

"Yes, I am a criminal. My crime is that of curiosity. My crime is that of judging people by what they say and think, not what they look like. My crime is that of outsmarting you, something that you will never forgive me for.

I am a hacker, and this is my manifesto. You may stop this individual, but you can't stop us all... after all, we're all alike."

-The Mentor, "The Conscience of a Hacker",  
January 8, 1986

## One

June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2009

2:35 pm.

Yamal Pradchaphet eyes the preference line for what feels like the millionth time in the last few minutes. It's not an easy question and he needs to think it over for a minute or two. His right hand poised over the keys, his left scratching at the tuft of greasy hair hanging in his face. He looks to his right and spies the big pile of blank reports and worksheets next to his monitor. He'll be sure to get to those just as soon as he takes care of this little task.

*"What kind of women do you want to meet?"*

The undressing lady holds her pose after pushing her lace-covered chest outward. The gentle soprano that is her voice is still ringing in his ears. He dares not say Asian, or Filipino. That would limit his options greatly in the latter case, and he doesn't much trust the former. If he wants to meet girls his mother approves of, he might as well date the girls they keep suggesting for him. The old joke he used to tell his parents runs through his mind.

*Mom, I bring home nice girls all the time. You don't need to.*

Still, the woman is looking for an answer. Damn she's hot too. Why can't he just say he wants her? Her black lace underwear and shapely curves are something he could wear all day. Why doesn't she come with the service?

*Because she's a fucking model you idiot, and those curves are digitally enhanced!*

So many years and so many kilometres separating him and his heritage, and he still can't seem to screw up the courage to be honest, not without looking over his shoulder. He checks once more, then clicks on the boxes he really wants.

*Blonde, Brunette, Redhead.* And *Caucasian* just in case that's not clear enough. He looks at the other possibilities for a second too and selects *Latina* and *Mediterranean*. It's interesting how specific they can be, but preferences tend to be that way. Those were the women he truly fantasized about, the ones he thought of whenever... you know.

"What kind of relationship are you looking for?" the woman asks, and starts to undo the hook on her bra. Pradchaphet's breath goes shallow and he lowers the volume to one shade above mute. She's on the verge of exposing her tits, the straps dropping and exposing the slip of pale flesh above the nipples. He's never found the nerve to go this far at his desk in his place of work. But boredom and horniness are the fertilizers of impetuous acts. And right now he is really, really bored... and the rest.

He clicks once on *discreet relationship* and again on *erotic chat/email*, just for good measure. *Please let this be the last step*, he prays to any God that will listen, and hits Enter on his keyboard.

Her breasts are now bare. Prad is momentarily excited, then slightly disappointed. The fine, pink globes and the tiny brown nipples just don't seem so thrilling now that they are out. Perhaps it was a buildup. Still, he's not going to count his chickens until he sees her totally in the buff.

"What's your name?" she asks, undoing her short skirt. The panties match the bra, black, thin and lacy, showing just enough skin around the most sensitive areas. But alas, a name for his account... He really didn't give that one any thought until now. It's important not to use his Society name, the one his friends see whenever privileged emails are sent. Lucky he has a family name that translates so well when it comes to internet handles.

*PradChap*. No one ever uses that name. The numbers aren't even really necessary, just a way to meet the minimum field requirement of seven figures.

He hits Enter again and holds his breath.

The woman disappears. Her almost naked body vanishes into the thin air of cyberspace while somewhere, a computer processes his application. Damn you vile temptress, he thinks as he waits for the list of possible hook ups to appear. Sure enough, they do, a new focus for his sexual frustrations. The title line says it all.

*Women In Your Area Looking for Fun and Casual Hook-ups.*

He scans through the long list of grainy pics, nothing like the ones used to lure him in while he was cruising the torrent sites, looking for downloads. Already he's losing interest in the whole process. Playmates just isn't living up to its name just yet. He looks at the clock in the lower right hand corner of his screen. The thought of cruising some free sites suddenly seems much more appealing. At the very least it would kill some time before he finally has to punch out.

He calls up the *Candylist* directory and starts right clicking on the sites he wants from the long list that Candy, the site's hot little avatar that dances in the upper right corner, has graciously provided him with.

*Busty, Teens, and what the hell, Asians.*

3:15 pm.

The coffee has turned stale and is just hot enough to melt the three sugar cubes that are needed to mask the awful taste. Coffee mate is available, but something about the powdered shit makes him uneasy. He decides to raid the fridge, see if there is any fresh milk or cream in there. An opened carton of half-and-half is all he can find.

"Don't let Miriam catch you with that."

Prad recognizes the voice. It's Rohit, his only real companion in this jungle of steel and concrete, at least the only one he truly thinks of as a friend. He eyes the container and assumes the obvious.

"It hers?"

"Yep, and she's not one for sharing."

"How would she know?" Prad says. "As if there aren't enough people crammed into this floor as it is."

"Yeah, I suppose. What are you working on?"

"Fucking the dog," Prad says, giving his coffee a stir and sip. His appraisal of the taste comes through in a big wide grimace. Too sweet, and kind of burnt, like honey on blackened toast. Rohit gives him a nervous look.

"Uh-oh, I know what that means."

"It's not like you spend every hour at your desk working," Prad reminds him.

"No, but Tetris and Minesweeper aren't considered offensive. You know they're short-listing people for the downsizing list. Quickest way to get on that list is to commit a sex offence."

"Like flash my junk at the software chick with the big tits?"

Rohit takes a sip from his own mug of stale coffee and looks at the break room door. He shoots Prad a look that says "watch it!" Even joking about that sort of thing is a no-no in the workplace nowadays. Prad rolls his eyes and tries to absorb the moral. He will be sure to lower his voice when making such comments again.

“Alright, I get the point,” he concedes. “So you have an idea who’s on that list?”

“Oh, you know, same old. Temps, part-timers, and a few old people who they figure they can kick out with some severance and not have to worry about promoting. And I hear there’s a couple who are finally getting the boot because of complaints filed against them.”

*Please be O’Malley*, Prad thinks. The old prig is a constant fucking pain, disliked by the ladies and the younger gents alike, especially the ones he refers to as the “ethnic ones”. He isn’t the only one Prad would be happy to say goodbye to, but based on Rohit’s criteria, he seems the most deserving.

“So how much time do you figure we have here?”

“We?” Rohit says incredulously. The idea that Prad would speak about them in the same sentence is clearly a shock. “Not sure how much time I got. Job security isn’t exactly a solid commodity around here right now.”

Prad scoffs. “Big execs always use that ‘bad economy’ shit to justify firing people.”

“Doesn’t make any difference to us though does it? Laid off is laid off.”

Prad nods, conceding the point. “So how much time do you figure?”

“Me, I’m guessing us baseline programmers got about six months before they start streamlining us.”

“Christmas? You think they’d lay people off before the holidays?”

“Easier than waiting til after to do it. Plus you get to spend the severance on presents and booze, helps numb the pain.”

“Still cold, man.”

“Anyway, I don’t think I’ll be getting a pink slip during the first round.”

“What about me?”

Rohit takes another sip and looks to be running Prad’s prospects in his mind. One thing programmers were good at was statistical analysis, which also made them adept gamblers. Not that Rohit could ever be tempted into doing any. He was boring like that...

“Well,” he finally says with a shrug. “I’m sure you could look forward to a big, fat holiday severance.”

“Woohoo...” Prad raises his hand in a mock victory salute. “At least I can look forward to sleeping in, and not working for people way stupider than me.”

Rohit looks at the break room doorway again.

“Dude, you need to shut up.”

6:30pm.

Prad is home from work in the Empire State Towers, apartment fourteen-eleven, which is a one bedroom suite. In point of fact, it’s floor thirteen, but due to the superstitious nature of most builders, floor thirteen does not exist. The view provides a lovely view of the skyline. At present, a beautiful orange hue is settling over the city, due in part to humidity, engine emissions and the fact that a stiff sea breeze hasn’t rolled in in recent days. Prad loves the colors, but would enjoy another transfusion of ocean air soon. The smell of smog reminds him too much of visiting family overseas.

A takeout box of fried Singapore noodles sits next to the keyboard. A few splotches of sauce decorate his shirt, but none had reached the keyboard thanks to his chopstick handling skills. The television plays in the background. It’s six o’clock so there’s nothing on except for the news. Scarcely anything that deserves attention, just more fear and controversy, people dying in the Middle East, murder and mayhem here at home. Rummaging through Shoutwire is

so much more interesting. There are two stories that occupy his attention at the moment. One is a recent study conducted in France that is making waves, linking crime rates to ethnicity. Apparently, the researcher contends that people of Muslim backgrounds, specifically Algerians and Moroccans are more likely to commit crimes. He can bear reading about this study for only a few minutes before losing his cool and starts leaving harsh comments.

*Everybody knows the French want to ban Muslim immigration! This study is propaganda and nothing more. Quit pretending like this is an issue!*

The other is summed up by its title, “Facebook linked to rise in Syphilis”. He has to admit, the link is tenuous, but makes for much more interesting reading.

Some news hits the screen that catches his attention, both ears tuning in. A special interest story concerning a person whose name he recognizes. He hasn’t heard it in awhile, but he’s certainly no stranger to national news. His fame was one of the reasons Prad was proud to know Professor Germaine of MIT, a big name in the wireless world. Prad had read about it already on all the webnews sites for days now; the mainstream media is only now getting around to talking about it. The once proud and eccentric teacher of Data Systems Analysis at MIT is under the weather and not long for this world, the perky Asian reporter, Hillary Qin, is saying. The investigative report takes the usual circuitous route to tell him this, going back over his life for those who did not have the benefit of knowing him.

*“Albert Germaine was a gifted student who excelled in the maths and sciences. From an early age, he was fascinated with computers and data systems. In his teen years, when most boys his age were interested in cars and going to drive-in movies, Professor Germaine was at work loading punch cards into his IBM or reading up on Alan Turing. In 1978, he was accepted into the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he furthered his studies in computer science, with a double minor in linguistics and behavioural psychology. His doctoral thesis, entitled “The Turing Test from a Behavioural Perspective”, argued that machines, in time, would be capable of imitating basic human thought and behaviour. His thesis drew on many seminal thinkers of his time, from Wittgenstein and Ryle to B.F. Skinner and John B. Watson. Arguing that the human brain, in its most basic form, is essentially a series of program instructions which are formed in accordance with conditioning and experience (similar to computer algorithms) he believed that a sufficiently advanced data system would be capable of independent thought and reason. In addition to behavioural psychologists, he also drew on noted authors, such as Philip K. Dick and Arthur Koestler, to make his point. The human brain, he argued, had evolved to meet the challenges of life through adaptive hardware and tailored software. Language, reasoning, routines, even philosophy could be broken down into programming language. This sort of language, rendered in digital form, could give a machine the same capabilities.*

*“After a five year stint as a researcher with a private laboratory, Germaine returned to MIT where he divided his time between teaching and advancing his research. Convinced that Alan Turing’s theories could be proven, he began using CT scans to map the brains of volunteers. As would later be learned, he performed many scans on himself as well. Once he had a sufficient idea of what specific human neural patterns looked like, he ventured, he would be able to design a synthetic version. For years, his work would attract scorn and controversy from theorists and the general public who accused him of practising a sort of technological Fascism. Some went so far as to compare him with Nazi researchers who performed cruel tests on human subjects. Others claimed that his ideas and research sought to deprive the human mind of its mystery and sacred value...*

Prad had to tune out at this point, as he is already intimately familiar with most of the details of the professor's history. Any student of data systems analysis at MIT knew about the professor. Anyone who was anyone in the programming world knew the name by reputation. They all knew exactly how he viewed all that hubbub as well, so Prad didn't need to hear it from Qin. Germaine was as myopic as he was fucking brilliant; he believed those who didn't understand or agree with him were small-minded or blind to simple realities. He had little time for what he called "mind-body dualistic nonsense", just as he had little time for Christians and other religious people. Many of his students dropped or boycotted his courses because of this. The campus' Christian Coalition smeared him with pamphlets and seminars and petitioned the university to fire him. Eventually, they got their way. Prad smiled when he heard Qin addressing this next. It was as if they had a direct line to his brain and he were the one giving the report:

*"In 1996, Germaine was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a condition which had been misdiagnosed in his youth. Like many of his generation, he grew up with various labels, some saying that he was a genius, others that he was intellectually disabled. Germaine worked through and around these labels, and succeeded in spite of them, only to find out in his later years that his gifts and flaws were due to a common neurological disorder. As if this wasn't enough, MIT chose to end Germaine's tenure due to the controversy his work attracted. Professor Germaine retreated into isolation for a time, reappearing only on occasion as a guest lecturer at symposiums or seminars. In time, however, a movement arose to restore the professor to his former glory. A number of organizations and some of his former students, many of whom had risen to positions of prominence in the scientific world, agreed to mount a class-action discrimination lawsuit against MIT for their release of professor Germaine. The suit never made it to court, as the Institute chose instead to reinstate the professor and allow him to continue his work. Germaine returned in the fall of 2000."*

And in 2000-2001 (or was it 2001-2002? He couldn't remember which year it was), Prad had met him. Angie was a student of his as well, though she and Prad had not known each other until after they had finished their degrees. It was kind of a bragging rights thing, knowing a man like Germaine. Most people in the Society did not, something that gave Angie and him some additional prestige, but everyone knew enough about him that it didn't really matter. Just about all of them had read *Turing*, the book he wrote on his seminal mentor, or some of his later published articles. There was also the study he wrote on the next great leap, entitled "Our Silicate Future". Most agreed that the man talked like he wrote anyway, one was as good as the next.

In any case, now the professor was on death's door, diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour. He was sure some assholes in the media would say it was because of all those brain scans, but what the hell did they know? The Christian students unions would be celebrating for sure as well, even going as far to say that it was God's punishment for his arrogance. God liked to punish people who tried to tear the veil of mystery away from his creations, apparently. He was full of love, but if provoked, would get very nasty, like an abusive dad. Who knew God was such a good imitator of human behaviour? He looked up some recent articles on CNN.com and from *The Boston Globe* that mentioned where he was and how he was doing. He was still working, they said. Brave soul, with only a few months left at the outside, but he was carrying on. The pictures showed him smiling bravely and being helped around by some students in their white coats. Prad felt a tinge of jealousy. The honour of helping the man complete his work was something only the truly skilled should be doing. Someone like him, in other words.

*Maybe when I get fired, he ventures.*

The television moves onto more boring matters, crime and death in the nation. Off it goes, and his full attention is back on his computer (or Dorothy, as he knows her). A little first-person shooter feels right about now, or maybe some time with the blogosphere. But then there's the matter of his inbox which has a few new messages he hasn't checked yet. He decides to check these before doing anything else. There's one for discount boner pills, one for vitamins from the General Health Store, and one for an online dating service. He shakes his head mournfully before deleting them all. No matter how many spyware and adware zappers he installs on his machine, his surfing habits still end up in a database somewhere, prompting hordes of unwanted spam. But at least the dating service offer has reminded him that he needs to check on his account with Playmates. Despite getting bored with it earlier, he wants to see who might have earmarked him in the Playmates system, see if any of them have more attractive profiles.

Then he notices the email from the Society, the subject line saying "Meeting." He quickly opens this one and scans the first few lines of text. Angela's signature is at the bottom, her DeeMark as they refer to it. She's advising him that their chapter has received a challenge, a test of their mettle from the local DeePs. Angie's never one to turn down a challenge; as a matter of honour, she can't abide trash talk from those bloody pirates! As a result, she is writing to tell them that their next meeting, scheduled for Tuesday, won't be the normal online meet and greet. This time, it will involve a mission, and a rather lucrative one at that. The nature of it is too sensitive to talk about here, she says. It will have to be conveyed in person.

The time and the place are written in code one line above her signature.

*SCH, D-1, XVIII H-H.*

Well that settles things for the evening. Tomorrow he can look forward to his date with Angela, and whichever other Society guests are in attendance. Tonight, he has a few programs to watch but needs to eat and kill a few hours before that can happen. He fetches his jacket and keys and decides to head for the pub.

8:30pm (or thereabouts).

The killing field stares back at him. The baked bones and greasy guts are strewn about in a semicircular pile, forced to share space with a defiling mass of crumpled litter. Prad wonders just how many animals died in this particular holocaust. Their limbs torn from their bodies, blood gushing and bringing their steroid pumped, cage ridden, grain-fed existence to a slow, agonizing halt. Born on a death farm, forced to wander around on broken legs, then cut down in their prime to feed the hungry barons of the inner city. Just like those poor calves in their plastic cages, senseless and isolated until the day when a patron looking to serve up veal parmesan or scaloppini puts the wheels in motion whereby their horrible existence is mercifully ended. Prad thinks it all over and considers becoming vegetarian until his order of potato skins arrive and he realizes the bacon bits are the best part.

He orders another Sapporo and resolves to give the subject some more thought before making any decision on the matter. Never hurts to drown a moral decision in endless debate. The cute underage waitress smiles at him mechanically and takes the plate of bones away. He knows he's too messy and bloated to flirt or be of genuine appeal to her, so he resolves to behave himself and not be that asshole who is low enough to flirt with bar staff, or stupid enough to think they are taking him seriously.

Just another Thursday night, and he's bored, restless, kind of drunk, and aching to go on vacation. He doesn't have to drive home and he could find his way back to his flat blindfolded

and half-dead. The potato skins looks good, but he knows they'd be better with a little added cheer. He makes a beeline for the men's room and finds a stall where he can sit alone and pop the little something he slipped into his pocket back at his flat. The tap water has a chemical taste and is way too cold, but he only needs an ounce or two to wash down the jagged pill. He takes a deep breath and looks at himself in the mirror. In a few minutes, his night will become a hell of a lot more interesting.



## Two

H-Hour.

He's arrived early. H-hour, eighteen-hundred hours, at the Seattle Coffee House, one night since receiving the email. His dark shades block out the harsh reality that is stinging his senses. Last night's activities have left him a little sore and sluggish. But he'll suffice for tonight's engagement. He steps a few feet away from the barista at her serving station and does a three-hundred sixty degree survey of the room. He spots a woman in a dark suede jacket and black glasses sitting in the corner nursing a 20 ounce cup. A mountain of curls hangs from her head, draping over her shoulders and down to the handbag that swings from the arm rest of her mahogany chair. He smiles and steps up to the bar.

"Twelve-ounce macchiato, extra strong," he says to the sardonic white kid with the braces and a constellation of zits. He demands an exorbitant amount of money in exchange.

"Here you go," he says, forking over a five and rummaging around for some loose change. Such is the price of fair-trade and inflation. He receives his cup from the barista and walks over to the self-serve doctoring station where he adds lots of milk and several spoonfuls of the coarse brown sugar. He pauses and wonders if it is fair-trade too. Some sugar farmer in the Caribbean could be living a better life thanks to his preference for sweetness.

Speaking of which, Angie is waiting. He walks over to her table, trying not to seem overly casual. As he walks, he wonders what it might be like to bury his nose in that mountain she's sporting on her head. He's come close once or twice, the scent still comes back to him in rare flashes. Lilacs and cherry blossoms, or at least what he imagines they would smell like. Her lips are encrusted with rubies. What do rubies taste like, he wonders? Cherry?

"Angie," he says as he takes a seat opposite her.

"Hello Yammie," she says in return. "You're early, as usual."

"Figured I'd get a good seat this way, opposite you."

She sips from her cup. He notices the Chai tea tag hanging from it. "Hope you enjoy the view," she says. "I'm in a bitchy mood."

"With you, dear Angie, any mood is heightened by the mere fact of your presence."

She scowls at him from behind those dark glasses. "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, there's no way, Yammie. Now just sit still and wait for the others."

He smiles like a boy who's been chastised by his pretty teacher. She's taken the challenge to heart, it seems. He still doesn't know what it is exactly, but it's clear it's got her peeved.

"While we're waiting, how about we talk about turn ons and turns offs?"

"Been reading too many porn mags there, Yammie?"

He chuckles, suddenly aware that the dope hasn't totally worn off. She's conjecturing that too much exposure to pornography has convinced him that this is how men and women communicate in real life. She's not entirely wrong, but who the hell reads magazines anymore? He doesn't dignify the accusation with that response for fear of revealing too much about himself. At this point in their relationship, he figures what she doesn't know won't hurt his chances.

"What about favourite sites to cruise? Can I ask you that?"

She takes another sip of her Chai and thinks it over. She shrugs. "Misinformation and Monster Dicks," she says casually. Prad laughs so hard it turns some heads in their directions. He looks back at them and waves, the mandatory gesture to show he's not crazy. When he looks

back at her, he notices she's pulled her glasses down to reveal her shiny hazel-greens. Her eyes could slice through metal, they are that focused on him. And she doesn't look too happy.

"Are you fucking high?"

"What? Noooooooooo..."

She is unconvinced and keeps staring at him with that penetrating gaze. Slowly, the glasses go back into place. He's a little self-conscious now, even though he's told her the truth, sort of. It's been less than six hours since he embraced the Purple Haze. It was intended to get him through the afternoon but he hoped to be sober enough by this point. Unfortunately, he skipped his after work nap that was supposed to sleep off the last of it. Idle conversation proves to be a losing game after that. Prad, in spite of his playful antics, is not immune to being shot down in the most blatant of ways.

Luckily, it doesn't take long for the others to arrive. One by one, two by two, they file through the front door wearing attire appropriate for the evening's "briefing". There's Lynette Bradford, DeeMark "Fiddlergrl", Tommy "OnCrack" Chu, Claude "Voodooman82" Mecklenburg, Sam "Sandngr" Sa'id, Tania "Cutegrrl" Zeta, Zuhair "Mohandas5323" Subramanian, and Arthur "Kingdome" Achebe. These are the sum total of the Society, the best and brightest in their respective field, or at least they say so. All are dressed in dark leather or suede jackets, wearing the same dark glasses as Angie herself. They don't look too conspiratorial walking directly to her table, only a few stopping to order caffeinated beverages.

"Okay, thanks all for coming, so I'll get right to it. We've been challenged." This is how she opens when they all sit down. Everyone leans in to listen attentively. Prad gets a few nods from people acknowledging him as they crowd around and press forward so they can hear better. Suddenly, Prad is feeling pinched and suffocated. And he resents the loss of privacy with his dear Angie, who seems to have all but forgotten about him as she prattles about their mission.

"The DeepPs are known for being assholes to us measly miners, but this is one I couldn't well pass up. And it's a big one, a risky one, so if anyone has any doubts or feels like they don't want to be a part of it, now's the time to say so. Walk away now, and I promise, no one will think less of you."

Achebe raises his hand and smiles at his own gesture. He looks like an oversized schoolboy vying for the teacher's attention. Angie calls on him accordingly.

"Yes, Artie?"

"I for one would like to know what the challenge is before I make up my mind. I think everyone would."

Nods and murmurs of agreement around the table. Angie nods approvingly and begins to lay it out for them.

"As you all may know, there has been some serious scuttlebutt recently about a certain Congressman who has a long and checkered history, and a strange ability to get re-elected in spite of all the shit that comes out of his mouth. His hobbies include waving the Confederate flag, denouncing the enshrinement of civil rights in state charters, and hanging nooses on the tree outside his office."

Some of the group laugh. They, unlike Prad, it seems, know exactly who she means.

"More recently, his activities included getting anti-gay marriage legislation passed, domestic spying, calling his opponents queers and terrorist sympathizers, and demanding that our current president produce a birth certificate because he doesn't seem to trust his allegiance. Ah, fuck it, you know who I mean!"

By now Prad and the remaining clueless apoliticos are catching on. Sa'id spells it out for his own satisfaction.

"Congressman Dangle, that cocksucker."

"Right," says Angie. "The DeepPs seem to agree with me that this man needs a good ass kicking since his constituents are in the habit of re-electing him. They thought it might be nice if someone were to provide proof of his past affiliations, something that no one could deny. I told them that if they thought so, they should hack into his campaign d-base and dig up some dirt, like they always do. But they said they already tried that a few years ago. They looked into who's been financing his campaigns and who he's shaking hands with."

"Nothing incriminating?"

"Nothing illegal," Angie replies after taking a sip of tea. "Any shit he's done or asses he's kissed has been out in the open. Worst thing anyone could find on him is that he takes contributions from the Christian Right and shakes hands with them in public."

"Stuff any idiot would know," Prad says.

"They got nothing?" Sa'id says, incredulous. "Those DeepPs found nothing on someone like Dangle and they admitted it?"

"And it pissed them off to no end. I taunted them about it, but they claim that Dangle must be clean, or just good as faking it. In either case, they figured that if some dirt didn't exist, that someone ought to create it and put it where it could be found."

Prad's eyes widen and a few people begin to push themselves back from the table. Sa'id and a few shush them and look around to make sure no one is listening in. Their volume has exceeded tolerable levels. Enough noise and even the patrons of a Seattle chain will start to get nervous about a left-wing conspiracy.

"Like I said," Angie goes on. "Anybody's not into this, now's the time. The challenge is straightforward, but challenging. We hack into the FBI d-base, find ourselves some good old fashioned domestic terrorists, and add a little information to their file that suggests they knew and were on good terms with Dangle. Nothing major, just something that's going to throw up some red flags at FBI headquarters on Wednesday morning."

"Sounds dangerous, and borderline sleazy," Achebe says. "But if you're gonna' do it, count me in."

"Me too," Sa'id says. As a man of Arab descent, he's waited years to get back at the assholes who made life hell for him and his family. The years in which he couldn't get a job and had to move back in with his parents he blames wholeheartedly on these people. Between the years of oh-one and oh-nine, there was nothing scarier than a Moslem with a high-tech degree.

"I'm in," Tommy Chu says and raps his knuckles against the table.

"Not me," says Tania. "Sorry Ange."

"It's okay," she says with a raised hand. She knows Tania has just started a job with a company that does government contracts and can't risk anything that might land her in hot water with her superiors. The Jerk follows shortly thereafter.

"I'm still on the INS watch list. I can't."

"Yeah, I'm not so sure I'm out of the woods on that either," says Zuhair, who is trying to bring his parents over from Sri Lanka. Angie gives them both a gentle smile of understanding.

That leaves Prad, who feels at least four sets of eyes on him. Three in, four out, and Angie leading the pack. At this point, he could go either way. The thought of committing a federal crime is scarier than shit to him. On the other hand, he would be defending Angie's

honour. That proves irresistibly appealing to him, and he has no intention of getting caught either. No ass-bound federal tracker could catch him, not when he's in the ether.

"You know, Sa'id," he says, trying to stall. "Claude is right about the INS and all. You got the NSA to worry about yourself, you sure you want to do this?"

"Fuck it, man. And fuck them too. They've been breathing down my neck for years, they should be sucking on my ball sack now."

Angie is still looking at him from behind those dark glasses. He feels her penetrating gaze slicing deep trenches through his forehead and eye sockets. "What the hell, I'm in."

"Alright," Angie says. He thinks he sees a smile forming. He wishes he could see her eyes. Oh God, let her be excited, he prays. If she's excited, it means there's still hope of getting her spread eagle on his keyboard.

An hour later, they've drunk their coffee and tea and eaten their biscotti and muffins. When they've discussed all other matters, Angie says good-bye to Tania, Claude, Tommy, Zuhair and Lynette, leaving her with just her co-conspirators. This is best, Prad reasons. The less they know at this point, the better. The thought makes him gleeful. Being part of something conspiratorial just feels so... exciting!

"So where is this going down?" Sa'id asks.

"Well, for security reasons, none of us should be using our home computers. Plus, I want us to be in communication range of each other."

"Internet café?" Chu recommends.

"Better, the Puget campus computer lounge."

"Public internet provider, we'd need an anonymizer," Sa'id says.

"Not a problem, we all know where to find those."

"Don't you need a student ID to get in there?" Prad reminds her.

"I got a friend at Puget," Angie declares. "They'll get us into the student lounge, Tuesday night at midnight. Nobody but on-line gamers and a few keeners are up that late, so we'll have the run of the place. Likely, no one will take notice and they probably won't care if they do. Colleges are full of anarchists."

A shared laugh, leaving only one question.

"What about security?"

"You mean how do we get past the congressman's ICE?" Angie looks at Prad. Those are supposed to be Sa'id's specialty, but considering his background, he can't be caught making those. And Prad knows he's just as good, he's beginning to suspect Angie knows it too from the way she's looking at him.

"I'll work something up," he declares. "Dangle's trackers won't know from which direction I came from. I'll be like a sniper in the jungle. Pop! Pop!"

He holds an imaginary rifle and squeezes off a few rounds at his imaginary enemy.

"Okay, shut up. So it's agreed, we'll do it from Puget next Tuesday."

## Three

It's Friday night and Prad feels like doing something while he's out of the house. He couldn't rope Angie into coming with them, but Sa'id and Achebe took him up on the offer. They needed a chance to discuss strategy before returning to their daily lives. Already Sa'id has a few people in mind that he would like to see associated with Dangle. He plans to email the list to Angie as soon as he gets home. He even thinks a few photo shop pics for the file would be nice. It seems a little overkill, but who the hell cares? All they need to do is create the illusion of something illicit, nothing that'll survive investigation. All that's really necessary is for the press to pick up on the scent of a possible scandal, a little something to make the Congressman's life more interesting before the next election.

They discuss the anonymizer Angie's planning on implementing. For a man like Dangle, who approved email surveillance for government employees, it seems like a fitting irony. The only question is which site she'll use. Prad knows she's partial to the Norwegians, though Russia has become good at producing such sites due to all the domestic spying they had to endure under Putin and Medvedev. Then again, there are plenty of Puget Sound services who offer similar services, thanks in no small part to eight years of Tom Ridge and Homeland Security spying on people's emails. After their first pitcher, they get into specifics of their own work.

"You and me can come up with some Icebreakers for the FBI, no problem, Prad," Sa'id says over his sudsy glass. "I got plenty of friends who would be more than willing to help. It's a dream come true, you know. I gotta thank Angie for giving me this chance."

"Assuming we don't get of course," Achebe says.

"It's just a one time thing right? And even if we fail, they won't know it was us."

"They could always find out the old fashioned way." Achebe looks over his shoulder at the other patrons. "Maybe we should be doing this from home... separately?"

"Naw, we need all our brains to do this. Angie did say our collaboration was key."

Prad is saying this. He has surprised his fellow members on more than one occasion by demonstrating his willingness to take orders from a girl. It surprises him too sometimes, but none of them seem to think of Angie as a girl. Achebe's concern seems more directed towards her methods though.

"All of us can do this from home and still stay connected, it's called a conference call."

"You trust your phone?" Sa'id scoffs.

"Then how about some MSN or Skype, Mr. Arab fucking nationalist?"

"Yeah, that's smart. The feds are a hell of a lot likelier to tap your computer than your phone, dude! Public places are way safer."

"Just wait til they start putting up cameras. This country will create its own version of the London Eye any day now."

Prad slaps the counter. "This is all fine and good, but it was Angie's call and we all said we were down, right? If you've got problems, Achebe, why did you agree to this?"

Achebe swills a little beer and his mouth and appears to be giving the questions some thought. "I don't know. Maybe I just don't like the idea of sitting things out while the boss lady is busy doing something dangerous."

"And because you like a challenge." Prad raises his glass and taps it against Achebe's. Sa'id joins them from the other side. At the very least, they agree that they can pull this off. No

federal tracker is as good as any one of them. How could they possibly fare against three of them combined?

It all sounds too simple. With a little lubricant and enough testosterone, just about anything does. Sa'id and Kingdome turn down Prad's recommendation for a third pitcher and decide to call it a night. They have families and lives to get back to, which invariably forces Prad to go pick up his where he left off. He hops the el-train back to the Empire State towers and decides some television and a fat puff will be his entertainment for the remainder of the evening. Perhaps he'll even call up mom and dad for his weekly update.

*Need to make some more friends*, Prad reminds himself. Life has become incredibly monotonous since moving to Puget Sound. The Society has not filled the void just yet, nor has lusting after Angie taken care of the vacuum that is his love life. As he passes through the revolving doors to his building, he realizes he scarcely needs to speak to his parents at all. He's already telling himself everything they are going to. At least his mother at any rate, who will be concentrating on his love life. All he needs to do before getting to his apartment is lecture himself on finding a secure job and he'll have both parents covered. Such is the breakdown of his parents' advice; his mother covers love and companionship, his father career and finances.

"Mr. Pradchaphet?"

It is the doorman calling to him. Prad is surprised, mainly because the guy finally said it right. He looks over at the old man in the monkey suit with a look that says "what the hell do you want?"

"A package came for you sir. I was going to bring it to your apartment, but seeing as how you're here..."

"It's okay, I guess. What is it?"

Prad is escorted over to the front desk and eyes a square box wrapped in brown paper and tied shut with binder twine. His address is written in large black letters in what appears to be permanent marker. There is no return address.

"Who sent it?"

"I do not know, sir. It was left at the desk while I was on my break and no one remembers seeing who dropped it off. It was just here."

"Don't suppose you gave it a shake? Checked it to see it was vibrating?"

"Vibrating, sir?"

Prad shakes his head at him and places his ear to the package. It's not vibrating, or ticking, or emitting a funny scent. Could still be anthrax or some other crazy biological weapon. Or maybe it's a pipe bomb, courtesy of the local Minutemen who think he's a terrorist. Prad has always wondered why the heat Sa'id complains so bitterly about has never been directed at him. He's dark enough that some dumb hick might get it into their head to call the NSA or FBI on him. For years he's been waiting for a knock on the door or a kindly meet and greet with some cloaked figure in a dark alley. It's like waiting for a shoe to drop. But alas, he is beginning to sense that maybe they've caught on to the fact that neither of his heritages are particularly suspect. He eyes the package and tries to decide whether he's going to open it here or upstairs.

"I'll take it with me. If it's anything weird, I'll phone down."

"Are you expecting it to be something weird?" the old man asks.

"Uh...no. Never mind."

Prad leaves the front lobby and wonders where the doorman has been for the last decade. Blissfully unaware that paranoia has become a national canon. The package clunks a bit as he hoists it under his arm and boards the elevator. Whatever it is is not secured too well inside, and

is clearly a few sizes too small for the box itself. His nerves are on high alert as he expects the contents to blow up or start leaking from the little thump. He pushes the button for the fourteenth floor (thirteen in reality) and the doors close.

The elevator hums to life and rolls upwards. He can hear the motors purring gently and feels his heart beating pleasantly fast. When the elevator stops on the seventh, it skips a beat and he's made all the more nervous when an older man steps on with him.

"Going up?" the man asks needlessly. Prad nods and tries not to look nervous, and fails. The man eyes him ever so suspiciously and steps in.

Hot date? Prad looks him over and thinks he's going upstairs to see some nice widow. He's decked out in a dapper black suit with a white shirt that looks to be faux-silk, possibly real. He has a dapper jacket on too, so he's probably picking someone up in addition to taking them out. Or maybe he's just stopping in for a booty call. Do men his age still do that? He smiles as he speculates as to the content of his wallet. Condoms, in addition to his platinum and senior citizen's discount card?

Prad checks the numbers again. They've reached floor ten. That's when it hits him. The doors are polished brass and highly reflective. The man has been watching him in the reflection the entire time. He could not have failed to notice how Prad was looking him up and down. And what's this under his arm? A big brown package with no return address? Well now Prad is feeling the sting of paranoid eyes on him. Or maybe he thinks Prad is one of the buildings many nubile queers, the up and coming boys who are moving into the valley and taking over prime real estate from old fag bashers like him. He feels strangely empowered.

The doors open on twelve and the man politely gets out. Prad is let down. Unless he's making a call to the authorities, Prad's been imaging the whole thing. Ah whatever, it was fun while it lasted. And guiltily, he realizes he forgot that by even being in the same tight, confining space with the man, he might have been risking his life. If the package is indeed some leaking biotoxin, then he just killed the poor fellow, or possibly made him and his date very sick. At least he won't be alone in the emergency room tonight.

The elevator passes the phantom thirteenth floor, reaches fourteen and dings. It takes less than a minute for Prad to make it to his apartment, get inside and fetch the pair of industrial scissors that came with his knife set. Taking a deep breath, he cuts through the twine and starts making a seam along the paper. Once he's cut the box from one end to the other, he gently tears it off and peaks underneath. It's a shoebox, Merrell's from REI, which is indicative of something, he thinks. But it's still just a shoebox, and he hasn't even risked a peek at the true contents yet. He feels strangely let down and relieved again. No one would ever pack a bomb or a bio-agent into a shoe box. If the Anarchist cookbook doesn't contain a section on that, well then it damn well should!

The edges of the box are secured with duct tape, which renews his sense of worry for just a second. If he were packing this box with something that wasn't supposed to get out until opened, he would be using duct tape to seal it. The scissors come into play again. It's an old habit that he can't just rip the tape of something or tear into a package. Not being subjected to Christmas while growing up can do that to a person. They just don't know how to devour a package. Nevertheless, his efforts are rewarded when he finally slits down the length of the last piece of tape. The eight pieces are easily removed and lay in a heap on his table. Eight silver strips in six and twelve inch lengths.

He takes a deep breath and removes the top.

It's a book... shit.

Not just any book. A copy of Koestler's "Ghost in the Machine" is staring up at him from inside. There was a note attached to it, a yellow sticky with cryptic instructions scrawled in fine ink.

*Read it. Learn!*

Already Prad is starting to feel annoyed. There is something inherently unsavoury about being instructed to learn. It takes all the fun out of it. Learning is most enjoyable when it goes against the grain, when it's something you're not supposed to be doing because it threatens the establishment. And the ultimate letdown of knowing that no one considers him important enough to kill him makes it worse.

He picks the book up and looks it over, just to make sure its not somehow rigged or booby trapped. He sniffs the pages, musty but harmless. The spine is intact, the cover not lined with some tactile poison. Nothing's wrong with it at all. It actually looks like it's in fine shape, like whoever sent it had the good graces to order a good copy through Amazon.com.

Who the hell sent this, he thinks as he opens it and flips through the pages. Probably Angie, he thinks. Something involving dating tips would probably be more appropriate given the tenor of their last conversation, but getting him to learn is something she would not pass up. The subject matter in undeniably Society as well.

The phone rings, causing his heart to jump again. He puts the book down and grabs the wireless from its cradle on the kitchen counter.

"Hello?"

There's no answer, just dead air and the almost imperceptible sense of something breathing in the background. His paranoia is starting to tingle again.

"Hello. Who is this?"

Another long pause. He strains to hear the presence of breathing but can't be sure.

"Who the fuck is this? Answer me, you sick cunt!"

"Yamal?" an overtly feminine, high-pitched voice says.

*Oh double shit!* he screams internally. All the way from Bangkok, the one person he can never allow himself to say "shit" to has just heard the worst he's got.

"Yamal?! What are doing talking like that?!" she demands.

"Sorry, ma," he says sheepishly. "Thought you were someone else..."

And Friday night becomes the night from hell. What should have been a routine conversation about his inadequacies has become a full-fledged double-barrelled denunciation. He estimates, as his mother tears into him with fire and brimstone, exactly how many angry calls he will be getting from relatives, coupled with the amount of time it will take to live this down. He gives it about a year, six months at best.

When at last the conversation is over, he ear feels hot and swollen. His dignity is similarly flayed, having been subjected to every bashing his mother could manage. Time for a smoke! Locating his vaporizer and his baggie, he loads a nice fat piece into the chamber, grabs his torch and then heads for the balcony. Another nice feature of the Empire Towers, the lovely terraces overlooking the emerald city at night. It's actually quite pretty tonight, the air cleansed by the wave of ocean air that's finally sent it all to Tacoma and Olympia.

He settles into one of the chairs that came with the patio set, the one with the glass table that has the natural bumps and imperfections in it. He settles his feet onto the glass, lights the torch and puts it to his vaporizer. He sips the sweet, cloudy nectar that forms in the chamber, knowing that in a moment, he will have forgotten all about the day and its debacles. At least for a little while...



## Four

Tuesday night, t-minus five and a half minutes.

Puget campus is virtually deserted, at least in the vicinity of the main student residence. Prad and the rest have dressed accordingly for an evening of felony hacking; dressy casual, all dark tones. No hoods or black toques, those would bring campus security running faster than a plea of rape or assault. Their best approach is to walk right in, playing it cool, set down to do their work then walk out like they just had a nice evening of gaming. That's still the cover story, and Achebe has the Warlords disks to back it up. Prad, meantime, has the ICE breaker on his decorative flash drive, the one he's been working on all week. Sa'id and Angie have been in regular contact with him, plus a few black hats he knows, letting him know everything they can about the FBI d-base. If they were wrong, they'll know soon when the FBI boots them and does a trace to find where they're working from.

But if things go well, Achebe's lovely little creations will be circulating in the FBI's files. That way, when the press gets a hold of them, a gift from an "anonymous source", they'll be able to confirm that the evidence is real. Angie's anonymizer site, whichever she's selected for this op, will come into play then.

All the bases are covered, all they need is for Angie's "friend" to show up.

Their synchronized watches indicate that it is now midnight. Feet are getting itchy and nerves are on edge. Prad waits a few seconds before saying what he's sure everyone must be thinking at this point.

"Where the hell is this guy?"

"He'll be here, just wait!"

Prad grumbles, then realizes he has inadvertently confirmed that Angie's friend is in fact a dude. He is further disappointed when the dude proves punctual and darkens the front foyer of the building they intend to enter. He does a little circular scan of the foyer and walkway leading up the front door, then pushes it open. He leans back against the door to hold it open, trying to appear calm for all the cams that are able to see him now that he's outside.

"So who is this guy anyway? Some kind of grad student or something?"

"Yeah, looks a little old for living in residence, Ange."

Angie looks at Achebe and Sa'id with daggers. She further corrects them on that a few facts. "He's a doctoral student and I never said he lives here, he just has an ID."

"You two dating?"

No sooner are the words out of his mouth than Prad wishes he could shove them back in. But like a wet vapour in a very cold room, it's out there and frozen solid. Nothing in the world could erase it now. "We're friends," she says defensively.

"I'm not hearing noooooo," Sa'id interjects.

"It's time, you dickheads. Okay now, nice and cool," Angie commands, and they walk nonchalantly towards the door. The cameras only scan the front and until now they've been beneath the shade of a tree. Prad thinks that such blind spots must be the subject of a lot of complaints. There's enough room in the area they've been standing in for the last few minutes for several assaults or rapes to occur. For most people, this would be considered a strange observation. To Prad, it's just plain fact, much like how the cameras are hopelessly out of date. No one is fooled by those tinted glass domes that cover them. Everyone knows they only point one direction.

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