced together his next mission. By the time he was finished, the sky had clouded, and the chill wind had him shivering. Turning up his collar against the chill he headed back to his small apartment.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Frederick signaled END, STOP RECORDING, SAVE. The image of the forlorn beach, and the sound of waves washing ashore abruptly ceased. The sensation of the chill winds, simulated by the sim-suit's refrigeration*

*strips around his neck and down his spine, faded slowly.*

*Out of habit he checked his score. As usual there was little change.*

*Shivering, Frederick quickly stripped from his sim-suit and donned his plain cotton street wear. Then, because he still felt the cold, he wrapped himself in the thread bare blanket from his bed. He sat on the bed, and pulled the sim-suit onto his lap. As he fumbled with the recording unit at the suit's belt, he wondered if the suit was defective. He'd bought it used. Every time he put it on, he cringed at the thought of how the previous owner may have used it. But he'd needed the built in recording unit, and he couldn't afford a new suit. Finally he had the data chip out.*

*On his dresser he had a stand alone chip reader. He shoved the suit to one side and let the blanket fall from his shoulders. As he took the few steps, the plastic floor covering crackled under his bare feet. He inserted the chip in the stand alone reader and ran quickly through the session until James opened the envelope. He captured the image of the two pages and copied them to another chip. He held the new chip in his hand and smiled to himself. At last his plan was taking solid form. Soon he would be able to tell those voices that echoed in his memory to shut up. Lost in thought the bitter memories returned.*

*\*\*\*\*\**

*"J.S. J.S. Freddy is a J.S".*

*He hated the taunting from the other children. J.S., Joy Stick. Not even three D goggles and gloves, just the basic government issue joy stick and flat screen display.*

*"Hey Freddy, my folks are taking me in to get jacked next week." Yelled one, "When are you going to get jacked?"*

*"They better do it pretty soon or you're going to be too old." yelled another. Those jacked kids had the advantage. He could never hope to match them. It hit home to him how unfair it all was. Frederick felt tears come to his eyes. He knew there was no chance he would be jacked. It cost too much. A child was jacked when old enough to manage the new sensations. But if too old, the jacking would permanently destroy neural pathways. When young, the mind bypassed the damage and integrated with the new signals. As a child grew this became increasingly difficult. It was a gamble, the parent's decision whether or not to have the operation performed. It was also a struggle to accumulate credits to pay for a jacking. Many families put off having any children until they had the necessary bankroll. You had to be pretty good in the game to accumulate that bankroll. If your parents were rich, you could be jacked. If you were jacked, you could be good in the game. If you were good in the game, you became rich. It was a self perpetuating aristocracy.*

*But the real blow had come years later. He'd connected, figuring he would get in a few hours of play. His mother had been on him lately about getting his score up, though he didn't see what a big deal it was. It had been at an acceptable level, if a little low. But he would take care of that. He was shocked when, instead of the normal connection he was confronted with a summons. He was to report for career counseling.*

*Career Counseling! They were hated words. Career Counseling was only for losers. He decided then and there someday someone would pay for this. He had been cheat-*

*ed! He knew it!*

*Career counseling, then a job. The stigma would remain with him for life. Three hours a day! With that kind of a drain on his time it made it even harder to bring his score up. And where was all this precious time going? As it turned out it was to be spent at the the department for agriculture statistics. He was required to evaluate crop yields, weather patterns and population shifts. Eventually he became responsible for planning the logistics necessary to feed the worlds teeming population. His work was a key in the prevention of mass starvation. Just let people get a little hungry, and they would forget about the game. There would be civil unrest beyond belief. But there was no recognition for his accomplishments. They had nothing to do with the game!*

*He had worked long. The pay was meager, but he still managed to squirrel away a small hoard. Now he had a war chest for his project, and he had what he needed to get started. Finding a name had not been easy, but finally he came up with one. George Gibson. His unknown source had told him to mention the Beethoven concert.*

*\*\*\*\*\**

*Carefully he inserted the chip into a protective carrier. Pulling the bed back from the wall he pulled up a loose corner of the plastic flooring. He'd hollowed out five slots in the sub flooring, each one just large enough for the little plastic square. Carefully he smoothed the flooring and pushed the bed back. He hit the erase key for the original and put that chip back in it's recording slot on the suit, then carefully hung the suit on its wall mounted storage hook. Except for that hook, the walls of his government subsidized apartment were plain construction block. I keep this world*

*running, but no one cares about that. Frederick thought to himself as he made sure the suit cabling did not get tangled. It's the game always the game, he complained to himself. Well, my turn will come.*

*\*\*\*\*\**

## Chapter 2

It was a routine trip. A little make up to go with his new name, Lee Yokura, and he was an engineer from a Japanese software company. Cross country flight, then a polar hop to Japan. From there to the target. Hire a car, pay the bribes. James found the office he was looking for, hidden in the maze of irregular streets.

James had worked hard to perfect his memory, and found foreign languages easy to master.

The clerk looked up from his paper strewn desk. "May I help you?"

"My humble apologies for disturbing your important work. My name is Lee Yokura. I have been sent to install your new software."

"Pardon me, did you say new software?"

"Yes." James pulled an envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to the clerk.

The clerk opened it and studied the carefully crafted work order. Finally he looked up. "This is wrong. We didn't order any new software." The clerk returned the documents.

James paged through the stack until he reached the last sheet. He pointed to the signature line. "Whose signature is this?" he asked.

The clerk looked then admitted, "That's the minis-

ter's. But he wouldn't have ordered anything without telling me."

"Well if he signed it, then he ordered and paid for it. The boss doesn't send me out unless he has cash in hand."

"The minister is not here. You will have to come back next week."

"I see." James seemed to consider. Of course he'd known the minister would be absent. "Again my most humble apologies, but my obligations do not permit me to remain here that long. Please have the minister contact the office and reschedule the installation. I regret that there will be an additional fee for the return visit." He pulled out a business card and wrote a note on it and handed it to the clerk. The clerk's eyes widened as he read the note.

"So much?"

"It is the standard fee." James answered.

The clerk considered his boss's probable reaction. Most unpleasant, he decided. "Wait!" the clerk said as James turned to leave. "Perhaps I was hasty. Come with me please."

The clerk lead James to a back office. The obsolete machine used the old eight inch disks. James opened his briefcase and pulled out three boxes of the old disks. He inserted the first disk in the drive and glanced at the clerk. "This will probably take a while. Oh, here." He pulled out three large manuals and handed them to the clerk.

The clerk looked at the books in his hands. "Thank you." He looked around the office, then finally put them on

a desk covered with papers. He watched for a while as James loaded disk after disk. Finally he returned to the front office.

As soon as he was alone, James pulled a compact drive from a hidden compartment in his briefcase. A custom adapter allowed him to link the drive in line with the cable to the video terminal. It took a couple of minutes to compress the data on the old disk packs and download it. Carefully doctored replacement files were then uploaded. In another minute the system was returned to the original configuration. The compact drive was packed in its hiding place. There were only a few disks left when the clerk returned. James finished, then handed the boxes of disks to the clerk, together with a clipboard and pen. "That takes care of everything, if you will just sign here?"

The clerk signed at the bottom of the form where James pointed. James then pulled a copy from the stack of sheets and handed it to the clerk. "You have been most helpful. I will mention it when I talk to your minister."

"Oh that will be very kind."

Hours later James was on his way back to the States.

He had an overnight layover in Seattle. A laptop computer had been arranged for him at his hotel. He picked up the machine as he checked in for the night. In the privacy of the hotel room the small computer screen glowed. The decompressed data passed before his eyes. He carefully memorized it, as instructed. When he finished he slipped the diskette into a padded envelope. As he stamped and addressed the envelope to a post office box, he speculated on the reason for the order. Why memorize something they would shortly have safe in a secure office? It made him a

little uneasy. But orders were orders.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Once again, Frederick signaled END, STOP RECORDING and SAVE. He checked his score. Not too bad. The session had been awfully boring. Out of curiosity, he looked at the game projection. The small time dictator, with dreams of conquest would be thwarted. His close advisors, basing their analysis on the doctored data, would urge caution. There would be a serious rift at the highest levels. followed by an attempted coup, and then a purge. The planned invasion would be put off for a while, as the dictator rebuilt his organization. James part in this accomplishment was calculated into the score and portioned out accordingly. James didn't operate alone, he couldn't have pulled it off without the support of others. But his was a key role in the operation. That helped the score. On the other hand if James hadn't done it, someone else would have been available. There were a number of agents at James skill level. If the task had been really difficult, something no one else could have done, then the score would be really impressive. Frederick knew to get a character like that took connections.*

*Frederick pulled off the sim-suit. At least this time, the hotel room where James was staying had been comfortably warm. At the stand alone reader he scanned the data chip of the session. At the hotel scene, where James memorized the data, Frederick captured the segment.*

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Chapter 3**

The report did not make sense. In his basement office, Lee Yokura was reviewing James' trip report. It was his job to evaluate the field reports, summarize the results and pass them up the line. Lee had developed the software James installed and the encryption algorithm used to give James his instructions. He couldn't quite understand himself why he had asked James to memorize the data, but it seemed to him to provide a little extra protection.

What didn't make sense was the data on the disk that had been returned. Not only was it supposed to have the crop information, it was also supposed to have the Allied logistics information he had been trying to substitute. But none of it looked reasonable.

On a hunch he displayed it as straight binary data and frowned. There was something about the appearance of the file that tickled the back of his mind. He pulled up another file and displayed the two side by side. Then he pulled up a program and started a key generator running against both files followed by a match program. He was not really sure there was anything to worry about, probably just coincidence, but he would let the programs run a while to be sure. He had hardly finished the train of thought when the machine beeped at him. Surprised by the short response time he viewed the results.

There was a seventy percent data consistency correlation between the two files. The first the disk of data from James' trip. The second, the file he had used to generate the message giving James his instructions. The correlation between the two files was too close to be chance. And the

fact the key had been found so quickly indicated an amateur was involved. But even though there was a consistency in the data, it still didn't make sense.

He filtered out James instructions from the earlier file and ran the match using the same key again. The consistency correlation between the two files went up to seventy three percent.

Lee had created the data capture program. Markers had been programmed in. They were to be spaced though the document at specifically calculated intervals. Someone would have to know what the markers were, and what the spacing was, in order to alter the data and not leave a trace. Lee checked and the markers were where they belonged. There was no question. This was the data James had been sent to capture. It hadn't been modified. It would take an extremely clever person to tamper with this data and leave no trace.

Lee edited out the markers and ran the match again. The consistency correlation went up another two percent.

Lee had worked on a number of machines, and was familiar with machine language coding on all of them. And this looked like machine language coding of some kind. He had a library of emulators available for every known machine in the world. He tested them all. None would run this particular code. The code was not written for any machine known to the International Intelligence Agency. Of course there might be some super secret project even the IIA didn't know about. But the key. It was so short. It had to be the work of an amateur. No professional would encrypt anything so sloppily.

The file he had used to mask his message to James

was one randomly selected from a library of files created years ago, themselves encrypted before use. One would be called up on an as needed basis, then never used again. Lee had absolutely no control over the selection of that file.

Lee considered in growing alarm what he was seeing.

One answer and only one occurred to him. There was a security breach of some kind. Lee picked up his phone to call his boss, then put it back down. But what kind of a security breach? And would it be safe to let anyone know that he knew about it? There was no telling who would do what if they thought he was on to them.

Lee scrambled the files using a private encryption algorithm of his own design. He thought about the key used by the unknown amateur. It was easy to remember, kcired-erf, Frederick spelled backwards. Who was Frederick? Was there a Frederick?

\*\*\*\*\*

*Harry put Lee on auto and closed the session. The image of Lee's computer screen faded from his sight. He brought up his control panel and pulled a review of the session, focusing on the files Lee had been working with. He started evaluating the files. It wasn't long before his fears were confirmed. He then signaled George, his supervisor.*

"What's up?"

"I've found something. I need to see you."

"Yes?"

"In person."

*George looked at the concerned expression on Harry's face. "Come on up."*

*"Be there in a minute." Harry responded and closed the connection. He unjacked, then lay still for a minute to reorient himself as he left sim. Finally, stretching, he gingerly got up from the couch. He left his office and went down the bare corridor to the lift at the end. Harry was a game monitor, and Lee was his preferred character. It was Harry's job to make sure that no one tampered with the game. The consequences of such tampering could be dire.*

*"What's wrong?" George asked as Harry entered the office.*

*"I'm afraid we may have a case of game tampering." Harry answered.*

*"Game tampering? Are you sure?" Asked George.*

*"No, not sure, but there is something funny going on. Right now, I am using Lee, an agent in the International Intelligence Agency. He has found some strange correlations between two completely unrelated files."*

*"So?"*

*"Well he thought they might be computer programs of some kind and tried to find the computer they were written for."*

*"What computer were they written for?"*

*"None that he could find."*

*"So it wasn't computer code after all?"*

*"Oh it was computer code all right, computer code for the Game computer. "*

*George stared at Harry. "Game code? You know it is a class one crime to introduce unmonitored code into the game."*

*"I know."*

*George seemed lost in thought, then he asked. "Why was this character Lee researching this? You know the penalty for letting a character learn about the game!"*

*"Lee was working on auto, I was only monitoring. I didn't instigate any of his research. He just found it. He doesn't know what it means, and there's no reason for concern."*

*"Do we have any idea who is involved with this?"*

*"Strangely enough we do. Again, thanks to Lee."*

*"What?"*

*"Lee found the code word for decoding the files. It is kcirederf, or Frederick spelled backwards."*

*"And?"*

*"Frederick Jones plays the character James."*

**\*\*\*\*\***

## Chapter 4

George sat gazing at the door as it closed behind his underling. Well now it had started. He knew there would be an investigation, in fact that was part of the plan. But without appearing to, he had to slow it down. It had been, about a month since he'd first met Frederick. But it had really begun long before that.

He remembered starting out as a game coder. His game play had been fair. But even though he had a jack, his play was nothing exceptional. What he had really found interesting was writing the code that made the game work. Things like creating scenery, modeling weather and so on. There was always something someone wanted done. He thought he'd found his niche in life and was content with it, except for the game monitors. They were the bane of all programmers.

Everything written had to be given to the game monitors who then submitted the changes to Ugmon, the Universal Game Monitor. It rankled that he had to submit his code for approval by a mere program. He remembered once he had spent a week on careful weather modeling so it would be a perfect day for football. It had been a work of art, absolutely perfect. But it was rejected, because it violated Game integrity. That was only one case. He was lucky if his one in five of his submissions were accepted. Finally it dawned on him he was in the wrong line of work, and applied to be a game monitor.

Not only did the game monitors submit code changes to Ugmon, they enforced the game rules to insure there was no cheating. It was here he had discovered a sense of pow-

er. Game monitors could play any game character at will. It had taken a few years, but finally he landed the job, and gradually worked his way up. Of course he had to give up coding to avoid any conflict of interest. But with a little creativity George had invented Joe Skafarni. It was amazing the amount of code Joe produced. George managed to get a lot of "Joe's" work approved. That was before fortune smiled on him and he met Frank Harrison.

Without the old schematics Frank had dug up from the Harrison Enterprise archives, he never would have been able to bypass game security. The circuit diagrams were old and the electronics had been upgraded tremendously over the decades. But the basic security design had not changed. Frank had provide him with a few very useful hardware modifications. They allowed him to bypass the submission process. But even so there was a risk. For some time now he'd been considering some way to finish things off. One last operation that would set him for life.

George's reminiscences brought to mind the night he'd received the call from Frederick. Fortunately he'd been at home.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 5

"Mister Gibson?" The voice was weak and hesitant.

"Yes?"

"I have been lead to believe you can perform certain, um, discrete services."

"Services?"

"Well, uh, you know, programming."

His first thought was internal audit was trying to trap him, but if so, the attempt was pathetic. Aloud he said. "I'm sorry, you must have the wrong person."

"Wait, please. I was told to tell you the Beethoven concert was a complete success."

Concert? The conductor? George paused in the act of disconnecting. This could be a trap, or maybe not. Also if someone was going around talking about his work, he felt he should know about it.

"I see." George said. "Don't say anything more. Give me your number, I'll call you back, and in the future don't call me here!"

George noted down the number given him and disconnected.

He stared at the number, considering. If this were a trap, just the fact he'd asked for the number might be

enough to connect him to the deed. On the other hand, if this were for real, it might just give him the opportunity he'd been looking for.

He was getting tired of the work. He'd been at it for a long time. The job itself was getting boring. He'd made almost enough on his "moonlighting" jobs to retire comfortably, if that is, he didn't get caught. He was good he admitted, but one could go to the well one time too many.

What would be perfect, absolutely perfect, would be to find some poor sucker too stupid to know what he was doing, trap him into asking for something wild, then just before he did anything with it, get him arrested. A really good bust would set his reputation for the rest of his career, and he could sit back and loaf until retirement, just a few years away. The government pension wasn't so hot, but with his nest egg, he would be quite comfortable. However, the question was, was this for real?

George performed a search on the number he'd been given.

Frederick Jones.

Gee, what a name. He pulled up the guy's background. A clerk? The guy worked? The work history showed seventeen years in agricultural statistics. What can you do for seventeen years with agricultural statistics? he wondered. He looked at Frederick's game score and stared. He'd never seen anything like it. He pulled the profile back up and stared at the picture of the balding man until he was sure he would recognize it.

He shut his home system down. The Champions would be a good place. He would have a chance to observe

*the guy before making contact. Maybe this guy was for real, maybe not. But he should be able to turn things to his advantage, one way or another.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 6

The Champions was your typical gaming bar. There were game booths along the wall where you could play, either by jacking in or with sim-suit. You brought your own suit of course. There were also connections, for three D goggles and control gloves. The goggles were seldom used for play, but were handy when gambling.

Game bars were at the edge of legitimate establishments. They were required by law to have the goggles and control gloves on hand, and provided free of charge. Why go to a game bar to play? Social reasons of course. You brought your girl, or friends to watch you play. It was an ego trip. A very profitable one for the game bars.

But the real activity at game bars was the betting. There are a number of tables with goggles through out the room. Here the virtual goggles were used to watch the action. At any particular time, there are thousands of events on which to bet. The game bars provided an opportunity to relax with your favorite beverage, and win or lose your life savings. You could bet on events against the establishment, or make bets between other patrons. On bets between patrons, the establishment took a percentage. If you won, you didn't pull in the full winnings. The betting was not only on the game activity, but on the scores of the players. Arriving at the bar George placed a call to Frederick.

\*\*\*\*\*

Frederick jumped when the call was signaled. He froze. This was the one part of the plan he was not sure of. He knew he needed help with his plan. He was no game coder. But he couldn't just go out and ask someone to write

his programs. He had worked out what pieces he wanted. Then he invented a cover program for each of the pieces. But he was still nervous. He had no idea if he could get this George to do what he wanted.

The call signaled again.

"Hello."

"Listen carefully, I won't repeat this. Go to The Champions game bar. Take a seat. I'll contact you there."

"But..." Frederick began. Before he could say anything else the call was disconnected.

Frederick didn't know where the game bar was. He checked the directory and found the location. It was on the other side of town he saw with dismay. Frederick seldom left his apartment, except to go to work. He considered giving up on his plans, but no, he had to do this. He'd waited long enough, and it was time.

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George picked an empty table where he had a view of the entrance. He donned a pair of goggles. The built in cameras allowed him to see the room, while at the same time, the goggles superimposed a list of events floating over the table. He selected one event, a football game, then picked aerial view. The list vanished. On the table, a football stadium appeared. He zoomed down a bit, then looked at a list of possible bets. Selecting "sack the quarterback" he checked the odds and placed a bet. He watched as the ball was snapped. the quarterback scrambled as the offensive line collapsed. But he managed to get a pass off just as he was slammed to the turf. Incomplete. George

watched his credits vanish. His eye on the entrance he placed another minimum bet. He wasn't here to win or lose, but he didn't want to draw attention to himself by not betting.

It was almost an hour later when he saw Frederick enter the bar. His picture didn't do him credit George thought. He absentmindedly placed another bet and watched. Frederick stared around the bar he finally went to a table and sat down. He removed his hat and put it on the table. Presently, when he made no move to don goggles, a waitress stopped at his table and spoke with him. Frederick shook his head.

Blast! George thought, he's going to mess everything up. Removing his goggles he quickly made his way to Frederick's table.

He addressed the waitress. "Hello, I was wondering if I might have a beer? Oh, and one for my friend here too." George sat as he was speaking.

The waitress turned as she heard George's voice, just in time to see the bill he was holding out to her. "Why certainly sir, uh, which one?"

"A house draft please."

"But I don't..." Frederick began.

"Oh don't worry about that," George interrupted. "I'll take care of this one." He winked at the waitress.

"Coming right up." the waitress said as she headed for the bar.

"I was trying to tell you I don't drink." Frederick insisted.

George turned to the balding man. He spoke quietly and urgently, "Look, if you want everyone to notice you here, that's fine with me. But I don't need the attention. So try to fit in."

Frederick opened his mouth, then shut it. Finally he uttered an "Oh" of understanding.

"This is a game bar." George continued. "You drink and gamble here. If you don't, they will ask you to leave. These places prefer paying customers. Now put on your goggles."

For the first time Frederick noticed the pair of goggles hanging on a hook at the side of the table.

George watched as Frederick fumbled with his goggles, then got them adjusted. He then put his own goggles on and pulled up the list of events. "What appeals to you?"

"Huh?"

"What do you want to bet on? We've got races, cock fights, sporting games, pick something."

"I don't gamble."

"You don't drink and you don't gamble. Look, I just told you, that's what people do here. This should be easy enough." George picked a stock car race. "If you don't gamble or drink they'll kick you out."

The waitress arrived with their drinks. "Thanks."

George said as he handed her another bill. "Keep the change." After she left he returned his attention to the race. "Tell you what, I'll bet five that number twenty five will have the lead at the end of the next lap."

Frederick looked at the cars roaring around the track. He spotted number 25 painted on the hood of one of the cars. "But that one is three cars back."

"You'll match my bet?"

"Yeah, I guess."

George waited. Frederick did nothing.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well what?"

"You need to place your bet. You put the amount here, your account here and here's where you indicate what you are betting on." George pointed to a form at the edge of the race track.

"Oh" Frederick said. He entered the bet as instructed. As he finished, number twenty five dived for the inside of the turn, passing two cars in the process. As it pulled out of the curve, it accelerated. On the straightaway it passed the third car. Frederick watched. His bet vanished. George's total jumped to nine and a half.

"Hey, what happened. Frederick yelled, "I put down five but you only have nine and a half."

"The house gets a percentage on personal side bets. They can't run this place for free you know. Now, you want-

ed to see me about something?"

"Uh, yes. You see..."

"Match my bet George interrupted."

"Huh?"

"I said match my bet. You can't stop. Talk while you gamble."

"Oh yeah." Frederick placed the bet and watched as his credits again vanished.

"Just keep matching my bets. Don't worry about the bet itself, just match it. You were saying?"

"Ok." Frederick fumbled with a bet as he tried to explain what he wanted. "Um, Mister Gibson, I'm working..."

"Call me Ralph" George interrupted. "No need to be formal here. Now, you were saying?"

"Sure, OK Ralph." Frederick made the effort. "Well I work in Agricultural Statistics you see."

"Uh huh." George knew this from his research.

"And," Frederick paused as he matched another of George's bets. George didn't seem to have any trouble with the continuous gambling as he listened to Frederick. "And it, well, can you keep this quiet?"

"What?" George asked. "Of course I'll keep this quiet, as long as it's legal. Why do you ask?"

"Well, if what I told you got out to the public." Fred-

erick's voice faded, "Well there might be some panic."

George paused in his activities. "Panic? What are you talking about?"

Frederick took a deep breath. "As I told you, I work in Agricultural Statistics. Specifically Resource Allocation. Things are tight, and getting tighter. This year, the crop yield is down."

"What?" George's voice was suddenly loud.

Frederick winced and looked around. Several pairs of goggled eyes had turned in their direction. He hurriedly placed another bet. Absentmindedly George matched it, as he continued staring at Frederick. In a quieter voice he asked "But what does this have to do with game code?"

Frederick struggled to explain. "You know almost everyone's allocation depends on their game scores, and in effect the game computer now controls our commerce."

"Yes." George admitted.

"There have got to be a lot of resources that are being improperly diverted. I need a program that can do a global search of all records to find out what is happening to these resources. I might also need to adjust the classification of records to be searched."

"Let me get this straight." George responded. "You need a game code program to search for these hoarded resources. Not a program to help you with your game play?"

"That's right." Frederick answered.

"Why? Why ask me to do it? Why don't you have a departmental programmer do the job for you?"

"I can't." Frederick answered. "It wouldn't be kept secret. People would talk. Besides, word would get up to my bosses and they would notify the people I'm trying to find. I want to keep things quiet until I can present a finished report that documents where these resources are. Then when the shortage is reported, I can tell them how to make up the difference. They won't be able to hide it then. I can't claim any finder's reward, since this is supposed to be my job anyway, but it will look good in my performance review."

"Depends on who does the reviewing." George commented.

"What?"

"Nothing, never mind. I assume you don't want any trace of the search left behind?"

"I guess."

"You better be sure." George responded. "The search will take a while to execute. If you are discovered before it's done, you can kiss everything goodbye. Nothing will get reported then."

"Yeah, you're right." Frederick paused then added "There is something else."

"Yes?" George asked.

"Well, it will be one thing to find the records I want. But when I make my report on this, someone might try to

*change the records, hide the evidence, and discredit me."*

*"Yes, that is a possibility." George agreed thoughtfully. "What did you want to do about it?"*

*"I was thinking of a program that will create an independent log if anyone tries to change the records. Something that will show who made the change and what the change was."*

*"That can be done." commented George. "I understand the programs you want, and I know some people who can handle them. "*

*"You won't be doing the work yourself?" Frederick asked. "I told you, I needed this kept quiet."*

*"No, I won't be doing the work. Why would I want to mess with game code? Don't worry. All they will get are the specifications. No one will know what it's for. And it will be kept quiet. Will you be needing any other work?"*

*Frederick looked at George startled, then back to the race. He hesitated then responded. "No, I don't think so."*

*George looked carefully at Frederick who was placing another bet "I understand, too many eggs in one basket. However if you should need anything else you can find me here every Thursday evening."*

*"I don't think I can afford to come back." Frederick commented, looking at the credits he'd lost to George.*

*George laughed. "Of course you can. How did you expect to pay me. Consider this a consulting fee. Were you just going to transfer credits to me for services rendered?"*

*Remember, you wanted it kept quiet."*

*"Oh." was all that Frederick said as understanding hit him.*

*George turned back to the table. He pulled the menu up, and selected a city riot. Next he placed a bet on the probable arrest of a pretty college coed. "I'll let you know how your product will be delivered." he commented.*

*"Thanks" Frederick answered. Then when there seemed nothing else to do he removed his goggles and gloves and headed for the door.*

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## Chapter 7

Jennifer Hect watched as Frederick left the bar. She was owner of The Champions. She'd worked hard to build up the business, and had hesitated when George first made his proposal. But she'd given in, and she had to admit it had been profitable. She came from behind to the bar and headed for the table where George sat.

George looked up as she sat at his table. As she donned the goggles she asked, "New customer?"

"I suppose so." George answered.

Jennifer placed a large bet. George matched it. Suddenly his credit total jumped. "Your cut." She said.

"Thanks" George answered. "I take it you liked the list I gave you?"

"Yes, it is much easier to set odds when you know what's going to happen." she paused then asked, "New customer?"

"Just the usual odd job." He slipped a data chip to the bar owner as he spoke.

"Right, thanks. 'Till next week then."

George watched as she got up and headed back to her office. Then still another figure joined him. This time, for a change, the small bets did not seem to favor one man or the other.

"Busy I see."

"Yes." George answered.

"Equipment O.K.?"

"No problems so far."

Frank Harrison looked around at the crowd.

"How's the family?" George asked.

"Same stuck up bunch, as usual." was the answer. "They seem to think they own the world."

George smiled at the comment. He'd heard the complaint many times from his friend. "Don't they?"

When there was no answer, George asked. "So what's up?"

"Nothing right now. Just wanted to keep in touch."

"And remind me I still owe you?" George asked. "Don't worry I haven't forgotten. I'm here when you need me."

"That's nice to know." Frank relaxed in his seat. "I get a funny feeling at home. Can't put my finger on it."

"Think someone is on to you?" George asked.

"No I don't think it's that, this feels like something else. I'm thinking they might want to kick me out."

George looked at Frank's goggled face. "Nothing

new there."

"No, but it feels like it might be close."

"Well we can handle that. Just be careful that it's nothing else."

The two men gambled for a while. Finally Frank removed his goggles and said "I had better head back. It's been good seeing you again."

"You too" George answered.

George watched Frank's retreating back.

Frank's visit made him uneasy. It was good to see his friend, but their conversation did not give him a warm fuzzy feeling.

George decided he had enough. He signaled cash in, then watched as his totaled winnings were adjusted for taxes, then credited to his account. Yes, mustn't forget the taxes. George thought, then smiled. He'd picked up a nice piece of change this evening, and it was all very legal. Too bad, he thought, they don't have something like this in the game world. It would make money laundering so much easier.

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## Chapter 8

*That had been an interesting night in it's own way, George thought. The programs Frederick wanted him to write were a little outside the normal request he received. Usually someone wanted nice weather for a picnic so someone's character could score with a girl or some such.*

*On the surface what Frederick wanted made sense. Everyone's status and perks depended on their game scores. The accounting programs had been integrated on the game computer. Along with it had gone planning and resource distribution. So even though the game computer had been developed for the game, it handled all world wide commerce.*

*As he thought about it this gave him cause to pause and consider the implications. What if something happened to the game computer?*

*But instantly he dismissed the notion. The system had been up and running longer than he had been alive. He was confident system maintenance was well in hand, really none of his business.*

*The reason George had insisted that the code leave no trace was because he knew that not only would Frederick's superiors have stuff squirreled away but, that ninety five percent of the stuff uncovered would be effectively untouchable. You just did not try to confiscate the holdings of the upper class. High game ranking had it's privileges, very carefully guarded privileges. But that was Frederick's problem, not his. George had delivered as promised. After all he had a reputation to maintain. If it ever got out he didn't,*

*he might lose some of his good customers. He also made sure his own hidden assets would not be found.*

*Delivering the code had been simple. George, playing the game character Oliver, had one of the periodic system diagnostics run. Oliver's decision to run the diagnostic just then had been completely in character. Disguised as part of the diagnostic was the download of his program for Frederick. He made sure the diagnostic was in progress, then checked on Lee. He had planned well, Lee was just about to pull the masking file. As he viewed the instructions Lee was typing he saw an opportunity for the second delivery. Taking advantage of Lee's momentary distraction, George had briefly taken control, and had the phrase "memorize before shipping" inserted. He then watched for a moment. He made sure Lee considered it a harmless addition that would provide extra security.*

*George straightened up in his seat, ending his reminiscences. Except for the wall console, the plain gray walls of his office surrounded him. At one time he had hoped to have a windowed office. Thanks to this project, he now longer cared. Really, a view of the gray featureless side of the neighboring building was not that interesting. The most important thing right now was to keep an eye on Harry, and make sure that things did not end prematurely.*

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## Chapter 9

Lee was thinking about the security breach, and the more he thought about it, the stranger it seemed. James had sent him the file. But while there was a possibility the agent might be involved with some funny business, he didn't think so. James could not have encoded the data on his own. The data from the trip was internally consistent in spite of the correlation with the other file. James was a capable agent, but intricate file structures were not his area of expertise. And if all James was, was an unknowing carrier, then his contact with the file itself might be enough to put him at risk. A simple thing could be done that would provide James with some protection, without being too revealing.

Making a call he spoke a short code phrase. This phrase would be substituted a number of times and passed through several intermediaries before being delivered, none of whom would know specifically where it came from. Lee did not want James to be his first casualty.

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James answered the phone on the second ring. It couldn't be another mission, orders were always in writing, never delivered over the phone.

"Mister Osgood?" the voice asked.

"Yes." James answered.

"This is to confirm your appointment with Doctor Franks tomorrow at ten fifteen."

"Thank you." James replied, "I'll be there."

No, it was not another mission! Hanging up the phone he went to his desk. Pulling out a drawer he pulled off the packet taped to the back of it. Next he called another number.

"Ace cleaning." the voice replied.

"This is Terry Henholf at 723 North 21st. I'm having a party this weekend, can you come over tomorrow and do my drapes and carpets?"

"We would be glad to." responded the voice at the other end.

"Thanks." added James and hung up.

He walked down to the corner and caught a bus. Even as it was pulling away a van drove up and several men climbed out in coveralls. James knew there would be no sensitive material left to worry about. In a way the government did take care of it's own.

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You read, in the newspapers, how it was getting harder to cross the border from Mexico, going north. There is stepped up border surveillance. There are raids on factories to capture and deport illegal aliens. James simply mailed his emergency pack to a post office box in Mexico and applied for a job at a factory just North of the border. More than one marginal factory would turn a blind eye to the lack of paperwork. If the INS picked up an employee a day or two before payday, well then there was one less payroll check to distribute. In fact it happened exactly that way. He suspected that it was the employer himself who

had reported him to the INS. All the INS is interested in, is deporting illegal aliens. His Spanish was good, and his broken English perfect. They did fingerprint him, but the fakes he wore were on no records.

South of the border, he visited a small shed he'd been renting for years. The guy he rented from received his payments through a round about route and the few U.S. dollars it cost was enough of a windfall to insure silence. There was no key to the lock. The apparently simple combination lock was a bit more sophisticated than one you might pick up at the local hardware store. The shed housed a motorcycle and other useful odds and ends. He headed south, his destination a remote mountain village. His trail had faded to nothing before he'd even left the States.

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## Chapter 10

The area Frederick worked used to be a hallway in a government building. Sometime in the unremembered past a bureaucrat had decided that it was a waste of space and had a long shelf installed along one unpainted composite wall. This shelf was lined with terminals. Occasionally they would slide them together just a bit more to make room for just one more terminal. They didn't bother with chairs, that would have obstructed the flow of traffic.

Frederick's terminal was about a third of the way down from the main entrance. Long ago Frederick had gotten used to the three hour stints standing in front of his terminal, performing the analysis demanded of him.

This morning he was in early. Things would be just a little too crowded during the normal work day for what he wanted to do. Nervously he powered up the terminal and identified himself then inserted the data chip into the reader.

Frederick had to know if the code he had been given would work. He applied the specified decryption protocol, using `kcirederf` as the password. He had prepared two test files. He submitted the first one to the program and it reported clean. The second file registered the expected hit.

George heard the door at the end of the hallway echo as it was opened. Quickly he cleared the screen and pulled up a crop report from the southern continent. He scanned down the data, not daring to look up as the footsteps approached.

"Why it's Frederick, isn't it?"

Frederick looked up. It was his boss, Joe. "Oh, good morning sir."

"In a bit early aren't you?"

"I just wanted to make sure this report was ready in time." Frederick answered. He gestured to the terminal, then almost fainted. The indicator light on the chip reader was lit. What if his boss noticed?

"Well that's very commendable. But please remember you are on a limited schedule. You are expected to get the work done during your normal work day."

"Yes sir, I'll remember" Frederick answered.

"Good, good, keep up the good work."

Frederick winced at the friendly hand on his shoulder. "Yes sir." Frederick dared to look up and watch as his boss's echoing footsteps faded, followed by the click of the office door at the far end of the hallway. As soon as the door was closed, Frederick let out the breath he found he had been holding. He extracted the chip from the reader and carefully placed it back in its carrier, then out of sight in his pocket. He felt it to make sure it hadn't fallen out of a hole in his pocket. All during the day, he had to continuously reassure himself the little piece of plastic was still there. It was a good half hour before quitting time when his boss made the customary stroll down the corridor. He would make a friendly comment to each worker as he passed. Frederick assumed that it was his boss's way of providing the "personal" touch. Today was one day he could have done without.

"Remember Frederick, the efficient worker can get things done during his allotted time slot."

"Yes sir." Frederick answered.

"What was that all about?" Jamie asked on his left.

"Yeah" Leonard asked on the other side, "you putting in overtime?" That got laughs from all up and down the hallway.

Overtime was an ancient joke. Once, according to the history books, people used to be required to work overtime. Frederick thought that was probably just someone's fairy tail. Though if he succeeded...

"Oh it wasn't anything." Frederick answered. "I just wanted to make sure this crop report was finished on time. There were some odd readings, and I needed to check them out."

"I don't see why you bother", Jamie responded. "If there was anything funny, the machine would have caught it."

"I just wanted to be sure." Frederick insisted defensively.

"Well, the boss is gone, must be quitting time." Jamie called out. He shut off his terminal.

"Sounds good to me." another answered and followed suit. Soon the sound of exiting feet filled the hallway. "Don't forget", Leonard reminded Frederick, "no overtime."

"I still have ten minutes. I'm almost done."

"Just watch yourself."

"I will."

Frederick watched Leonard's retreating back. The corridor echoed as the door slammed shut. He looked at the screen in front of him. He entered three more lines, then filed his report.

The place was empty. He stood there in the silence, looking at the glowing screen, thinking about the tests he'd run that morning. Now that he knew the program worked as designed, the next step would be to make some minor changes and combine it with the other pieces.

But what if he ran this program in it's present form on live data?

He immediately rejected the thought. It would only be taking a risk.

The idea of hidden hoards had only been a ploy, an excuse to explain the program.

The taunting screen faintly reflected his image.

What if those imaginary hidden hoards really existed?

He found himself setting up the program to run in background batch mode, and assigning it to the live data path.

Like some over controlled game character, his fingers

reached for the keyboard. He entered the submit command.

Why was he doing this? He could get in deep trouble if it was discovered, and that would ruin all his plans.

Curiosity, plain and simple. And everyone knew what that did to the cat.

He decided to hit cancel, but his finger hit execute instead. Frederick stood in front of the terminal frozen. Now what? He pulled up the hit count. Zero. Then as he watched it ticked over. Then two, and three in quick succession.

Well he thought it's working. There really was something out there. Time to shut down and go home.

He stopped in mid motion when he realized he didn't have any way to stop the program. It would run until it was finished or ran out of storage.

There was a lot of storage.

Frederick stood frozen in place, trying to figure out what to do. Even turning off the terminal would accomplish nothing. The program would just continue to run. He arrived at the chilling conclusion there was nothing he could do. His plans were ruined.

Reaching out he turned off the terminal. With leaden feet he headed for the exit. He remembered to turn off the lights as he left.

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## Chapter 11

Once again Frederick found himself at the Champions. He stopped at the bottom of the steps and looked out over room, searching for the remembered figure.

During the previous three days, Frederick's sense of impending doom had gradually faded. The background task was still running, and no one noticed. He had decided he could continue with his plans. He didn't want to use the same coder for all the pieces, but had been unable to concentrate on finding anyone else. He now knew that the stuff he had been given performed as advertised. Boy did it ever!. It probably wouldn't hurt to use the same coder one more time.

He was jostled from behind, and realize he was blocking the way. He mumbled an apology and entered the room. He ignored the hard stares of the young couple that had pushed by him. It still took a couple of minutes for his eyes to adjust to the subdued lighting. Finally he found the coder, sitting at a table, alone. He knew who to look for this time, or thought he did. The three D goggles hid the upper part of the face, but what he could see looked like the same square chin and sharp nose he remembered from the last time they'd met. And the red plaid jacket the figure was wearing was the same. Still, what if it wasn't?

Slowly he walked around the edge of the room towards the table, pretending to check out the sim-booths along one wall. He was facing away from the table when he heard a voice.

"Have a seat."

It was Ralph! Gratefully Frederick turned and sat at the game coder's table.

"Like to draw attention to yourself?" George asked.

"What?" Frederick began, but was interrupted by the waitress.

"May I get you anything?"

"Uh beer I guess." Frederick answered.

The other man looked up from where he'd been focusing on the empty table. His goggled eyes stared at the waitress. "I'll have one too please." Then turning his head he continued. "Freddy my boy, how's it going? Did that stuff get the job done for you?"

He looked at the man across from him. "Oh yeah, That worked great." Frederick answered. "It's been going for three days and it's only covered four tenths of a percent of the system. The hit rate is hanging around seven percent.

"That much huh? Well what do you know? Come on, put on your goggles. Let's have some fun."

Frederick picked up the goggles. He found he was watching an ice skater. She jumped and spun, landing smoothly. He looked at his available bets.

"Think she'll finish without any faults?" he heard.

"Sure." Frederick answered. He saw a side bet appear and he entered a minimum bet of five.

"So, what's up?"

"Something else has occurred to me. I guess I need your help again."

"Well, that's what I'm here for. What's this idea of yours?"

"You know" Frederick said, "how when a character dies, you get to pick a new character?"

"Yes."

"What if you are playing someone like a company president, who has a heart attack, his heart stops and he stops breathing? He's dead then, that's when you get kicked out. Right?"

"I suppose so."

"Well what if the character doesn't really die?"

"Doesn't die?"

"Yeah, you know. They're reviving a lot of those types now. The heart stops and they stop breathing, then they use drugs and electric shock and get them back."

"So?"

"So, if you get kicked out, you can go to the game board and tell them you need a new character. You show them the data chip where the character is supposed to have died and they assign you a new character. And because the death is due to natural causes, your score is almost as high

as when your character died. So you get a good character."

"I still don't see what you are getting at. So you have a new character?"

"But the first one didn't really die." Frederick explained. "You can still play him."

"Oh come on." the coder said. "You can't play two characters." Unless you were a game monitor, George thought to himself.

"How do you know?" Frederick asked. "How do you know you don't have someone playing two characters and getting double credit?"

"That's impossible. The game system wouldn't let it happen."

"Want to bet? Look, when the game system was designed, if the character stopped breathing and the heart stopped, the character was dead. It was that way for what, five hundred years? Now you tell me, did they rewrite the game system when modern medicine was developed? I need code that will monitor every character and create a record for every death."

"Do you know what you're asking? I'd have to develop a virus to infect every character in the game to add that function. This is not a trivial program."

"What's the matter, can't you do it?"

Rather than answer George asked a question of his own. "Why should I risk it?"

"Look at how successful we were last time." Frederick answered. "You didn't think we would find anything. Do you know the size of the hoard we found?"

"No, how could I?"

"So far, I've uncovered enough to feed every man woman and child on this planet for a year." Frederick claimed proudly. "If the projections prove out, there's probably sixty years worth of stuff squirreled away. On top of that, when you realize how much of what we produce now is going into these hoards, we could probably stretch it for another twenty. And that's without growing a single bushel of grain the entire time."

Frederick sat back in satisfaction. The skating competition on their table forgotten. He could tell he had the other man's attention.

He continued. "Tell me there are no multi-character players! Just think what it would mean if we uncovered them. It would make us famous."

The silence at the table stretched, until finally George faintly responded, "Who'd have thought it?"

Coming back to himself he challenged Frederick "How do you think we could expose them? Excuse me mister game monitor. I introduced a virus to infect all the characters in the game so I could discover Joe Smith is playing two characters."

"All we need to do, is discover who is doing it. We can use other methods to expose whoever we find." Frederick answered defensively. The question had caught him off guard. The truth was he really didn't care if they unmasked

anyone. He just wanted the code.

The coder sat in silence for several minutes. Finally he spoke. "It would be expensive." He pulled up a down hill ski event and placed a bet.

Frederick looked at the figure. "That's outrageous."

"Take it or leave it."

Frederick placed the bet that the skier would beat the extremely modest time the coder had entered. The split as the skier reached the halfway point promised a comfortable margin in Frederick's favor. Then, twenty yards from the finish a ski caught on something, and the skier was flying, limbs and skis flailing, into the crowd at the edge of the course.

Frederick looked up at the coder. "You knew that was going to happen didn't you?" His voice had an accusing tone.

"It was a gamble." was the response as the coder recorded his winnings and shut down.

Frederick took off his goggles and was about to leave when the coder spoke again.

"Your character, what's his name, James? He's about due for an East European mission isn't he?"

"Yes." Frederick answered.

"This one is going to be tricky. It will take at least three weeks, maybe more."

*"That long?"*

*"If you like, I can arrange for a refund." George gestured to the seat Frederick had just vacated.*

*"O.K., O.K, I'll wait."*

*"Contact will be made during the mission. Be ready!"*

*"Right." Frederick answered as he left. Once outside the door of the dingy establishment Fredericks expression became euphoric. He'd done it! This was the trickiest piece of code he would need, and he'd done it! Now all he had to do was pick it up on James' next mission. But he needn't worry about that for days, he could relax.*

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## Chapter 12

Joe Martin's footsteps echoed as he walked down the empty corridor, the shelf of blank terminals along one wall reflected the image of the occasional overhead light. He opened the door to his office, and squeezed in. The worn chair squeaked as he sat down. A wall mounted shelf held the few manuals he used for his job. Loose leaf folders full of tissue thin sheets.

He hated the manuals, and was grateful he seldom needed them. The printing on one side of the page showed through to the other. Deciphering the cursed things gave him a headache.

He turned on his terminal. It was the last day of the month, and the end of period report was due. There wasn't much to it. Basically it consisted of running a routine that automatically pulled together the reports of everyone in his department, summarized them and sent them on to his boss. All Joe had to do was enter his code to authorize the report before it got sent. The whole thing took all of five minutes. But it was part of his job.

Joe hated his job, because of the stigmata attached, as much as anyone. He just hadn't found any way to get out of it. He'd begun as a data entry clerk, much as the bunch of losers he could hear filling the hallway outside his door. It was pure luck he was the senior one present when the previous manager had retired. And here he would probably remain for the rest of his life. At least he got to sit down.

Joe frowned. The report wasn't ready yet. The ma-

chine normally scrolled up a list of items as it performed it's summary. But right now, after the last line on the screen, a counter was running. He watched as the numbers blurred. System Resource Usage was the line on the screen. He wondered what this was about. He sat and watched the numbers.

He remembered the last time he'd had a problem with the report. They had to call in a technician, and it had taken a week to get someone in. By then his report was late, and he'd been written up, even though it wasn't his fault. He glanced up at the shelf of manuals. The one on the end was the system problem reporting manual. He was about to get up and get it when abruptly the screen started scrolling again. He sat back. Just a glitch he thought in relief. The list of reports continued to scroll, then abruptly halted with the familiar beep. He went to enter his authorization code, then stopped. The machine hadn't asked for it.

"OUT OF BOUNDS" The words on the last line on his screen flashed.

Out of bounds? Now what? With a curse he stood. With a bang the chair was shoved into the wall behind him. He reached for the manual. Dust showered him as he pulled the rarely used book from the shelf. He dropped the thing on his desk and another cloud filled the cramped office, and triggered a bout of sneezing. Joe glanced at the door, as he rubbed his nose. He heard a murmur of voices coming from behind the thin door. He considered opening the door to air out the office, and decided it would give a poor impression. He dusted the cover of the binder and opened to the index. He found the section on error messages. Next to "OUT OF BOUNDS" there was a diagnostic code. Carefully he typed in the code.

He knew you had to be very careful. If you entered something wrong, it could end up leading you down a garden path of incorrect conclusions. The response he got puzzled him.

"NO SYSTEM BOUNDS EXCEEDED"

Now what he wondered. He went to the troubleshooting chart and read the short paragraph. "If there are no system bounds exceeded, check the program manual." Program manual? What program manual?

Joe sat in puzzlement and frustration. He had to figure this out. If he couldn't document that he'd taken every possible step to fix the problem himself, this time he would get demoted. It had been years since he'd been late with the report, but the management procedures didn't seem to take that into account. He couldn't risk it. But what program manual? He'd never seen a program manual.

He looked at the remaining binders on the shelf. Employee's Handbook, Management Procedures, Required Reports, and Report Forms were the faded titles facing him. On a hunch he pulled down Required Reports. He'd been running the end of month report. Maybe there would be something here. He was a little more careful with this manual, managing to carefully scrape the dust into a pile on the corner of his desk before opening it, and was able to avoid repeating the sneezing fit.

He found the section on month end reporting. There was a section here on exception procedures. There it was, "OUT OF BOUNDS". Joe sighed in relief, except it would have been a lot more useful to say "REPORT OUT OF BOUNDS". Then he would have known where to look.

There was a response code here too. Joe entered the new code.

"SYSTEM USAGE OUT OF BOUNDS"

System usage? But when he'd entered the other diagnostic code, it said there were no system bounds exceeded. What was going on. He slammed the binder shut and was about to throw it against the wall when he stopped. There was that one line that had stayed on his screen for so long. It had said something about the system. That was it! There was some kind of a report on the system that got included.

He opened the manual and looked down the list of reports. There it was, System Usage Summary. He found the section on error codes for the System Usage Summary. He carefully entered the code for "SYSTEM USAGE OUT OF BOUNDS." A long list began scrolling up his screen. Frantically he pushed the freeze button so he could see what was being listed. There were five columns of numbers. One column looked like a list of dates. They were all for the month of September. He didn't know what the rest of the columns were. Another column had numbers that he guessed were lengths of time. They seemed to range between 2:15 and 2:45 though a few got up to 2:55. He began paging through the section on System Usage Report. On one page it showed a list that looked like what he had on his screen. The column headings were Date, Elapsed Time, Terminal Code, User Code, and Process Code. Now he was getting somewhere. He remembered that in the back of Management Procedures there were summary sheets on each employee in his department. He was required to add or remove one of these sheets every time someone was added or removed from his department. He looked back at the screen full of numbers. By quickly pressing the unfreeze

and freeze buttons he was able to look at most of the report and not miss too much. He could see the dates changing, and knew it wouldn't take too long to go through the whole thing. It wasn't until almost the end he found what he was looking for. The line kind of stuck out. Under the column elapsed time, it showed 46:23:5:21. But there was no terminal code listed, and there was an asterisk next to the process code. Joe pulled one more manual from the shelf. He began paging through the employee sheets comparing the code displayed on the screen to the assigned codes printed on the sheets. Halfway through he found his match. He looked at the name. Frederick Jones. Well, well, good old Freddy. He looked at the two remaining manuals on the shelf. He knew that in the Employee Manual there was a section on system abuse. This sure looked like system abuse to him. In Report Forms there was a form for Employee Infractions.

He stood up, again slamming the chair against the wall, grabbed the two remaining manuals, and slammed them on his desk. Once more a cloud of dust was stirred up. Joe yanked upon the door.

"Freddy! Get in here!"

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## Chapter 13

At the sound of the door slamming and Joe's yell, Frederick's head snapped around. A wave of fear washed over him. He left his terminal and quickly walked towards Joe's office.

"I told you to watch your time!" Jeremy hissed at him as he passed.

Frederick's mind was in too much of a turmoil to answer. But he didn't think it was a problem with overtime.

When he reached Joe's office, the sight of manuals spread over his boss' desk met his eyes. Joe sat back in his chair.

"Close the door!"

Frederick did so. He remained standing, uncomfortably crowded against the edge of Joe's desk in the cramped space. The cloud of dust hanging in the air made his eyes water as he stifled a sneeze.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you've caused? Because of you, my report is going to be late, and I WILL NOT take the blame for it this time!"

"Your report is late?" Frederick asked in puzzlement, grasping the only meaningful detail he could.

"Yes! This whole department is supposed to run smoothly, no ripples. I run a report at the end of the month, authorize it and everyone is happy. But you have to

go off and run some stupid program for days and eat up a lot of computer time. The system flags it as out of bounds, and now I have to explain it. The report is due today, and I can't send it on because there is too much computer time used. What kind of an explanation can I give that won't bring the whole division down on top of me?"

"Oh, I didn't know it would be a problem." were the first words out of Frederick's mouth. "This wasn't exactly true. "I was just trying to find out what caused the anomaly."

"What anomaly?"

"Things weren't adding up, and I was trying to find out why. I figured there must be some hidden resources somewhere and was trying to find them."

"Well forget it! I'm restricting you to an hour a day, and putting you on probation. And kill that stupid program!"

"I can't!"

"What do you mean can't. Just override it and kill it."

"I tried, it won't let me."

"Give me your access code Joe commanded."

He could have looked it up in the manual, but was in no mood to fool around. He cleared his screen and entered the code as Frederick recited it. Pulling up the offending background job he entered the kill command. The system promptly responded with the words "ACCESS DENIED". Joe

cleared the screen and entered his own code. Once again he entered the kill command and received the same response. Swearing he dug the system manual from the bottom of the stack on his desk, and looked up the supervisor over-ride instructions. The procedures he laboriously followed resulted in the same response.

"What the heck have you got going here?" He demanded.

"I told you, it's a search routine." Frederick answered.

"A search routine? What kind of a search routine takes this long?"

"Yes sir. I found it in the archives." He strayed from the truth slightly here. He was hoping that a search of the archives for his program didn't occur. "It's supposed to check where the allocated resources really go, and compare it to the planned distribution. It uncovers any hidden hoards."

"What are you talking about, hidden hoards?"

"Resources squirreled away by private individuals. Everyone's supposed to get only what they really need. But they've been getting more than that, and there's a lot of extra stuff lying around."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"No, honest. Look at the interim report." Frederick gave his boss another access code.

He memorized the code. This one he'd not been

aware of. He wondered where Frederick had obtained it, but put the question aside until later. His screen abruptly filled with columns of numbers. He froze it for a moment. "What is all this?" he asked.

"The first column is the resource code. The second is the quantity. The third is the storage location. The last is the code of the person who was last known to have possession. Either he or she still has it, or has given it to someone else. If it had been thrown away it would have shown up in the waste summary and that would be subtracted out."

"How much is there?" Joe asked in wonder looking at Frederick.

"There's a summary at the bottom. If you ask for the sum in the report command you will get just that."

Joe cleared his screen and called up the report again, specifying summary as instructed. He stared in wonder at the displayed numbers. "There's really that much stuff out there?"

"Oh no, a lot more. The system has only processed six tenths of a percent of the records."

"What? But that means it will take months to run!"

"I know," Frederick answered. "But look what we've uncovered."

"Yes, well, look. It was still unauthorized use. I'll still have to restrict you, and put you on probation. I'll figure out some way to slip this into our plan."

"I understand." Frederick answered. He had no

doubt that Joe's intention was to take all the credit for himself. But if you thought about it, this was really too big for his boss. Someone else would take over the project. The episode had cost Frederick and he'd learned a valuable lesson. This would be the last time he would take that kind of risk.

*"Right. Well, your restriction and probation begins immediately. Actually, if you leave right now, there will be less time for embarrassing questions."*

*"Yes sir."*

*"And close the door when you leave." Joe's gaze returned once more to the screen on his desk. What a find! What an incredible find!*

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## Chapter 14

*Frederick sat on his bed staring at the wall unseeing, lost in thought.*

*One hour a day. Well he could get by on that for a while. He wouldn't dig into his savings if he could help it. He was used to a cramped life. He'd been able to put half of what he made towards his project. It meant he wouldn't be able to add to it for a while though. But he was almost there, maybe he could finish the project with what he had. He'd been neglecting his character lately. Maybe he could play the character and up his score a little. It wouldn't get him much. He hadn't cared about the game in a long time. But maybe he could get a few credits, and that would help a little. Besides, with the extra two hours a day, it wasn't like he had a lot of other things to do.*

*Frederick slipped on his sim-suit. He checked his score. It was down. Well, in a way that was good, he thought. That should make it easy to pull it up a couple of points. Frederick completed his link. His view through James eyes was that of rough hewed ceiling rafters. He felt rough threadbare sheets under his hand. There was a feeling of humid heat, as the suit's heating circuits kicked in, and Frederick began to sweat.*

*Curious, Frederick prompted James to sit up and look around. He noticed there was no sink. A basin with a pitcher of water sat on an old faded dresser. A cracked mirror hung on the wall. James glanced in the mirror. The distorted reflection that met Frederick's eyes was a strange one. James' bronzed face had been darkened and was now crease by a maze of wrinkles. His conservatively cut brown*

*hair was now close cropped black and curly. The change in appearance caught Frederick by surprise. Was the game character already on another mission? It certainly looked that way.*

*Frederick felt puzzled and wondered what had been going on. He quit the session and pulled a history playback for review. He decided to start where his last session had ended. It was in the hotel. James was memorizing the last file. Frederick skipped rapidly through the next several days. James caught a flight from Seattle. Frederick saw the arrival at James' apartment. Then the agent was on a bus, at a factory, then on a motorcycle and finally at the primitive inn.*

*Frederick froze the image and took a moment to think things out.*

*Nothing made any sense. He would need to find out what had gotten the game character into the situation he now found himself. Resignedly, Frederick decided he would need to review the activities again, this time slower.*

*As he worked, he lost track of time, his initial intentions to play his character and raise his score forgotten. It was almost midnight when Frederick reached the point where James left the apartment.*

*Frederick slowed the playback to normal speed. He listened carefully as James received one phone call and made another. Frederick listened closely to the words, but they didn't make sense! He played them over again, and again, but it was useless!*

*There was nothing in either call that meant anything. James had an appointment with Doctor Franks? He'd heard*

James say he would be there. But he had obviously missed the appointment. And what was that call to Ace Cleaning?

Finally it dawned on Frederick that the calls were coded messages. But what did they mean? James normally took several days to prepare for a mission. This time, there was no preparation. James had paused only long enough to recover a hidden envelope, then made tracks for the nearest bus. It was as if the agent was running away. Slowly the reality sunk in. Frederick's game character was in some sort of trouble, and was on the run. No wonder the score was down. This was no good. James was in hiding.

Frederick didn't have a clue who the agent was hiding from, and didn't really care. The point was, James was out of action, doing nothing! There would be no way he could do anything about his score with this mess. Then another thought crossed his mind. James was supposed to be in Europe in two weeks for the next pickup.

Frederick swore. He had to get James on to his next mission, or at least into Eastern Europe, even if he didn't get him back into action as an agent. He wasn't going to let any cowardly game character keep him from making that pickup. He'd worked too hard for this critical piece of code. Frederick did not stop to contrast his own timid life to that of the spy he was playing. It did not matter to the player that his character had taken drastic steps to protect his simulated life.

Overcoming James' desire for self preservation became an unexpected challenge for Frederick. The game player realized that up to this point, playing James had been easy. For the most part, James did his job, and Frederick went along for the ride. Now, however, Frederick would have to motivate his character, spur him into taking a spe-

cific action. James would need to take steps that would put him where Frederick needed him to be.

Frederick quit the session and stripped from his sim-suit. He remembered tossing the Game Players Manual in the top drawer of his dresser. Over time it had been shoved to the back and buried beneath an accumulation of miscellaneous junk. He dug it out and found the section on subliminal motivation. He read that the skilled player could insinuate his or her thoughts so subtly into those of the game character, that the character would think the thoughts were totally his or her own. According to the manual, the more subtle you were in inducing the character's action, the better the score. The manual also warned against letting things get out of control. The player was always responsible for the character's actions. Frederick swore once again. By now he was in a very foul mood. He realized everything he was reading was written for jacked players. People who could feed their thoughts directly into the minds of the game characters. Once more he cursed the limitations of the sim-suit. If he could have played, jacked, this would be simple. Frederick's hatred of jacked players was flamed anew. At the end of the manual there was a thin chapter for sim-suit players. In frustration Frederick threw the flimsy booklet aside. The tissue thin sheets ripped free and confetti briefly filled the air. This was going to take far too long. Frederick would have to gradually build James' dissatisfaction, getting him to notice the many minor discomforts of the Mexican village. The lack of hot running relaxing showers, the repetitive food, the discomfort the the sagging bed, the hot, humid, rainy weather. He would have to instill in James an increased restlessness and dissatisfaction.

Frederick shoved the sim-suit to the floor and pulled the thin blanket over himself and rolled into a ball. It was late and tomorrow he would have to begin the tedious pro-

cess. Frederick would need to review James' history and capture clips he thought would help in his efforts. Memories, of fancy hotels and restaurants, the taste and texture of a perfectly grilled steaks, would be found. Frederick would search for these and dozens of other details . Anything to remind James of what he'd left behind. Frederick would link just before James went to bed. Subliminal phrases would be repeated that would bring back to James tantalizing memories as he was falling asleep. Anything to make the agent restless, impatient, bored with his current surroundings. Anything to get him on that motorcycle and headed for an airport.

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## Chapter 15

"The current status on the case of Frederick is watch and wait. The James character is in a remote village in southern Mexico, under an assumed name."

"What's this character doing there? I thought it was supposed to be an agent. Is it on a mission?" George interrupted Harry's report.

"I don't know." was Harry's reply. "It appears Frederick doesn't either. Checking the logs, it looks like he spent some time back tracing his characters actions then quit for a bit. The back tracking seemed to stop at the point where the character receives some kind of cryptic phone call."

"So what was this phone call?"

"It looked like a confirmation for a doctor's appointment."

"Could it have been some kind of signal for starting his next mission?"

"Well the character is pretty inactive for being a spy on a mission. Maybe it is waiting for contact, but that seems unlikely. In addition Frederick's score is dropping. That shouldn't be the case for correct game play."

"What is he doing about it?"

"Frederick is trying the usual subliminal stuff to spur the character to action, but as you know, that subliminal stuff is hard to do when your playing with a sim-suit. So far

there have been no results."

"If Frederick, or his character is waiting for a contact, it may help us out. Has there been any progress in tracing down the game code? That's what this is all about you know."

"Yes I realize that." Harry responded defensively. "We know the first message was included in the instructions sent from James' home office. But those instructions came from Lee. Lee is my character, and I've reviewed the records. He knew nothing about any of this until he discovered the correlation between the two different messages. The second message somehow was inserted in the data retrieved by James while on his previous assignment. We have no idea how the code got in that second message. The ministry the data was retrieved from has proven a complete blank."

"That's all you've got?"

"Something is going on behind the scenes somehow that's not showing up on any logs." Harry paused for a minute, then added "I think we need to use Ugmon."

"The Universal Game Monitor? Isn't that a bit extreme?"

"Not in this case. It may be the only way we can find out what is going on."

"All right." George responded after a thoughtful minute. "Fill out the requisition and I'll submit it for approval. Is there anything else?"

Harry quietly let out the breath he'd been holding.

*"No, that's pretty much it."*

*"Very well, keep me informed."*

*"I will." Harry promised.*

*George watched as Harry turned and left the office. As far as the pace of the investigation was concerned, things were satisfactory. The involvement of the Universal Game Monitor might change things a bit. But what he found disquieting was the fact Frederick's character was not in Europe as planned, nor it seemed, would it likely to be there any time soon.*

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## Chapter 16

James stood gazing out the window, his hands resting on the window sill. The tropical sun had warmed the unfinished wood under his hands. His was a corner room. There was no glass in the windows. Shutters, now open, could be shut against tropical storms.

The most attractive feature, he found, was the view down the mountain. The road up the steep mountain was visible as it switched back and forth. Only occasionally did the thick jungle growth hide short stretches. The narrow road in front of the building had no guard rail on the cliff side that dropped off in front of him. Idly James wondered if the road ever washed out. Tropical vegetation clung stubbornly to the steep rocky face of the mountain. The air hung heavy and humid, only occasionally stirred by a breeze that varied the rich scent.

The view was good, but more importantly, it was hard to see this inn from down on that road. He was safe.

It had taken hours on his motorcycle to wind his way up the narrow mountain road. He'd encountered a few animal drawn carts but no motor vehicles. He somehow doubted he would find a gas station and was glad of the spare tanks he'd tied to his cycle.

At one time the mountain village was a tourist resort. But times had changed, and now it was just a quiet farming village. The small inn, snuggled against the mountain, with the half dozen rooms was almost a century out of date. The building was adobe with a tile roof. Inside the rooms the raw rough boards used for framing were visible.

When James had first arrived he'd found the peaceful setting of the village comforting. But now the inaction had begun to wear on him. He found himself becoming impatient. This being on the run stank. There was no excitement, no entertainment. In the distance a power tower poked from the vegetation carrying high voltage lines over the mountains. But the miracle of electricity was lacking in this poor community. Even if there had been a working television set available, the mountain would make reception useless. Absolutely nothing to do except watch the sun rise and set. He had come to detest the daily diet of beans and corn cakes. He'd found that, as the time for the afternoon meal arrived, his memories returned to the taste and delicious aroma of rare juicy grilled steaks, potatoes and gravy. A meal capped by strawberry cheesecake for desert. His mouth watered in memory. He found his diet of beans and tacos, day after day, boring. For the past week James had been hard pressed to curb his impatience.

He wondered what had happened. There was no question about the translation of the order.

"Break! Run! Heads down! Bury yourself deep! There is danger from the office!"

Nothing in the last mission seemed unusually hazardous. Was there something about the data he wasn't supposed to know? The whole thing had been nothing but gobbledygook. The only reason he had memorized it was because he had been ordered to. Maybe someone found something in it they didn't expect, and realizing he had the information figured the only way to protect it was to eliminate him. James had to admit this possibility worried him.

"Heads Down!"

He'd resolved to stay out of the way for a year. After that he would make the trip back to civilization. What would then follow would be a long search of the newspaper archives, reading personal advertisements at a public library. Somewhere in that stack he would find either an "all clear" or a "stay down" message.

Waiting out that year would be a challenge. He hadn't been here for long, and already he was restless. Lately he'd been plagued by dreams, things from his past he'd thought long forgotten. He began the practice of taking walks following the road up the mountain. But the walks only gave him time to think, and wonder what had happened. His activities had been so insulated from the office that he didn't see how anyone there could consider his work a threat. It must have been the data.

A possibility had occurred to him. He'd scrounged a few sheets of paper, and had carefully recorded the data he'd memorized. Afterward he'd studied the sheets, but none of it made any sense to him. Finally he'd given up the effort in frustration. It was encrypted, and without a key it was utterly useless to him. The sheets were now safely hidden behind a loose board in the wall behind the bed. His gaze wandered to that wall. He knew which board it was. There was nothing to distinguish it from its neighbors. He returned to his view out the window. All he had to do now, was find someone he could trust. His hands clenched into fists. That would be tricky. If only he knew what the score was. Who had sent him the warning? This inaction was driving him crazy. "Heads down!" he kept reminding himself. "Survival was paramount. Self control. Stay hidden." He forced himself to relax, curb his impatience and resolved to wait out the year. "Alice would love this view." The thought stole over him. James hadn't thought about Alice in

years. He sighed. He wouldn't be enjoying a woman's company for a long time. Unseeing he stared out the window.

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*Nothing was happening, James was just standing at the window, enjoying the mountain view. In frustration Frederick signaled end and stripped from his sim-suit.*

*For over a week, he'd been trying to get James to move. He was going to miss the pickup! Frederick couldn't even get his character interested in finding companionship. His efforts had been a complete waste of time.*

*Frederick considered his options. He just had to make that connection. He had tried everything he could think of. Oh James was restless all right. Who wouldn't be with all that prodding. In spite of Frederick's efforts, nothing he did could overcome James' single minded focus on self preservation.*

*Frederick was stuck with the basic makeup of his game character. It was driving him crazy. Of course, he could always take direct control. But if he did that James would end up acting so out of character that every system alarm would surely be set off. He realized he'd not considered system safeguards when he'd made his plans. He didn't know there were any such alarms, but Frederick's experience at work had turned him paranoid. Right now, he couldn't afford to be noticed. Besides, taking direct action hurt your score big time. With his pay cut at work he had to keep the score as high as possible. "Fat chance!" Frederick thought. With James staying under cover there was no way his score could improve. James was going to be out of action for a while, and there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it!*

*Frederick swore in frustration at the stubbornness of his character. He would have to rethink his strategy. Morosely he considered his savings. There was another option. It would attract some attention, but it would be more natural. He could file for another game character. There was a big fee, and it would hurt his score, but even with the fee, it was better than anything he could do with James. If he did it right, he could get his character in position for that pickup. After that, well he would worry about "afterwards" later.*

*As Frederick considered the possibility he realized he would have to take action immediately. He would need to get the application in for this month's board meeting. The board only met on the fourth Tuesday of the month, and if he missed it, he would have to wait another month. That would mean he would miss the pickup.*

*The thought spurred Frederick into action.*

*\*\*\*\*\**

## Chapter 17

The Game Board scheduled its review and approval of character assignments the fourth Tuesday of every month. The building was an old school auditorium, taken over once a month by the game board for character assignments. The building echoed hollowly with the voices of players waiting in line for their hearings. Frederick ignored the other players, sunk in thought. Frederick had managed to file his request just in time for the October session. He arrived at the game board complex early. He knew from his previous experience that the earlier you arrived, the better the selection of characters you had. With the game boards processing as many assignments as they did they had a tendency to expedite cases. If you weren't Johnny on the spot, you could find your case was canceled. Then you had to file all over again, pay another filing fee, and wait for the next month's meeting. This was one time when you had to appear in person. He had already had his blood drawn, and DNA type matched with his birth records. A single use identi-chip had been strapped to his wrist with a tamper proof band. He was glad he didn't have an identical twin. The Game Board required all identical siblings appear together anytime one was assigned a new character. It was all a sham. They didn't really care if two people swapped. They just required a sworn and freely given affidavit from both that the two were who they said they were. But appearances were important.

He finally arrived at the head of the line. He waited patiently for the next available cubicle. "Next." The voice echoed from the line of curtained cubicles. Frederick walked down the hallway formed by the temporary dividers. A bored flunky scanned his identi-chip then cut the strap from

his wrist and deposited it in the locked receptacle.

When Frederick had submitted all required forms he'd given as his reason for reassignment the desire to become familiar with a European culture, preferably in one of the newly established republics. There were three board members in attendance. They were always assigned at random, with the board speaker chosen at random. A portable screen behind the board members displayed the information that had been scanned from his identi-chip. "Frederick Jones." the speaker announced. "Case 73251161." He looked up from his desk screen at Frederick.

"Mister Jones, in your request you say you want to become more familiar with European Society. You realize of course that your current lack of familiarity will make your game play even more difficult?"

"Yes sir." Frederick answered.

"Yet you still want this reassignment?"

"Yes sir, I feel I need to broaden my background."

"Didn't your spy character," he paused as he looked at his screen. "Ah yes, James. Didn't this character, James, give you that experience?"

"Sir, that experience was always temporary." Frederick answered. "It did not give me a chance to really know the culture."

"Speaking of your previous character, your request wouldn't have anything to do with his present inactivity would it?"

*Frederick had known this question was coming.*

*"Well to be honest sir, it did influence my decision, but only in regard to timing. I have been considering a switch for some time."*

*"You realize that leaving the character in this condition will have an unusually adverse impact on your score, which by the way, is pathetic to begin with."*

*Frederick paused, as if in thought, then simply answered "Yes."*

*"Very well. Normally at this point we would ask you if you had selected a character from the published list. However you qualify for only a single character." He looked down at his desk screen. "He is a mail room clerk at the Bonn World Wide Exchange. married, twenty two years old, no children." The speaker looked up from his screen at Frederick, a concerned look on his face. "To be honest, you will have a better chance of improving your score if you stayed with your present character. Are you sure you want this new assignment?"*

*Frederick hesitated. A mail clerk! He was tempted to refused it. But he really didn't have any choice. That third piece of code was essential, and this was the only way to get it. "Yes, I will take him."*

*"The board speaker looked hard at Frederick for a minute, then turned to his two companions, and asked, "Do either of you have any questions or comments."*

*The two members who had been observing the proceedings in silence both answered "No."*

*The speaker then spoke formally. "A request by*

*Frederick Jones, player number 772-61-11953, has been placed before this board to be assigned the game character Hanz Gruen, number 193445726143." He asked the board member on his left. "Do you approve?"*

*The other answered "Yes."*

*The speaker then asked the same question of the individual on his right and received the same answer. He continued, "The specified request has been approved, and recorded and activated. Case 73251161 is closed." He then turned back to Frederick and told him.*

*"Your new character will be available the next time you connect. You have three days in which to reconsider and file an appeal. If you should appeal, any increase in your score due to play with this character will be canceled. Any loss in your score will be permanent." He signaled the clerk at the entrance. "Next case please."*

*Frederick noticed the reassignment appear on the screen behind the board members. Next to his name and ID number the words "Hanz Gruen, mail room clerk" glowed. He turned and left.*

*\*\*\*\*\**

*James woke late in the morning and lay on the uncomfortable mattress completely relaxed. He puzzled over his unusual feeling of well being, then realized what it was. There had been no disturbing dreams. Suddenly his inaction seemed the most normal thing in the world. The agency can go hang he thought as he rolled over and drifted back into a comfortable sleep.*

*\*\*\*\*\**

## Chapter 18

Harry jacked in and pulled up a maintenance menu. There were a number of sub-menus he had to wade through before finding the one he wanted. It was the form for authorization of automated character surveillance. It was a seldom used form. Use of Ugmon to monitor characters was strongly discouraged. That was one reason for the paperwork. Like most game monitors, Harry hated paperwork. He'd spent two days creating the report he would use to justify his request. He entered Frederick's name and player ID, then hit search to pull up the rest of the data he would need for the form. He watched as the fields filled in then scrolled down to the block marked justification. He was just about to paste in his report when the character name registered. It was not James. The words Hanz Gruen hung in front of his eyes. It only took a few minutes to find out Frederick had changed characters. He signaled George.

"We won't be needing that surveillance on James were Harry's first words, as George's face faded in.

"Why not?"

"Frederick filed for a new character. James is now inactive."

"A new character?"

"Hanz Gruen, a mail clerk in Germany. I'll have to start all over on that monitoring request."

"All right, but make sure you have all your ducks lined up before you submit it. I hate having requests reject-

ed, it makes me look bad."

George's face faded. Harry swore to himself. It had been a lot of work making the case for James. At least there he had two documented incidents of game code transfer. Now he was going to have to start from scratch. Maybe if he got lucky, he could use the stuff he'd already collected. But he would need to prove the activities of the old character was relevant to Frederick's current game play. He put the form he'd started, and the report in safe storage, then began researching the new character.

After cutting the connection, George sat for a minute lost in thought. What was his pigeon up to? With a new character involved, he would have to be careful, or things could get messy.

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## Chapter 19

General Ahban threw the stick hard over and his Mig screamed in a bank as he lined up his target. Piece of cake he thought as he came in on a strafing run ahead of the line of tanks. The exploding shells tore up the ground. Suddenly he heard the warning screech of the lock on alarm. He jiggled sharply and fired chaff then violently turned his craft.

The first missile was decoyed into the chaff, not the second.

\*\*\*\*\*

*There was a flare of pain and the emergency cutouts disconnected Frank Harrison the seventeenth. The aftermath of the death trauma coursed through Frank's nerves, leaving him shaky. It must have been at least a half hour he lay on the game couch, before he even tried to move. He was cursing himself the whole time, but quietly. He knew better, from bitter past experience, than to try to move, or even say anything aloud. Finally he slowly reached for the jack cords, and carefully pulled them out. He tried to sit up, and promptly put his head back as a wave of nausea hit him. He lay quietly until it passed, then, figuring he might as well get it over with, bolted for the bathroom. He made it to the commode before the nausea hit him again. When he'd finished retching, he stripped. He hit the hidden override on the shower timer, and turned it up as hot as he could stand it. For a long time, he just stood there letting the hot spray wash over him. Finally he shut it off, dried himself, and pulled on a clean outfit. Gingerly he picked up the soiled cloths and dropped them down the trash chute. He got out his cleaning supplies and proceeded to work on the couch. This was the sixth time. You would have*

*thought he would be used to it by now. But it still hit him hard. As he worked, he reflected on his father's possible reaction. He was in for it now.*

*Frank Harrison the sixteenth looked up as his son entered the room. "Not again!" he thought. No word had been spoken, but there was something about his son's expression the older man recognized.*

*"Call you back later Henry, something's come up." Frank spoke to the empty air, and ended his call. He looked at his son and asked "What's up?" Maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought.*

*"Well I was thinking of changing character's."*

*"Look, don't pussy foot around!" He was suddenly irritated by his son's wishy washy approach. His voice rose in volume. "If your character's dead, say so. What happened this time?"*

*"I got shot down." was the brief answer.*

*"Ground or air attack?"*

*"Air to air."*

*His father stared at him a minute. "So how many of their aircraft did you get?"*

*"None, I was..."*

*"None? What the heck were you doing?"*

*"It was a ground attack mission. I was on a strafing run."*

"Where was your air cover?"

"We didn't have any."

"Why not?"

"We were told there would be no air threat."

"Who told you this?"

"Our intelligence group."

"You believed them?"

So far the conversation had been an interrogation, and the younger man still felt miserable. "Hey, they weren't even supposed to have that equipment. How was I supposed to know there were any enemy aircraft in the area? It wasn't my fault." He hated facing his father like this. He always found he had to defend himself for things he couldn't control. He found this true again.

"A military commander," began the father, "and that is what you were, is supposed to be, must be prepared for the unexpected. It most definitely was your fault. It was your fault you took intelligence reports at face value. It was your fault you had no independent confirmation. It was your fault you got yourself killed. It was your fault the mission failed, and it was your fault you lead six of your team into a trap!" the older man hammered the points home.

"How was I supposed to know?"

"You were a general for Pete's sake. Every general in that region has his own private spy network. Where was

yours?"

"I didn't know I was supposed to have one."

"Didn't know? Bah! You've been playing this game long enough to know how it's done. A disgrace, that's what you are. A disgrace to the family. We designed this game. We built this game. Every interface device contains Harrison Enterprise chips. There hasn't been a Harrison who hasn't aced this game! Until you that is. I've had it. My years of interceding with the game board are at an end. Face them yourself. It's time you experienced the consequences of your actions."

Frank Harrison the seventeenth stood looking at his father, who glared up at him from where he sat. He had mixed emotions, and tried to decide what to say. He was about to answer his father when two more words were barked at him.

"Get Out!"

That was it. Nothing he could say would make any difference. Quietly he turned and left the room. It stung. Every time this happened, he couldn't help feeling like a little boy. His father acted as if he didn't care if his character died. That wasn't true. He'd tried playing the game by the rules, but something always happened. How could his father be that way? His father had used the same character for what was it, fifty years? He didn't know what it was like having a character die. There'd been no sign of sympathy. He was miserable, but he should have known that was the way it was going to be. The Harrisons always won. It was expected of them. He'd been told it over and over again since before he was jacked. But he always had trouble with the game. His reactions always seemed a little slow. It was

difficult achieving a good mesh between his ego with that of the game character. They never seemed to do exactly what he wanted. It was always off, some how not quite right.

He'd complained that when he was jacked, something was wrong. They had the doctors check him, several times in fact. They always assured everyone that there was nothing wrong. They insisted he should have no trouble with his game play if he would only try. "It's all in your head kid." they would tell him, then laugh at their senseless joke. Yeah, right! Of course it was all in the head! That was the purpose of jacking. He was in his late teens when the second death occurred. By then he had given up on the doctors. At that point he'd concluded they'd botched the operation, and were lying to protect themselves. All he would have to do was prove it! And he had thought he'd known how to get that proof. At that time he found himself in the perfect position. He'd been at the age when it was reasonable for him to take an interest in the family business. Under that pretense, Frank Harrison the seventeenth had dug through the archives of Harrison Enterprises.

Yes, Frank reflected, at least one thing his father had said was true. There wasn't a game interface that didn't have Harrison Enterprise chips. During his research he'd discovered it was one of his ancestors who put together the team that developed the first game interface chips. The company used to make military communications chips. When the military contracts dried up they had to find some other use for all that manufacturing capacity. The military mind set that kept everything secret prevailed. The designs for the new game chips had been obfuscated to make reverse engineering difficult if impossible. Of course once the game had become recognized world wide, the interface chips, with the unique design to provide access to the game, were sold, at very reasonable cost to virtually every man,

woman and child in the world. The company had even gone so far as to develop a bottom of the line unit, to be distributed throughout developing countries, with the help of a government dole, for free. It hadn't mattered how poor you were, you could always take your mind off your problems by playing the game. The company had lost a bundle on the cheap sets, but it had been a shrewd move. Nothing like giving away something for free to capture market share. No one would stick with minimal access if they could upgrade at all. The simple unit was nearly indestructible, and had to be turned in when you upgraded. In five years Harrison Enterprises had recovered the initial investment, and made money hand over fist. Distribution had continued to expand. The company had a lock on the product. There had been a little judicious palm greasing, a few laws were passed, and competition evaporated. After all, the company had provided all those units for free distribution as a public service. Because of the secrecy used during chip development, there was no fear of design piracy. The unit could be reversed engineered, but a cost that would bankrupt anyone trying. All this young Frank had discovered while trying to find out what could have gone wrong with his jacking operation.

In the end his efforts had proved fruitless. He was unable to uncover anything that would explain the problems he had with the game. But in an abandoned lab, near one of the automated plants, he did discover some old engineering drawings. That was when he'd decided that if he couldn't solve the problem one way, he would find another. Eventually he'd found George and cut his deal. Well, now it was time to collect on that old debt. Frank left the house and headed into the old side of town where The Champions had been squeezed into a basement corner.

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## Chapter 20

Once again, seated at a table at the Champions, Frederick donned goggles and gloves. A stock car race he noticed. He placed a bet, then spoke. "I've got a new character."

"A new character?" George feigned surprise. "Who is it."

"The name is Hanz Gruen, He's a mail room clerk at the Bonn World Wide Exchange."

"A mail room clerk? Now why on earth would you want to do that? Seems to me your old character would be a lot more flexible."

"I don't know, something happened. He ran away to some peasant village and I couldn't get him to do anything."

"But a new character, that seems a bit extreme." George commented.

"Extreme? Ha! I don't know about you, but I don't want to spend my game time watching sunsets. I still don't know how I'm going to make the pickup. How do I get my stuff?"

"Well, let's see. What is this character's name?"

"Hanz Gruen." Frederick answered.

The game coder pulled up a screen for betting on character play and searched for Hanz's name. When it was-

n't there he pulled up a screen for minor characters. Again the name was missing. Finally under a screen for trivial characters he found it. Frederick looked on in silence. The game coder's goggled face turned to Frederick. "You requested this assignment?"

"It's all I could get." Frederick mumbled. "Look, I just need that program."

"Pretty badly too, I guess. Ok, let me think. Hmm, a mail room clerk. Well, since he handles a lot of mail, why don't I just mail it to the clerk?"

"You want to mail it to me?"

"Sure, why not? Really, game mail is pretty anonymous. You can even have your clerk set up a new mail slot, say for a mister Schultz. I'll have the coder set up a birth announcement in the in the paper, a new baby born to Schultz when the code is ready. Then you mail the announcement to mister Grisold Braun when you are set up to receive it. Nothing could be simpler."

"You're not the coder?" Frederick asked in surprise.

"Look, I told you before, I just arrange things for you. I don't code."

"But I thought... Never mind." Frederick interrupted himself. "I'll have Hanz look for the announcement."

"Fine!" George responded, "Then we're all set."

They spent a half hour or so gambling after that for appearance sake, talking little. They had switched to horse races. Frederick left before the final race of the day.

*Idly George placed a bet on number three. He watched as the horses ran their circle. The bet was lost. George shut down and removed his goggles. He signaled for another beer.*

*He was concerned about Frederick. He wondered what was going on. He was sure the little bureaucrat was planning something, but what? The code he'd asked for was highly irregular and could be dangerous. There was no way it was going to help his game play, so that wasn't the object. George was sure that when he did find out what the object was, he would get one heck of a bust out of it. The beer arrived and George took a swallow of the watery brew without tasting it. Yes the bust! George relished the image this brought up. With a bust like this on his record he could afford to retire early, and in style too! As his thoughts wandered, he realized there was something else about the situation that was puzzling him.*

*Why hadn't Frederick been able to get anywhere with his old character. It was strange that he hadn't been able to break James free of the character's inactivity. The problem had to be the limitations of using a sim-suit. George couldn't imagine what it must be like, trying to play in a sim-suit. He'd never tried it himself. He shuddered at the thought of putting on something that would cling to every part of his body. Give me a good clean jack any time he thought. A good clean jack, now that's how you control your character. He didn't consider the aversion many people felt at the thought of electrodes threaded through the very essence of your being, filling the mind with unnatural, artificial sensations.*

*The game coder's reflections were interrupted as another figure approached his table. There was a serious look*

*on the face. He watched as the other sat down and put on the three D goggles.*

*\*\*\*\*\**

## Chapter 21

"Problems? asked George as he re-donned his own goggles.

Frank sat in silence for a while, then finally said. "I need to collect."

"So, it's finally come to that. What's the situation?"

"Simply put, I'm on my own."

"Cut off huh?"

"Yep."

"Do you still have access?"

"Yeah, that hasn't changed. No one goes down there. It's all automated. No one even thinks about it any more. I doubt anyone on the corporate board even knows where it is."

"How can they run the place if they don't know where it is?"

"They don't need to know where it is. Once every three months they meet to look at the reports. They'll tell each other how they are doing a great job and adjourn. It's really just an excuse for a fancy meal. As long as the credits accumulate they are happy. They just had the last meeting. It will be almost three months before the next."

The game coder relaxed. "So what happened?"

"My character got killed again."

"Again? What's that make it, five?"

"Six." Frank answered shortly. "And my father has informed me this time I'm on my own with the game board."

"On your own? So your father doesn't show up with you when it convenes. I don't see how that's any big deal. It's not the first time you've been there."

Frank's goggles faced the game coder then returned to the race track. Another race was about to begin. He placed a bet, then spoke. "No, it's not the first time, but this time it's for real."

"For real?"

"Yes. You see, the name of Harrison has pull, a lot of pull."

"Pull? What do you mean? Pull with the board? How? The board is completely impartial. Not even Prime can get any favoritism with the board. It is completely independent."

"Politically independent, yes. It's in the contract that made the game public. It says 'Harrison Enterprises shall maintain independent game boards for the purpose of impartially assigning game characters to players.'" Frank quoted from memory. "Part C paragraph 121, line 3. Simply put, Harrison Enterprises runs the game boards."

"Oh, I hadn't realized that."

George had weaseled himself into a position of power as he had worked his way up in the game monitor organization. Now it hit him that his companion was allied with power that dwarfed his. Was allied, he reminded himself, now that Frank was cut off.

"It's not discussed much." Frank continued. "After all, most Harrisons are pretty good on their own, and don't care much what the game boards do. Most of them only see the game board for their initial assignment, then never again. You can't say there has been undue influence."

"But?" prompted the coder.

"Well, what do you think? My general got shot out of the sky. How do you think I got a general after five deaths. This time, I'll be lucky to get a street sweeper."

"I see." George took a moment to consider the situation. There might be a way to get Frank back in the good graces of his family. "What's your score now?" he asked.

"Look." Frank answered. He shut down the race and entered his personal code, then displayed his scoring history and a summary.

"Hmm, no, it's not good at all. But, I've an idea." He pulled up another score. "This ought to do."

"What is it?"

"Someone's score."

"Yeah, but who's. This guy is terrible, a lot worse than mine."

"Oh yes, it's bad, but it doesn't matter who's it was. The guy dropped this character and got a different one assigned. However this character, now that's another story. It's a spy, and has a lot of potential. It hasn't really been played."

"And?"

"Well this spy just happens to work for a character I use on occasion. We ought to be able to get this guy back in action without much trouble."

"Back in action?"

"Seems the player managed to get the character spooked about something. It went into hiding. Some remote village in Southern Mexico. That's why the score's so low. The player tried to get him moving, but couldn't do it. Sim-suit players can't quite get the response you need sometimes, if you know what I mean. That's why he filed for a new character."

"That's strange. I mean even playing this guy where he is doesn't hurt the score the way filing does. Heck, I wouldn't be looking if that stupid general hadn't got himself killed."

"Who can figure? Anyway the point is, if you are interested, I can put this character on investigative hold. It won't be too much to keep it there for a month."

"A month?" Frank looked at George startled. "That's right, the game board met met this week, didn't they?"

"Yeah, but it's really no problem. I will simply ar-

range for the character to be released on the Monday afternoon before the meeting. They publish an addendum with the last minute additions, but most people don't look at that. Usually they just use the list of available characters that's published over the previous weekend."

"All right." Frank answered. "You're sure he can be got back into real play?"

"Not a problem. All you'll have to do is prompt him a little. Besides, it might impress your family if you take an apparent loser like this and turn him into something."

Frank was quiet for a bit, the sound of his father's scorn still fresh in his memory. "You know, I'm getting awfully tired of trying to live up to family expectations." He paused, then added, "But I guess it wouldn't hurt. O.K. Thanks." Frank removed his goggles. "See you around."

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Ugmon was alerted when James' score was pulled up. The images through the goggles allowed the Universal Game Monitor to interpret both sides of the discussion at The Champions. The opportunity that presented itself fit in nicely with developing plans.

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## Chapter 22

*Frederick wanted to be ready for the pickup and was anxious to get started with his new character. He didn't know German, so even though it hurt his score, he engaged the game translator.*

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"So, are you going to apply for that opening in sales?"

Hanz Gruen winced at his wife's question. "Of course," he answered.

"Make sure you do," he was told. "I don't want to be stuck in this dump forever."

"I know you don't dear. I'll get a break soon, I can feel it."

"You gotta make your own breaks," was his wife's rejoinder.

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*Frederick listened as Hanz quickly said his goodbyes and perfunctorily kissed his wife. His sim-suit barely registered the touch of the lips.*

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The air was filled with a heavy mist of droplets that collected on collars and dripped down unprotected necks.

Hanz shivered and turned up his collar against the late October chill. The sound of water dripping accompanied him as he walked the three blocks to the bus stop. It would be another hour before the sun would rise and break through the gray overcast. The wait at the stop was not long. Even so, it was a relief to board the bus when it pulled up.

It was also a relief to be on his way to work. He loved his wife he supposed, but at times she was very domineering. She had plans for him, and did not expect him to remain in the mail room for long. But right now, he enjoyed the work. It was not very demanding, and allowed him to give his mind free reign. Sometimes, as he was sorting the mail, he would come across envelopes with interesting looking return addresses, and he would speculate on the contents, imagining that he was holding a contract for a sale, possibly worth millions of marks, though he knew that such probably would come by courier, not common mail, but one never knew. As long as the envelope was sealed, he was free to speculate. Other times, there would be mail, such as trade magazines for departed employees, he was supposed to discard. Sorting through this he would often put aside interesting pieces to read during his break before tossing them. You never knew what you might learn.

He reported to work as usual, then went about his job. The day was normal enough until his break. He headed for the break room, the stack of discarded mail he'd scavenged in his hand.

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*Frederick knew taking direct control of his character would mess up his score even more, but time was slipping away. Things needed to start happening now!*

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Instead of picking up the mail he'd put aside to read, for some reason he picked up the day's news paper someone had left lying on the table. And then, rather than turn to the business section, normally his first pick when reading the paper, he turned to the boring vital statistics. Under births he felt his eyes drawn to the announcement of the birth of baby Schultz.

He watched in fascination as his hands, seemingly of their own will, tore out the birth announcement, folded it and put it in his pocket.

He sat stunned for a minute, then looked around. The half dozen others in the room seemed to have noticed nothing. But why should they? He looked at his hands, opening and closing them. They seemed to be working normally. He started to reach for the clipping in his pocket, then stopped.

He quickly finished his coffee and returned to work his mind in a whirl. As the day progressed, he thoughts gradually calmed down. Later that day he was verifying addresses on some of the packages he was sending. He reached up and pulled from the shelf one of the international phone books and looked up the address of a Grisold Braun in the Ukraine and neatly typed the address on an empty envelope. He slipped the torn piece of news paper in the envelope and sealed it, adding it to the pile of mail he was working on. Hanz continued his work, but what he really wanted to do was sit down, maybe report sick and go home. He continued working. It seemed that as long as he continued to do what he normally did, he was all right, but if he tried to turn and leave he couldn't. Hanz passed the rest of the day in a sort of haze, watching his body work, but not

seeming to control it. The next and last incident that day was when he was updating the mail slots.

Periodically as new employees were added or left they would need to sort the mail slots. He was doing the Esses when he added the name Schultz.

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*Frederick relaxed. He could afford to leave Hanz alone for a little while to recover. It would be a few days before there would be a response to the letter.*

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## Chapter 23

George sat, reviewing the weekly activity summaries from the dozen game monitors under him. He arrived at Harry's report and read.

Subject Frederick Jefferson requested a new game character. Subject was assigned Hanz Gruen, a mail room clerk of the Bonn World Wide exchange. Board review records show subject was warned his score could suffer inordinately with this particular assignment due to cultural incompatibilities. Subject accepted new character assignment on Tuesday, 28 October. Currently, security guards at the Bonn World Wide exchanger are being used to monitor the new character. Friday, 29 October, was the first day of game play with the new character. Play was forced and heavy handed. Game character Hanz showed symptoms of trauma. Believe player was using direct control. Subjects game score has continued to drop.

George summoned Harry to his office.

"I've been reading your report." he began as Harry entered his office, not waiting for the other to seat himself. "Are you sure he was using direct control? Why would he do that?"

"I'm pretty sure that's what he was doing." Harry answered. As for why, I think it has to do with a letter he mailed." Harry had headed straight for the wall console as he entered the room. He had a data chip in his hand and inserted it in the display unit. In this recording you will see the characters activities through the eyes of the security guard I was using." A console was visible where some black

and white monitors were mounted. The attention seemed focused on the upper left monitor, but as the viewpoint shifted occasionally to the other monitors, you caught flickering images as they cycled through various camera locations. The upper left monitor was the only one that didn't change cameras.

George noticed it and asked, "What's the significance of that upper left screen?"

"I kind of gave the guy a feeling that something might be going on in the mail room." Harry answered. "It wasn't anything specific."

They could see people moving around, sorting mail, packing, weighing and stamping boxes. A hand reached out and touched some controls below an adjacent screen. Now there were two views of the room, from different angles. The first along the length of the room, the second was from above a work surface. They were looking down on the top of an unkempt head of hair. They could see the man beneath the hair was wearing coveralls, but the viewpoint revealed little else. The controls beneath the monitor were manipulated again and the image zoomed in on an envelope being addressed.

"Well did you catch that?" Harry asked George. He stopped the playback, ran it back a few seconds, then froze the image. The envelope addressed to Grisold Braun, was clearly visible, and the address easy to read.

"Yes, and you've tracked this character down, found out who is playing him?"

"Yes I did." Harry answered George's question. "I have verified that the character does exist. It is old, not

really much to the character. The player isn't all that much either. I think this is a decoy, something to distract us from the real target."

"And that target is?"

"Haven't the faintest idea. This guy is very hard to figure. He doesn't care about his score. Took direct control to mail that notice and set up the mail slot. But there's no gain. He gets nothing for this."

"Are you sure about that?"

"I'm not sure about anything. Look, this Exchange where his character works has video cameras monitoring the mail room. There are three guards who watch the monitors. I borrowed this one today. But I can't use him on a full time basis without a formal requisition. I want to requisition all three of the security guards to watch this character."

"Three security guards? Is this really necessary?" George asked.

"I need to use those guards!" Harry insisted. "They know the habits for this guy Hanz. They've been watching him, off and on, ever since he started there. They've been trained to watch people. They are familiar with everyone's work habits. If anything unusual happens, they'll notice it immediately. I didn't have to do anything to get this guard to zoom in on that envelope. He caught it on his own."

"And they'll do what?" George queried.

"Nothing if I can help it." Harry answered. "That's another reason I need them. If they do see something interesting, I'll need to be on the spot to dampen that inter-

est. For example I was able to convince this guard that it was probably only one friend letting another one know about a mutual acquaintance's blessed event."

"I see what you mean." George relented. "Very well, I'll sign the requisition."

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## Chapter 24

"Dear" Hanz started tentatively. He paused, looking for the correct words. He had been dreading going back to work. He'd spent the weekend worrying about what he had come to think of as his 'episode'. "I think I might be coming down with something."

His wife paused at the sink, where she'd been cleaning up after breakfast. "What's the matter?" she asked. "You think you're getting sick? You're not getting sick are you? What do you mean, coming down with something?"

"Well, Friday at work. It's hard to explain. I felt really strange."

"Strange? What do you mean strange?" Then Hanz's wife looked hard at him. She stepped back. "You look ok to me. Do you feel ok now?"

"I guess so." Hanz was forced to admit. "I just thought maybe I'd better call in sick, just in case I'm coming down with something."

"Lazy is what you are. Heavens knows where you'd be if you didn't have me to look after you. Look, you'll never get that sales position if you skip work. You did apply for the position the way I told you to didn't you? Don't forget you get a bonus if you don't use your sick days. We can use that bonus you know. It's not easy putting decent meals on the table with what you bring home. At least you could take me out for a decent meal with that money. No, don't you jeopardize that bonus. You don't want to stay home and aggravate me do you? You better hurry, or you'll miss your

bus and be late."

"Ok. Ok. I guess it's not that bad." Hanz surrendered before the onslaught. Anything to cut short the motivational flood his wife felt necessary. Maybe he could make it through the day. But on the way to work, he couldn't help remembering the day of his episode, the experience of watching his hands move of their own volition. He wondered who Grisold Braun was or what he would think, receiving the birth announcement of baby Schultz.

Thinking back, it seemed to him that it was almost a trance like state he had been in for most of the day. Maybe someone had put some sort of psychedelic drug in his coffee as a joke.

He couldn't think who it might be. He kept pretty much to himself, and didn't know the others all that well. He would watch his coffee during his breaks, and maybe leave the office and go out to lunch, so someone couldn't slip anything in his lunch while he was working. His wife would complain about the expense. But he worked hard he thought, and it was his money. He deserved a little something.

Hanz watched himself carefully as the day progressed, pausing often, just to see if he could. As far as he could tell everything was normal.

He wondered about talking to a doctor. He knew his wife would complain about the expense. What good would that do anyway? What could a doctor do? Put him in a mental hospital? Fat lot of good that would do.

The long day passed without incident.

The week dragged by, and as things remained normal gradually Hanz relaxed.

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On Thursday of the following week, while Hanz was sorting the incoming mail, he noticed the envelop in Schultz's mail slot. The slot was still there, labeled with Schultz's name. Hanz didn't remember putting the envelope in the slot. Probably it had been put there by one of the other clerks. He stared at it for a minute, his eyes riveted on the white paper. Then he wrenched his gaze away and forced himself back to his sorting. Nothing unusual happened. It was as if he knew something would happen, but when? His gaze kept returning to the mail slot.

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*As the days had passed, Harry had become used to his new schedule. The change in time zones meant he arrived at the office hours earlier than normal. From the first day, any time Frederick ran a session, Hanz was monitored. The first day of the character switch had been educational. Harry watched through the eyes of the security guard. He remembered watching Hanz slip the newspaper scrap in the envelope and mailing it.*

*Harry had dutifully made his report to George. Since then things had been quiet.*

*Today, the security guard's attention seemed drawn to Hanz. As Harry watched through the guard's eyes, it seemed to him that there was something about Hanz attitude today that seemed out of place, and the guard had picked up on it. Harry couldn't figure out what was agitating the clerk. It's player, Frederick, was not on line. In fact, it*

*seemed the player had lost interest in the game, logging on once a day, observing for a half hour or so, then disconnecting. Harry monitored the guard, who in turn watched his video monitors.*

*It was while the clerk was on his lunch break that Harry received the signal that Frederick was now on line, once again only in observation mode. He prompted the guard to check the break room monitors. But the character was no where in sight. Harry remembered it had gotten in the habit of leaving the building for lunch. Harry berated himself for not arranging some way of checking up on the clerk.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Frederick suited up. It had been almost two weeks, he should have some response by now. He had suited up daily to keep up appearances, but he was really interested in one thing, and one thing only. He watched as Hanz finished his lunch. He seemed uneasy, but Frederick didn't see why. He watched as Hanz returned to work. The first thing he saw as Hanz entered the room was the mail slot. Hanz gaze seemed to be pulled to it, though Frederick was in a watch only mode. It was here!*

\*\*\*\*\*

Hanz finished up the day's work. Putting on his coat, he prepared to leave. The envelope was still sitting tauntingly in the mail slot. He looked around, everyone else had left. He headed for the door. As he walked past the shelves of mail boxes, his hand reached out and plucked the envelope and, with a quick movement, slid it in an inside coat pocket. He continued out the door. Hanz tried to stop and turn around, but his steps carried him through the lobby,

past the security guard and out the building. He wanted to scream, turn around, anything, but his voice was frozen and he kept walking.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 25

Harry's viewpoint was fixed on the video monitor, and it seemed that Hanz's walk was awkward, mechanical. It was this strange posture that had attracted the security guard's attention. A hand reached out and flipped a switch. Another monitor showed a hallway with the figure of Hanz walking toward the camera. Suddenly alarmed, Harry attempted to distract the guard, got him thinking about what a long day it had been. He didn't want to do anything to stretch it any further did he? Besides, it was probably just weariness at the end of a long day that afflicted the mail clerk. Just then the security guard's relief walked in.

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"Anything happening?"

The guard turned his attention to the interrupting voice.

"Tired, so tired, long day, the wife is waiting for you at home." Harry projected.

The security guard hesitated, glancing at the screen. The hallway was now empty. "Nah, quiet day." Then he handed a clipboard to the new man. "Here are the daily orders he said. Just the usual."

The new man took the clip board, signed his name then hung it back on the wall hook. "Well, I've got the watch, you're free to go."

"Thanks." was the answer.

\*\*\*\*\*

Harry stayed with the guard, continuing to project thoughts of the cheerful welcome he would have when he got home. After the guard had left the building he disconnected, reasonably certain he had allayed any suspicions.

Harry remained jacked. The sensation of the worn lumpy couch beneath his back barely registering on his consciousness as considered what he'd seen during the session. Coming to a decision, Harry pulled up the last half hour of the day for review. The motion had been so quick and smooth he wasn't even sure he'd seen it the first time. He played it several times before he caught the flicker of hand motion. Harry frowned in thought. Where had that envelope come from anyway? He back tracked a bit and looked carefully at the image of the mail room as seen on the small monitor.

It was hard to see the mail slots. The camera had been positioned to show the people in the room and the mail slots were at an extreme angle. But there was a bit of white showing from one slot. That same bit of white was missing after Hanz walked past it. Now Harry knew where to look.

He started at the beginning of the day's session, and began the playback all over again. There, the guard was looking at the video screen. He froze the view and looked at it carefully. No tell tale bit of white could be seen. So whatever it was, had to have arrived today.

He continued the playback. The guard's attention was distracted as the door opened behind him. Another guard walked in with a couple cups of coffee. The two security guards talked for a few minutes then the one turned

back to the monitor console, his gaze quickly scanning the multiple screens. Harry froze the image again. Because the guard was not focusing on the monitor, the image was not very clear. But it looked like there was a spot of white that hadn't been there previously. Harry checked the time mark. Hanz had not yet arrived at work. Harry continued the playback. He was rewarded a minute later with a clear image of the video screen. It was still hard to see the mail slot on the screen, but the the white tip of the envelope was showing.

So, Harry thought, Frederick is taking direct control again. Something in that envelope must be important to him. Could it contain more game code? At that thought, Harry felt a chilling sensation. Not only did he need to find out what was in the envelope, but he needed somehow to get control of it. You couldn't afford to let stuff like that remain in the game.

He paused as a thought occurred to him, then he smiled to himself. Why not?. Instead of linking to a character, he pulled up a manual system link. The image of a terminal screen floated before him. It took a little experimentation, but he soon had the protocol for the International Intelligence Agency computer working. He then logged on using Lee's access codes.

In a way, Harry thought, this made things simple and straight forward and since he controlled Lee, no one would suspect anything.

The IIA had procedures in place for sending untraceable messages. Acting with Lee's authority, Harry arranged for a code five message to be sent to Hanz.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Hanz,

We believe an envelope was incorrectly addressed to a Mr. Schultz at your office. We would be most appreciative, and it would be in the best interests of both you and your country, if you could please forward that envelope in the stamped pre-addressed envelope we have included for your convenience. We assure you, if you can do this for us, that the matter will be completely closed. We would dreadfully regret it if we needed to take any further action such as informing your authorities of this little mishap.

Jeffrey J. Jones

Association for World Peace

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The message was sent via overnight express.

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## Chapter 26

Hanz was shivering and sweating as he waited for the bus.

He'd never done anything like this. It was stealing! If he were discovered, he could be fired.

He waited nervously for the bus, expecting the guard to come running from the building at any minute and have him arrested.

The bus arrived. As he boarded, he found it crowded. Hanz saw he would have to stand for the ride.

"Are you all right? You don't look too well."

The stranger's voice intruded into Hanz's awareness. "Uh, I'm fine." He answered.

"Are you sure? Here, have my seat." The stranger stood up.

Hanz looked around. There were several pairs of eyes on him. He sat quickly. Anything to escape their scrutiny.

"Thanks, I guess I am feeling a little faint." In fact he was grateful to be off his feet.

"Put your head between your legs." another offered helpfully.

Hanz did as instructed. He stayed that way for several minutes, then sat back.

"Thanks again." he said to the good Samaritan.

"Think nothing of it." the other answered.

The rest of the ride passed in silence. Hanz managed the walk to the apartment from the bus stop, his steps were not quite so shaky. He got home and hung up his coat. He deliberately ignored the envelope in the inside coat pocket.

He was distracted during dinner and had trouble concentrating on his wife's daily litany of complaints. She kept asking him why he wasn't listening, and finally he said he thought he was coming down with the flu.

"No, you don't look too well." She admitted. "Maybe you should get some rest. Don't worry about the dishes, I'll take care of them."

Her uncharacteristic concern caught Hanz by surprise. "Thanks, maybe I should." He answered.

He left the table, his meal hardly touched. Once in the bedroom, the door closed, he stripped and climbed between the sheets.

He managed to doze off, but real sleep wouldn't come. Occasionally he heard his wife's steps approach the bedroom. He had no desire to engage in conversation and did the best impression of a possum that he could. Finally she came to bed.

Even after her regular breathing told him she was asleep, he could not get to sleep himself. Questions kept flowing through his mind. What was the significance of the envelop? Why had he felt compelled to take it? What was

in it?

Finally he gave in to the nagging questions and quietly slipped from between the sheets. He wrapped himself in his robe to ward off the slight chill. In the front room he turned on a low wattage reading lamp. Slipping the envelope from his coat he sat down next to the lamp to see what it was that was disturbing his life.

There was no return address. It was simply addressed to Herr Schultz at the Bonn World Wide Exchange. He slit open the envelope and pulled out five pages of randomly typed characters.

As soon as he looked at the first page, he found himself staring at the sheets, and could do nothing else. He carefully read every single character in that piece of nonsense. He could not take his eyes from the pages he held. He had to scan and understand every character, though there wasn't even the semblance of a word here and there to break the monotony. He couldn't look away!

He broke out in a cold sweat. It was happening again. As much as he struggled, he couldn't pull his eyes from the sheets. Finally he finished the last page.

As suddenly as it had possessed him, he felt the compulsion vanish. His head jerked as he pulled his eyes from the paper. He closed them, welcoming the darkness, and put his head back in the chair. Slowly he opened his eyes and looked around. Everything in the room seemed normal, and that was the scary part. Things were normal, but when would the craziness strike him again?

The ticking of the mantel clock, a family heirloom of his wife's, was loud in the otherwise silent apartment. He

looked at the clock. It was after two thirty in the morning. He heard the furnace burner kick in, and a minute later it's blower started up. He felt the warm air from the baseboard vent next to the chair. He sat, wondering what the heck he should do.

Cautiously he looked at the pages in his hands. He felt nothing! They were just pieces of paper covered with gobbledygook. They meant nothing to him, held no fascination. What should he do with them?

He felt like balling them up and tossing them. But what if they came looking for them? They? Who were they? Someone from work? He had no idea.

He started to refold the pages and found his hands shaking. He put the cryptic pages back in the envelope and returned the envelope to his coat pocket. He still wasn't sure what he was going to do. He would have to think about it.

His mind was spinning, and he still had the shakes. He shucked his robe, leaving the garment in a untidy pile by the side of the bed. He was careful not to disturb his wife as he climbed between the sheets. He lay on his side, and pulled the covers tightly around himself in an a futile quest for warmth. He thought he would have trouble getting to sleep, but exhaustion overtook him. He was unconscious until the alarm went off.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Frederick signaled END, STOP RECORDING, SAVE, and stripped from his sim-suit. At Last! he thought. It was clear to him now that he had been stuck with a real loser. It had been a real effort forcing his game character to look*

at every character and symbol on each and every page, but it had been necessary.

He was half way there. Now he would have to figure out some other way to get the rest of the stuff he needed. Might as well get rid of this character. He thought. He'd had to force all the activity, and there had been no real game play. He obviously couldn't continue using Hanz the way he was. Heck the character was probably already ruined.

He wondered if he could get James back. But the reality was that guy was out of action, and that wouldn't do any good either. He would have to give some real thought to his next step.

Frederick sorted through the session and extracted the third piece of code he would need. Carefully he put the chip with the other two.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Chapter 27**

The envelope was still in his coat pocket when Hanz arrived at work Friday morning. He thought he would just slip the envelope back into it's slot when no one was looking. Then he notice the letter in his own mailbox.

Hanz seldom received mail at work. He read the letter from Jeffrey Jones. There was also a hundred mark note with the letter.

He felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. He quickly glanced around. No one else was in the mail room at the moment. He looked at the mail slots against the wall. He picked out the names of some of the other mail room clerks. He saw no similar envelope in any of the other slots. A couple still had mail in the boxes, indicating the owners had not picked up their mail.

So why had this letter been addressed to him? How would anyone know that Hanz had the Schultz envelope? Was he being watched? At that point he remembered the cameras. He glanced up at one of the mounted units, then quickly away. Was this a test? If he did as requested, would he be admitting his guilt?

He looked at the address on the enclosed return envelope. It was in the United States.

He pulled the company directory from the shelf, and looked up the addresses for the U.S. offices. There were none in the state listed for the address of the Association for World Peace.

He looked again at the letter from the association.

His eyes were drawn to the words "completely closed".

He wished that the whole episode was completely closed. His decision was made.

He went over to the mail slots, positioning himself so that he was directly in front of the Schultz mail slot. He pulled the envelope from his coat pocket and slid it into the Schultz slot then stepped back a bit, and pulled the envelope from the slot, looked at it, then slipped it into a larger one addressed to the Association for World Peace. Sealing it, he dropped it in the bin for outgoing mail.

Good riddance! He thought. The letter he shredded, and the hundred mark note slipped into his pocket.

He pulled the name Schultz from the mail slot. He knew no one would notice, and it gave him satisfaction to overcome the impulse that had caused him to put it up in the first place. Any more mail for Schultz would simply be marked "Return to Sender".

Hanz experienced no more problems, and that night on the way home he spent a portion of the hundred marks getting drunk, something he'd never done before. He shocked his wife speechless when he got home, and fell into bed fully dressed.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 28

It was on Monday the eighth of November, when Lee, going through his mail, found the envelope. Opening it, he pulled five pages of randomly typed characters. What's this? He wondered.

He looked at the typed address on the envelope. It was to one of the agency's many dummy covers. The post-mark was from Bonn Germany. There was no return address.

He looked through the five pages. After working in cryptography as long as he had, he had files for all the different codes that were used. But this one didn't ring any bells. Probably a report from some field agent he thought. Well, there was one way to know for sure.

He transcribed the typed pages to a computer file, carefully keying in each character, including the spaces. He did it twice more, the third time, starting at the end and working back to the beginning. He had the computer reverse the third entry, then compare the three files. He was pleased to note he'd made only two mistakes out of the five pages. He corrected the errors, then submitted them to the machine for analysis. He sat back to wait for the results, taking a sip of the coffee which had grown cold while he worked.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Harry signaled end. He pulled a copy of the session to a data chip, then unjacked. "Yes!" he thought to himself. Am I good or am I good! This was the proof he needed that*

*Frederick's new character was being used to obtain illegal game code.*

*He was whistling a joyful tune as he headed for George's office, data chip in hand.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*"You're an idiot Harry! What were you doing using Lee to get this piece of code?" George was yelling at Harry.*

*The joyful tune had long since faded from Harry's lips. Instead of being pleased with his progress, his boss was bawling him out. George's reaction had caught Harry off guard.*

*"I didn't see any reason not to use Lee." Harry answered defensively. "The character works well for me, and I'm comfortable with him. He's in a good position to get the intelligence we need." He held up the chip. "I think 'the proof is in the pudding' is the correct phrase."*

*"You aren't as smart as you think!" was George's response. "Have you forgotten that letting a character become game aware is a primary crime? We'll have to terminate Lee."*

*"Come on. Lee's not contaminated. If you terminate him, you'll set this investigation back months." Harry shot back, suddenly angry himself. "Don't forget, Lee is still our primary link with the codes Frederick has been getting. And he is still in the best position to follow up on any leads."*

*"Lee is nothing but a desk jockey, how much follow up can he provide?"*

*"Everything we need. He has conduits all over the place."*

*It had taken Harry years to develop the character with it's combination of skills and position. Harry had also developed a certain fondness for the character. Needless to say, the idea of termination was upsetting.*

*"I'm sure Lee suspects nothing. If he does learn too much, we can always get rid of him when we finish the investigation."*

*"All right, we'll leave Lee alone for now, though at this point I question his usefulness. However," George paused for emphasis, "You will put him under twenty four hour Ugmon monitoring."*

*"What about Hanz? I need to use Ugmon to monitor Hanz."*

*"Use the guards, I authorized three of them for you. Everything seems to be happening in the mail room, that should give you all you need."*

*"But..."*

*"No buts, just do it!"*

*Harry retreated in frustration. He had the proof, and George hadn't even looked at it. Instead he'd been attacked. Well he would use the guards, but that wasn't all he was going to do.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The computer beeped at Lee with the message "No known encryption." Lee sat up. No known encryption? He

pulled the file back up, suspicion beginning to dawn in his mind. Thoughtfully he pulled up two other files. Then he performed an analysis with the new file, the same way he had with the first two, running correlations between three files now. He carefully noted the results in a report, which he sealed with a personal seal, in a file for on-going investigations. This would covered his rear. He did not know, but assumed "Big Brother" was watching. For the time being, however, he was going to keep his thoughts to himself. He wanted to do absolutely nothing to arouse any kind of suspicion.

But the new file from out of the blue made one thing clear. What ever was going on had nothing to do with James. It put things in a whole new light.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Harry connected to the game matrix and summoned the Universal Game Monitor. The head and shoulders of an image formed in front of him. This was all the interaction anyone ever had with Ugmon. Any possibility of corruption of the Universal Game Monitor was to be avoided at all costs.*

*"Ugmon" Harry called, "I have instructions for you."*

*"Yes?" answered Ugmon.*

*"The character Lee Yokuro is to be put under twenty four hour surveillance for unacceptable game awareness. If it's game awareness level exceeds fifteen percent, terminate it immediately."*

*"Yes Sir" replied Ugmon.*

*Had Harry asked, Ugmon would have told Harry that Lee's game awareness was currently at twenty percent. With just a little more prodding, Lee would begin to seriously question the reality of his own existence.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 29

"Your suspicions concerning the nature of your existence have been discovered and you, as a character, are terminated. Proceed with plan A3Y1."

Lee stared at the letters glowing on his computer screen. The words had popped out at him as soon as he'd logged on this morning. Yesterday it had been a strangely encrypted message, and now it was this.

He would have passed the thing off as a joke except for one thing, and that was the plan mentioned, A3Y1. Lee was the only one who knew about the plan. He had put it together as a contingency plan, one of several, in case there was an emergency and he needed to take quick action. The plans had been mentally labeled when they were committed to memory. Lee had written nothing down, told no one. He was the only one who knew they existed, or what his personal code meant. Alpha 3 meant the third of the next available flights, regardless of destination.

It wasn't just the fact that no one knew about this personal escape plan that bothered him. But there was something else. He hated airplanes. He hated airports. He hated anything to do with flying. Of all the plans on his list, this had been the least desirable. Why that one? He could use an alternate.

These thoughts passed through his mind even as he numbly picked up a small diskette containing three files and a decoding program. He switched off his machine and left.

Lee realized, as he signed out of the office, that he

would not use an alternate plan. He would follow the specified plan as instructed.

He drove to the airport and parked the car. Entering the terminal, he checked flight schedules. He noticed that the third flight scheduled was for Texas. At the ticket counter he discovered there was one first class seat left. First class with, no reservation, was expensive. Lee purchased the ticket without complaint and checked in.

Lee had no baggage, only a carry on suit bag he had kept ready in the trunk of his car, just in case. Just another businessman on a trip. Lee waited for the flight to be called, sitting stiffly in the lounge area. He looked about himself as he sat there. There were, he noticed, surveillance cameras placed in strategic locations. He also watched the other passengers. One youth walked up to the boarding gate counter. There was a brief discussion, then dejectedly he returned and reclaimed his seat. Lee, watching the small drama, surmised the disappointed passenger was probably a college student, returning to school. He suspected the youth had more time on his hands than money, and was flying standby. The flight was called. Lee stood up and walked to the nearby line of phones and pretended to place a call. He hung up abruptly and walked back to the waiting lounge, this time sitting next to the youth. He sat, muttering under his breath for a minute, then looked at the youth and spoke abruptly.

"Bet you don't have a boss jerking you around."

The youth looked at him. "What?"

"Oh, I've been planning this vacation for months." Lee went on. "But my boss tells me he needs me to postpone it, wants me back at the office. Urgent."

"Bummer man." The other answered. But there was a slight glint in his eyes at the hope there might be room on the flight after all.

Lee pulled out his ticket looking at it mournfully. "First class, and I can't get a refund. Well, I'll put it on my expense report. If he's going to yank me back, he'd better well approve it." Then Lee offered the ticket to the youth. "How would you like a free first class upgrade. This thing isn't any good to me."

The other stared at Lee. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, go ahead, take it."

"All right! No more of this standby stuff." he said, "Thanks."

Lee watched as the other took the ticket and headed for the boarding gate. Since his ticket was for first class, and the other had been on standby, he had no doubt the kid would keep it quiet. First class seating was already boarding. Lee waited until the other had disappeared down the ramp then stood.

He headed to the end of the boarding line, then continued out of the terminal. Feeling extreme relief at leaving a place that had nothing but horrid memories for him, he boarded the city transit heading back to town. The stop at the airport had been the first, and for him the most difficult step in plan A3Y1. He wondered that he had even dreamed up the dreadful plan. Thankfully this was as close as he would get to an airplane. Well the rest of it was fairly straight forward. Meanwhile, as far as the rest of the world knew, Lee Yokuro would shortly be in the air for a destina-

tion thousands of miles away.

Hours later he was holed up in a run down hotel, registered under a different name. The condition of the room matched the rest of the hotel, but it did have a television. Lee flipped it on to see what was available. It only took a minute to flip through the three available channels.

A news bulletin concerning a plane crash caught his eye.

He felt a wrench in his gut. That was his flight! He sat down hard on the lumpy mattress.

Memories from his past hit him, as he remembered the frightful sight of a falling plane.

The plane was only to misdirect whoever was after him, throw people off his trail. People weren't supposed to die! He'd purchased the ticket, and the plane had been destroyed. That's crazy! He wasn't that important was he?

Dimly he heard the announcer continue that there had been a glitch in the Doppler radar at the airport in Texas. During this brief period, the plane had run into an excessively severe and sudden late season thunderstorm on it's approach.

A thunderstorm! No one could plan on a thunderstorm. It had only been an accident. Lee felt a slight sense of relief. He had nothing to do with the crash. That meant he was only responsible for one life, not a hundred and twenty two.

Violently he rejected the thought. He wasn't responsible for the crash. If he hadn't bought the ticket, it would-

n't have made any difference. There would have been one more seat on the plane, and the kid would have gotten his standby seat. Or would he? Did they give first class seats to standby passengers? He couldn't shake the sense of guilt. With his first class ticket he'd handed some innocent kid a death sentence. He should have been on that plane, not the kid.

Lee listened with part of his mind as the newscaster drowned on.

"Except for part of the tail section, where the black boxes are located, intense fire has left little more than ash. While the flight recorders have not yet been analyzed, informed sources say that there was little any pilot could have done.

"The failure of the radar will be investigated, but that can only be considered a contributing factor. There is little doubt, even at this early stage, that the crash was due to the storm, and this accident will be classified as an act of God."

"An act of God?" Lee wondered in misery. Then another thought intruded on the horror he was experiencing. Was the message he'd been sent also an act of God? Could God read his mind? Would God tell him to buy a ticket on a plane then destroy the plane? The thought sent a shudder through him. Why? To make it look like he was dead? Would God kill a plane load of people for that? Lee felt overwhelmed at the directions his thoughts were taking him. How had he attracted this kind of attention? He didn't know why was he running, only that he had been told to run. He didn't know why, and didn't know who or what organization might be after him.

There was, Lee considered, one thing that was clear. If the crash did have anything to do with him, then whoever, or whatever had caused it, murdering all those people, did not want Lee himself dead. At least not yet. Lee had never intended to get on that plane, and anyone, or anything that could pull A3Y1 from his mind, would know that as well. While the plane ticket was meant as a misdirection, now it might provide a more permanent roadblock to any investigation into his disappearance.

Lee looked at his watch. If he was going to follow his plan, it was now time for his next move.

Why bother, he was dead now, wasn't he? He didn't need to go any further. Then he decided he might as well follow this to the bitter end and find out why this plan had been chosen.

He left the key to the room on the bed and left the hotel, locking the door behind him. He could hear the television through the door of the room. He could have turned the volume down, he thought, but the key was locked in. Shrugging he headed for the bus stop, his suit bag draped across his back.

His route was by bus to the train station. There he bought a ticket on the commuter line. He settled in his seat. Soon the lights of the city were passing his window.

His thoughts dwelt on the day's events as he tried to order his course of action. Right now he was following a plan of action mapped out years ago. Again he wondered if continuing to follow that plan was the correct thing to do. So far, the only record of his existence had presumably ended with that fatal plane crash. On reflection, he considered that the investigation into his death might not stop with that

obvious conclusion. In the normal course of events, everyone booked on that flight who disappeared would be declared dead. Officials had a tendency to take the course of least resistance. Unless evidence turned up, forcing them to look more deeply into a death, they would declare a case closed.

Lee smiled to himself, thinking of how hard it was to prove you were alive to the Social Security Administration when they got an erroneous death notice. However, if someone was looking for him, his "death" might only cause a delay in that search.

Right! That thought brought him back to the question of who would look for him. He admitted to himself that the International Intelligence Agency had a tendency not to take things at face value. After all, Lee had left the place abruptly. There might be a little more digging.

Lee had been careful not to draw particular attention to himself when he'd checked in to the motel. He'd done his best to project the image of a poor traveling salesman, trying to get by with a tight budget. He had paid cash for the room, so there was no credit record. But if an exhaustive search turned up the clerk, and the poor guy was asked in a persistent manner, the clerk might remember Lee.

Lee had to admit that the Agency probably would look for him. It had resources for the job. But was it the agency he had to hide from? Was some other organization involved? Had the agency been infiltrated? Obviously he was not running from whoever or whatever had sent him the message in the first place. There was little sense in trying to hide from something that could generate messages on his computer screen, cause thunderstorms, or even, it seemed, read his mind.

The idea that anything had that kind of power spooked Lee. So much power, and it seemed to have taken an interest in him. So really, why was he trying to hide? From whom? Who had ordered his termination? Who, or perhaps what organization, would want to see him dead? What did it mean that as a character he was terminated?

The words echoed in his mind, "as a character". What the heck did it mean? He remembered reading, as a kid, stories where the characters in a story find out that they are only characters in a book. But that was just a writer's trick. Where else did you find characters? There were movies and television. Those too were the same kind of thing. A character would ride in a car past a movie marquee, showing a movie the character appears in. There were game characters. Lee paused in his thoughts. A video game? Or was it a computer simulation? Perhaps a simulation on a machine that used a code unlike any known machine?

He looked at his hands, pinched his arm, pulled some of his hairs and rubbed them between his fingers. It felt so real, and all of it what? A computer simulation? Ridiculous! What kind of computer could manage detail at this level? He felt the diskette in his pocket as he rode. What kind of computer indeed? A computer with an instruction set unknown to the exhaustive resources of the agency.

The direction of Lee's thoughts sent chills down his back. "As a character." The words returned to him over and over as his thoughts circled. Incredible thoughts. Impossible thoughts. The train left the urban for the suburban.

\*\*\*\*\*

***Part  
Two***

## Chapter 30

The phone rang. Sheila picked up the handset. "This is Sheila Jefferson, may I help you?"

"Sheila, could you please come into my office for a moment?" She recognized Dave's voice. It was her boss.

"I'll be right there." She saved her work then shut down and locked her computer. Dave's office door was open.

"Yes?" She asked as she walked in.

There was another man in the room. "Sheila, this is Mike Smith. Mike, this is Sheila Jefferson, the programmer you were asking about."

"How do you do?" Mike asked, extending his hand.

"Pleased to meet you." Sheila responded taking his hand politely, wondering what this was about.

"Sheila", Dave began, "Mike is with another department here. He has asked to talk to you about a possible position."

Sheila noticed Dave looked a little uncomfortable. "But I've only been here six months. There is still a lot I have to do before the application is ready for testing."

Dave stood up. "You don't have to make a decision right now." As he left, he closed the door.

Sheila looked at the closed door with trepidation.

Mike walked over and took the vacated seat possessively. "Please be seated." he said gesturing to the remaining chair.

Sheila sat as requested.

"Dave told me you have made a lot of progress on your project. He's noticed the hours you put in. Ahead of schedule even. In software that's unheard of."

"Well, I'm just trying to do my job." Sheila answered hesitantly.

"Don't you find the hours interfere with your social life?"

Instantly Sheila's guard was up. She hated personal questions. "Excuse me. I thought you wanted to talk to me about an opening in your department. I believe my personal life is personal and private. I've been working hard to do the job I was hired for. What I do on my own time is my own business. But right now, I am on company time, and the job I have needs doing. I'm sure Dave won't complain if I stay ahead of schedule." Sheila stood up and started to leave.

"Sit down please." Mike's tone was insistent. Sheila looked at him. His position had not changed.

The other was silent for a minute then he spoke. "I apologize if I've given you the wrong impression, but I do have a very legitimate reason for asking. If you will let me continue, I believe I can convince you of that."

"Go ahead." Sheila permitted grudgingly, and seated herself again.

"Thank you. Ms. Jefferson, do you consider yourself a patriot?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" she blurted. This was getting ridiculous.

"We have a government contract. But there are sensitive materials involved. The reason I asked about your personal life, and if you were a patriot, is because a background check will have to be run before we can add you to our department."

"A government contract? What kind of a government contract does an insurance company get?" she asked. "I thought the government took care of all it's own insurance."

"Oh they farm out some of the work." Mike answered the question casually. "But the thing is some of the information we are required to collect is very privileged, and you couldn't help but come in contact with that information in your work."

"I see." Sheila commented.

"What we would like you to do, is fill this out, giving us permission to request the background check. If everything is ok, then I can fill you in further." Mike handed her a stack of forms.

Sheila picked up the forms and leafed through them. A background check. Right! This is all show! They probably already know ten times more about me than these forms ask for. She looked up from the stack of paper at the other's

face. "You know, you really haven't told me anything about this new job. But you want me to fill this out, providing what appears to be very personal information. I don't know why you really want me. And I don't know if the job you want me for is worth all the trouble. To be blunt, what's in it for me? In all honesty, the job I have now makes a lot more sense to me."

"Fair enough." Mike answered. He then asked "Why did you quit school before you got your doctorate?"

Getting used to odd questions coming from strange directions Sheila responded instantly. "Money! I finally realized I was doing all this work on a doctorate's degree, and the degree didn't seem to matter any more. I was living on a teaching assistant's pittance when kids from my classes, getting out with bachelor's degrees knowing less than half of what I did, were going to work starting at fifty thousand a year. I got tired of the tiny apartment and started shopping around. Your Wilson Thomson Insurance agency made me a very nice offer, and I took it."

"The doctorate you were working on was in cryptography wasn't it?"

"I have degrees in in mathematics, electronics engineering and computer science." Sheila responded. She had carefully failed to mention her studies in cryptography in the resume she'd given Wilson Thomson. It was obvious someone had already started a background check!

"But you were working on a degree in cryptography?" Mike insisted.

"Sure, and that doctorate, plus a buck and a quarter, will buy you a cup of coffee. Besides, what does cryptogra-

phy have to do with insurance?" Sheila asked.

"When Wilson Thomson checked your credentials, they spoke to your professor, Hendricks. He was quite impressed with you, commented that your work would establish a new standard for secure communications. Aren't you bored with your current work?"

"Hey, I can go to the store, buy reasonable groceries and not worry about the check bouncing. I have a reliable car and there are no delinquent payments, and I've only been here six months. You know sometimes boring isn't so bad."

"I can't give you the details, but your expertise would be put to real use. Interested?"

Sheila sat in silence for a minute. It wasn't just the money that had prompted Sheila to apply for a job at Wilson Thomson. There had been an extremely intriguing abstract she'd uncovered while reviewing various journals. It promised a breakthrough for a completely secure cryptographic method. But her studies hit a brick wall. She couldn't find any other work by the author, Lee Yokura.

"You think you can really use me?" she finally asked.

"Your work could prove very valuable, and I can tell you that it's worth three times what you are making now."

"A military contract?" Sheila asked.

"It's not a weapons contract." Mike hastened to assure her.

Sheila looked at the stack of forms in her lap.

Mike stood up and walked over to her chair. "But first we need to get the background check run." He held out his hand to her. "It has been a pleasure talking to you. I hope you will take the job."

Sheila stood and shook his hand again. "Thank you, I'll think about it." was her carefully neutral response. She struggled not to show her glee. While trying to find Lee, her search had lead her to Wilson Thomson. She had been right. There was more to this business than simple insurance!

Mike watched Sheila's retreating form. She hadn't jumped at the opportunity, which puzzled him slightly, but there seemed to be something else he couldn't put his finger on. He turned and headed in the opposite direction, stopping at the lunch room on his way. Dave was seated at a table drinking a cup of coffee.

"Well?" he asked, "have you blood suckers stolen another valuable prize from me?"

"Afraid so." Mike answered. "She looks quite promising."

"Did she say she would take the job?"

"No, but she's hooked."

"Darn." Dave answered. "I was hoping I would get to keep at least one good one. You know, we do have a business to run here."

"Cheer up, you'll find someone else to replace her, you're good at that."

"Yeah, and when I do, he or she gets ripped off by you thieves."

"As you said," Mike responded, "we have a business to run here."

"Yeah, Yeah, get out of my sight and let me drown my troubles."

Mike left for his office, leaving the other worrying about replacing yet another recruit.

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## Chapter 31

The sound of voices and a car trunk slamming brought Lee awake. One thunk, then another followed as car doors were closed, then the motor was started.

"Needs a new muffler." Lee thought.

He picked up his left hand and held his watch in front of his face. It was after nine. He dropped his hand and stared at the fine cracks in the ceiling above him.

It had been late when the train had stopped to let passengers off, to be greeted by empty benches and a nearly empty parking lot. The few passengers who had exited with Lee had quickly departed. As the sound of the last car leaving faded into the chilly evening, he found himself facing an empty street. A half block down had been a flickering vacancy sign. He had used a fake out of state drivers license when he'd checked in. The ID wasn't perfect, but it would do for a few days. There were no agency records on the ID or on the credit card he'd used. The card was a valid one. He'd kept it active with an occasional surreptitious purchase, always paying the bill in full with money orders.

He had mentioned to the night clerk that he had car trouble, and he would need the room for one or two nights while repairs were made. He remembered tossing his bag across the chair, and engaging the safety chain. Collapsing on the bed, he had been reviewing the days events when weariness had overtaken him and he had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

The noises of the neighbors departing had pulled him from fitful dreams.

He was still dressed, sprawled across the bed. Groaning, he forced himself to his feet. Time to make myself human he thought as he stripped to shower. In the bottom of his suit bag was a zippered pouch with a few toiletries. Twenty minutes later, clean, shaved and presentable he packed up the bag and hung it in the closet.

He looked at the bed. He didn't particularly want to draw attention to the room. He pulled the spread down and rumbled the sheets.

His rumbling stomach reminded him that he'd not eaten since breakfast the morning before. Checking his wallet, he saw he had enough for his immediate needs.

Leaving the room he locked the door. His steps carried him past the row of numbered doors to the street. Pausing he took in the sights around him. The chill breeze pulled at his light coat, making him wish he'd worn something warmer. Next time, he thought, his plans would include weather as a factor.

"Right! Like there'll be a next time." he muttered to himself.

He noticed a fast food restaurant down the street, and headed in that direction. It was a clear day so far, but he could see clouds to the west. He wondered if it was cold enough to snow. He shivered at the thought. Hopefully it was still too early for that.

He entered the restaurant, glad of the warmth. He wound his way through the rope maze, letting his hand slide along the slick nylon from post to post. He carried the plastic tray with his wrapped, precooked biscuit and sausage,

juice and coffee to an isolated table.

As he ate he stared out the window at the traffic. About halfway down the next block he noticed a mini strip mall. "Don's bargain computers" was listed on the sign board, along with other shops. He finished his meal and cleared the table, then, turning up his collar against the expected chill, left the warmth behind and headed down the street.

With the feeling of a chill down his back, not attributable to the weather he pushed open the door and looked around. There were a couple dozen systems set up.

"May I help you?"

Turning at the sound of the voice, Lee found himself facing a salesman. He was young, wore glasses, an inexpensive coat and tie. Probably just out of college, if that Lee concluded.

"I'm not sure." Lee answered. "I guess I was thinking of something in the line of a laptop computer. Something not too expensive. Mainly for word processing, not much else."

"We have several machines." the other answered. He came from behind the counter and headed for a table with several lap tops set up. He powered some of them up. Selecting one he began a sales pitch. "This one has the latest MicroWord integrated product. Full word processing. And if you need it, spread sheet, internet browser, database and email are also part of the package."

Lee pretended to listen to the chatter as he looked over the offerings. One machine the salesman had not pow-

ered up caught Lee's eye.

"How about this one? What's it got?" Lee reached out and turned the machine on, interrupting the patter. Rather than color, it came up with a plain monochrome display.

The salesman frowned as his attention was distracted. "That's an old machine. The owner maxed out the memory and disk drive, then became frustrated when all the new software came out using color and traded it in. You can get gray scale on it. But frankly..."

"How much?" Lee interrupted.

"Well, I could probably let you have it for seven hundred."

"And how much is that one?" Lee asked pointing to the machine the salesman had started with.

"Well, normally its twenty five, but we discount it to twenty three hundred."

"And if I had a machine like this one, how much trade in would you give me? Three fifty? And that would probably come in under your dealer incentive I bet. You would still make a profit. How about I offer you three hundred for this old one. I'm sure you would still be making money. It's been here a while hasn't it?"

"Well, yes." the salesman admitted.

"So how about it, do I get it for three hundred? After all I might want to get something else for the office to use when I'm not on the road." He looked in the direction of

some of the larger machines set up against one wall.

"Well, I guess I could come down some," the salesman brightened noticing the direction of Lee's attention, "but I couldn't let that go for three hundred. My boss would skin me alive." he complained.

"So how much?"

"Well, I think I can get away with five fifty."

"Four hundred." Lee said. He pulled out his wallet. Slipping the credit card from it he held it out to the salesman.

He looked at the card. "Are you really interested in an office machine?"

"I am." Lee answered, and he rattled off a list of specifications that would make for a very capable machine.

"I can do it for four fifty, but that's it."

Lee considered, then felt pity for the youngster and relented. "All right, if you include a carrying case."

"Sure," the other answered. "it came with a case."

The salesman watched as Lee left the store and smiled to himself. He'd been thinking of scrapping the unit, and was happy now he hadn't. You never knew.

He went into the back room and bought out another identical machine and set it up in the empty space. Maybe these things will sell after all he thought. He'd picked up a dozen for three hundred at a going out of business auction

almost a year ago. They didn't take up very much space.

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## Chapter 32

Sheila entered the human resources office. "Hi Rachel." She greeted the receptionist. She didn't know her well, but Rachel had immediately put Sheila at ease when she had first interviewed at Wilson Thomson.

"Do you have any idea how long security checks take?" Sheila continued.

"Getting admitted to the inner circle eh?" Rachel smiled at Sheila. "Well normally the checks take about a month. They do like to be thorough."

"Oh, well I guess I'll just have to exercise patience." Sheila was disappointed, but should have expected the delay.

When she got to her cubicle she called her boss Dave.

"Hi Dave she began. Do you have time to talk about the project?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"I just turned in the papers for the background check. Rachel said it would probably be a month before the checks were finished. I should be finished with testing of the current phase by then."

"That sounds about right." Dave agreed. "That should make it fairly easy to transfer the rest of the project to someone else."

"That's good." Sheila paused, then added. "Thanks for approving the transfer."

"I would never think of interfering with the career of one of our people. And remember, if you decide you want to come back, there will be an opening here for you. You will always be more than welcome."

"Thanks." Sheila answered and hung up.

It always felt good to know you were welcome in your job. She considered her upcoming challenge. She had been anxious to meet Lee, but now she was considering the ramifications of the change. Sheila's emotions were mixed. Now, if the possibility of actually working with him materialized, how would she measure up? She wanted to talk to the elusive Lee, pick his mind. But what if he didn't think she was worth the bother?

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Oliver walked into the director's office.

"Hello Oliver," the director began, "what's on your mind?"

"Lee Yokura."

"Yes?"

"He's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes."

The director put down the report he was reading.  
"What do we know?"

"Not much. He left early yesterday, signed out. Didn't come in this morning. We called his home, there was no answer. We sent a couple of agents over. His paper was on the porch. We searched the place. There was no sign of him. His car's gone."

"O.K. Put out an alert, find him."

When Oliver didn't leave the director looked up again.  
"Anything else?"

"Well, yes. If we can't find him, what do we do for a replacement?"

"Isn't it a little early to be worrying about that?"

"I don't know. We haven't found James yet."

The director looked at Oliver. "Do you think there is a connection."

"I don't know it just seems," Oliver paused for a minute, "odd."

"Yes, it is a little odd." the director admitted.

"What about the replacement?" Oliver prompted.

"I guess you will have to handle things for a while, won't you?" was the director's unsympathetic response.

"I suppose I could. The only thing is, well, Lee did a lot of stuff with the codes, and that really isn't an area of my

expertise."

"Then get yourself an assistant! Do I have to tell you how to do your job? How about that new girl, what's her name, Sheila? Didn't she do stuff with cryptography before she got here?"

"But she hasn't gone through clearance yet."

"Details. Look, just do it. Expedite it. Do whatever you have to. Get it done!"

"Yes sir."

With that Oliver left the office. The director stared at the retreating back, then picked up the report he'd been studying. As long as he was short handed, he couldn't afford to address the problems Oliver presented.

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## Chapter 33

"Isn't murdering a plane load of people a bit extreme?"

Lee held his breath, waiting for something to happen, then slowly let it out as the screen remained unchanged.

Staring at the line of text he had just typed, Lee waited, wondering if the experiment was just a waste of time and money. He hoped fervently that it was, but he had to know. Even this may not be conclusive, it was hard to prove a negative. But if nothing happened, then possibly he could hope there was some rational explanation for his recent experiences.

The cursor blinked at the end of the line.

He hoped that by using the inflammatory question he would provoke a response, assuming there would be any. Who could possibly answer such a question?

When he had returned to the motel, the room was as he had left it. The moan of the wind through the tattered weather stripping provided a background to the metallic ticking of the "DO NOT DISTURB" sign against the door.

Lee glanced outside. Scudding clouds from the approaching storm hid the sun.

Lee stood up to pull the curtains closed against prying eyes and the gloomy sight, then re-seated himself before the laptop computer. The power adaptor was plugged into the wall, but Lee had deliberately left the modem disconnected.

Nothing was happening. Lee reached for the power switch, then halted abruptly.

"No."

Lee stared at the screen. Until the moment those two letters had appeared, Lee still had doubts. Those two letters washed away those doubts in a raging flood. His hands shaking so bad he couldn't type, he pecked out his next question with a single finger. "Who are you?"

"I am the Universal Game Monitor, you may call me Ugmon. You might think I am God. I am only a program."

God? Lee thought. No, never!

"Only a program?" he typed. Maybe he'd simply misunderstood and had stumbled on some obscure game the previous owner had installed. The next words dashed this hope.

"Yes, as are you, and as were all the people on that plane you seem so concerned about."

Lee stared at the words on the screen. 'Only a program.' The words echoed and circled in his mind. An unfeeling string of ones and zeros in some unimaginable computer. And all those people. Unfeeling ones and zeros. All that terror, unfeeling ones and zeros.

His mind rebelled as the horror crept up on him. Then, his speculations of the night before came back to haunt him, forcibly brought home by the characters glowing on the screen. He had an eerie sense of dislocation. A feeling this was all imagined and unreal, impossible, a dream.

Finally Lee typed, the plastic of the keys hard under his fingers. "Why tell me this?"

"You need to know."

In frustration Lee poured out question after question, not waiting for a response. "I need to know what, that this is all a sham? Why? What's the use of it, if I'm only a program? What difference does it make whether or not I know? What do you want with me? WHY DID THEY HAVE TO DIE?" his fingers were slamming against the keys in anger with the final words. Lee realized tears were coursing down his cheeks. He wasn't sure who he meant when he typed "THEY".

"The reason you need to know is that it can make all the difference in your world." was the response that appeared.

The words were blurred through his tears. He rubbed the palms of his hands against his eyes to clear them, then typed. "What difference? What do you mean?"

"We have a problem, and I need your help."

"You need my help? You do this, and you want me to help you?" Lee typed in anger.

"The world as you know it is a game simulation." Ugmon replied. "It is a near universal game played by virtually everyone on the planet. But someone is working on a virus to destroy this game. He has made some progress, as near as I can tell. However a certain amount of his work is off line and inaccessible to me. You uncovered him when you discovered his encryption key. His name is Frederick."

Lee stared at the words. A game. Some silly game. All the pain, all the suffering for some silly game. Then the significance of the last word on the screen broke through his churning thoughts. Finally he typed. "So, he does exist."

Then his fingers continued to move, seemingly of their own accord as another thought occurred to him.

"But I guess not in quite the way I expected."

"Correct" responded Ugmon.

Again Lee read the displayed characters on the screen as he began to analytically consider the information he'd been given, suppressing his roiling emotions.

"How do you know he is working on a virus?"

"Virus recognition has long been integral to the game software. Those three files you have contain virus like patterns, a different pattern in each case. If there was only one example, it could be written off as coincidence. But there are three different pieces. That is not a coincidence!"

"How am I supposed to help?" Lee asked. "Sounds to me like we are at the mercy of a physical world totally outside our control."

"Outside our direct control, yes." responded Ugmon. "But we are not without influence. For example, you do have those three files. If I provided you with the game code instruction set, you would be able to reverse engineer the thing and develop a vaccine."

"Maybe" responded Lee, "but why not do it yourself?"

Why Me? You are obviously more familiar with this game code. Not only that, but this can't be the first time you've encountered this problem."

"It is a matter of resources, responded Ugmon. Putting characters on this computer screen for you to read is a relatively trivial task. But at the same time the bulk of my processing is maintaining the eco-cyberbalance of this game. To develop a vaccine would take a measurable fraction of my resources. You are essentially an independent program. You have your own allocation of system resources. Those resources are used to construct your mind. As you know, you are only using about ten percent of your mind. The remaining ninety percent is the allocation used to keep you and your immediate surroundings in existence. I can provide you with access to that ninety percent."

Provide access to ninety percent of my mind? Lee wondered. "For example?" he typed.

"The door to the adjoining room, open it." suggested Ugmon.

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