

Sample Chapters from

The Algorithm

By

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Chapter 1

Screens filled the air around Jon's head. They jostled each other for attention, oblivious to their relative importance, only wanting more time with his eyes on them.

He reached up and dragged a smaller one closer, almost-but-not-quite touching it, causing the others to rotate like stars falling into a black hole. The screen showed the progress of a smaller hack, an information gathering algorithm researching a man's personal life. Gathering data from social media was easy – the machines could do it in moments – but turning the data into a way in, an entry point, was a skill. He formed the gathered data into a table and sorted it, searching for a key, an oft repeated data point which might lead to the key.

'Hey man, you have to check this out.' Artarmon's voice barely registered, a background buzz from the real world. Jon knew where he was; on a couch, at the office, working late with his boss. It just didn't matter at the moment.

'Busy,' he said. He expanded the screen to get a better look, but it wasn't there yet. The hack needed more time.

'And I'm your boss. How about you try paying me a little attention?'

Jon pushed the screen back into the storm above his head and brought the main attack program back into focus. This one was Em's, a thing of beauty she'd knocked out in a week. It focussed on the company itself, trying to do what none of the other firms had managed yet.

'Are you listening to me?' Artarmon said. 'You're going to want to see this.'

'You know we're under contract, right?' Jon pointed his finger at the slider in the lower left corner of his HUD, moving it down one level, from his personal realm to off. The vortex of screens waiting for his attention faded away along with the rest of the digital world. He looked around at the office, surprised that even with the chaos of his digital workspace, the physical office was messier. The open plan office was furnished in the hipster-hacker aesthetic the clients expected to see; pinball machines along the walls with neon beer signs above them, couches and futons and meditation mats on the floor, and the smell of weed in the air. Artarmon didn't actually allow his staff to smoke on the job but he had to include the smell to complete the image.

'You're still not paying me enough attention.' The boss lay on the couch opposite Jon, FeelyGear attached to his balding head. His eyes were closed, the equipment controlling his senses while he was off somewhere playing games. 'I'm needy.'

'You're expecting me to nail this intrusion tomorrow, right?'

'Of course.'

'But you don't think I should put in the hours tonight?'

'I think you should do whatever you feel is necessary to make me look good.' A ghost of a smile escaped through the FeelyGear.

'Then can I please get back to work?'

'In a bit. Take a break.'

'That just means I'll have to work later.'

'I'm paying you for it though, right?'

Jon wasn't sure if the boss was actually asking the question rather than making a statement. He had accountants and an HR suite to take care of the boring parts of running a business. 'Yes, but at some point I need to get some sleep.'

'Sleep is for old people like me. Don't waste your life on unconsciousness.'

'Waste it on games instead.'

'Exactly.'

Jon decided to stop arguing. It was only going to end one way and hopefully, if he gave in now, he'd be

able to review everything before going home. He removed his Realmware glasses – fancy, feather-light wraparounds – and reached for the box on the desk. Inside was the other set of office FeelyGear, a ridiculous expense Artarmon swore was a tax write-off. Jon wasn't sure the boss knew what the phrase meant, but it gave him access to something he wouldn't otherwise be able to afford, so he didn't complain.

A soft pad the size and shape of a yarmulke went on the top of his head, with retractable arms he now pulled into place. The ends of the arms stuck to his skin and hair around his head, twitching a little as they worked to find the right angles on his brain. When they were ready he got a three second warning – a low tone in his ear – before the FeelyGear took control.

There were people who knew how FeelyGear worked; Jon had met them. They paraded their knowledge of the inner workings of technology at parties, possibly in the hopes of getting laid. This never worked. Whatever invisible rays the device used to manipulate a user's brain were unimportant to the average person. It was safe, it was fun, and it worked on magic. Everyone was happy.

Realmware glasses gave you sight and sound for your own digital realm, but FeelyGear gave you everything else. When Jon's HUD sprang to life and the screens began to swirl around his head again, he immediately grabbed the nearest one. This time when he reached for it he didn't need to stop just before touching it; his fingers could feel the texture of the two-dimensional display, like a piece of expensive paper. The screens left trying to grab his attention caused a breeze as they flew around his head which he felt on the skin of his face.

It was fully immersive, and utterly distracting. Nobody who seriously wanted to get any work done, in Jon's opinion, should be using FeelyGear. But it was pretty cool.

'Are you still screwing around?' Artarmon said. His voice carried extra weight now, a low vibration Jon could feel in his stomach.

'I'm ready. Where are we going?'

'Omega Gadaffi.' An invite appeared in his peripheral vision and Jon activated it. A moment later the real world disappeared.

He stood in a large market, the sun overhead an angry giant beating down on him. People swarmed from stall to stall, their avatars in all shapes and sizes. Dwarves straight out of Tolkien rubbed shoulders with space marines and Vulcans, everyone coming from a different region of the game. The stalls sold loot harvested from all over the world, valuable weapons racked beside herbs and flowers.

'Where are you?' He asked on a private channel. 'What's your name?'

'Art.' The boss stood behind him. His avatar looked exactly like he did in the real world, complete with jeans and a shirt.

'I expected you to be a little more...ostentatious.'

'It pays to hide your awesomeness in the Market. What's your name?'

'Chaos187. The legendary.'

'Of course it is.'

'Better than just calling yourself Art.' Chaos187 was a musclebound warrior, seemingly held together by leather straps and steroids. A giant sword rested across his back and scars decorated his skin. He was proud of the avatar, and it fit into the chaos of the market better than Art did. 'Why are we here?'

'Look over there.'

Chaos187 looked over to the edge of the market, the place where paving took over from the desert. A barbarian horde were approaching, marching quickly down the hill leading to the next region. Towering over the avatars, at the edge of the market, was the Knight Protector, a giant suit of rusty armour given life with cogs and steam. It waited patiently, a statue with no sign of life.

'Are they attacking the market?'

'Looks that way,' Art replied.

'The Knight Protector is going to crush them,' Chaos187 said. Nobody attacked the Merchant, the owner of the Market. It was a known rule, a reason the place could exist at all. The Market was a safe space, a destination for players the world over. People tried raiding it every so often, but they invariably died in the process. The Merchant was the most powerful player in the game and he'd built the region up from a simple desert map into the centre of the world. People didn't mess with him.

'You're right, they're dead,' Art said as the Knight Protector finally came to life. It stepped from its plinth and stomped to the edge of the paving. The barbarians continued marching, oblivious to the death waiting for them. 'But I think this is just a distraction.'

The crowd was getting bigger. It seemed like anyone with a game saved in the Market was coming to

watch the show. Avatars popped into existence at a constant rate as news spread across the real world.

'You think there's a larger force somewhere?'

'There's only one Knight Protector, but there's 360 degrees of desert. Come one.' Art turned and began making his way through the crowd.

'So we're running toward danger?'

'Yup.'

'And we're not going to get a video of the attack we know is actually happening, just in case there's another attack happening somewhere else?'

'Yup.'

Omega Gadaffi was formed from the relics of old MMOs and then procedurally generated from there. There was no governing body, no company in charge, just the general chaos of the cloud. Getting to the central market had taken him months, of bloodshed and violence and mythic quests. His spawn, randomly assigned the first time he logged in, was on the other side of the world. Dying in the market was not an option. He followed anyway, but drew his sword, just in case.

'Look over there,' Art said, pointing through the stalls toward the only building. Chaos187 scanned the church – the Merchant's store – but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

'The only thing worth looking at over there is the lack of people. Because they're all watching the fight, which is where we should be.'

'Look to the left a bit.'

Chaos187 sighed and followed Art's finger. He had to squint but he finally saw it between the stalls and the church; an army of barbarians, with mammoths and AK47s, marching on the market. The shifting sands covered the sound of their approach and they kept as quiet as they could.

'I'm dead,' he said. He brought his pack around to the front and took stock of his supplies. At least he wouldn't lose much, not counting the time it had taken to get here.

'Maybe,' Art said, hurrying toward the church. 'Follow me.'

'Toward the army of murder?' Chaos187 said, resolutely not following. Art didn't slow down though, running from cover to cover, getting closer to the church without drawing attention to himself. 'Of course.'

With another sigh he took off, following the path of his boss, moving from cover to cover until the church shielded him from the army. He then hurried to join Art at the large double door entry to the building.

'Took you long enough,' Art said.

'Running toward danger isn't my idea of fun.'

'Really?'

'Not when I'm so far from my spawn, no.'

'Child,' Art said, pulling a plasma rifle the length of his arm from his jeans pocket. He handed it to Chaos187, smiling at the wide grin he got in return. 'This is going to be fun.'

'You're a god in here, aren't you?'

'It pays to hide your awesomeness in Omega Gadaffi.'

'Noted.' The rifle now appeared in his inventory and he hit the insurance button immediately. Now, when he inevitably died, he'd only have to find a fraction of what it was worth to get it – and everything else in the pack – back.

'The Merchant has every defence possible in here, so we're safer at the church than out in the market anyway.' Art reached into his back pocket and fished around, eventually pulling out a crossbow as large as his thigh. 'The army won't attack him, if they have any sense.'

'So we take up a position in a spot they won't attack and kill everything in sight,' Chaos187 said, his grin now a permanent fixture on his face. He primed the rifle and a shiver went up his spine at the sound it made, a deep electric groan, as though the plasma ached to be unleashed.

'Yup. Should be pretty good grinding, and we might even survive.'

'Where's your spawn?'

'Like I'm going to tell you,' Art said, dismissing the question without thought. Omega Gadaffi only allowed one spawn point, ever. You kept it to yourself unless you wanted to be hounded from the game. People took perverse pleasure in gunning down unarmed, freshly spawned avatars.

'Here they come.' Chaos187 pushed the church doors open and stepped inside, taking a quick look around before getting ready. The interior of the building looked less like a house of worship and more like a pawn shop, with rows of glass cabinets filled with odd items traded from across the game. While the

Merchant owned the entire market, and took a cut of every sale, he would have been rich just with the special items in the church.

Chaos187 took cover on one side of the double doors and Art on the other, each aiming their weapons at the market. They should have a great vantage point for attacking the army, with their view stretching to the knight protector on the far edge. He had just finished with the small band of barbarians and now returned to his plinth. He didn't know the army was coming, and seemed satisfied with the blood staining the sand dune behind him.

The barbarians stormed into view, smashing aside stalls and making as much noise as they could. They ran directly for the large crowd gathered to watch the first attack.

'Would you like to do the honours?' Art said, gesturing to their wide open targets.

'No, please, I insist.'

They opened fire together, Chaos187's plasma rifle sending balls of red-glowing death into the enemy while Art's crossbow fired slow moving laser bolts. They took out five each before anyone noticed what was happening, and another two before the first barbarians reached the crowd and began the slaughter.

'What's this?' Art said, stepping a little way out of the church to look around at the approaching mammoths. 'They're not following the others.'

'They're coming here?' Chaos187 said, surprised. Nobody attacked the Merchant, it was suicide.

The bulk of the barbarian army, hundreds strong and still as silent as they'd been on their approach, formed up before the steps of the church. They ignored their dead and the rifle and crossbow trying to thin the ranks.

'They're going to attack here.' Chaos187 jumped at the voice, coming from behind them in the church. He turned to see the merchant, a short, fat man in a toga, standing calmly between them. 'Will they never learn?'

'Um,' Chaos187 said. 'Sir? Do you need us to do anything?'

'Just leave me ten percent of the loot,' the Merchant said as he stepped through the doors and into the bright sunlight. The barbarian army finally broke their silence, growling and hooting at the man they'd obviously come to kill.

The crowd had been massacred and it seemed none of them fancied trying their luck again, as the market was now empty. The Merchant stood at the top of the steps to his church and raised his hands in the air. A few of the barbarians flinched away.

'This is my region,' he said, his voice carrying across the market and out into the desert. 'Here, I am all powerful. No one can stand against me, or haven't you learned that lesson yet?'

'They've been running raids for weeks,' Art said. 'It's why I was saved here. Great loot from all the corpses.'

Someone stepped out of the ranks and onto the first step. He was smaller than the other barbarians and didn't look right. He looked more like an accountant or a librarian, despite the leather thong and sword.

'I wanted to come see for myself,' the man said. His voice had none of the power of the Merchant and it died on the wind. 'I've decided to take this all away from you.'

'There is no power here greater than mine, and no exploit that can defeat me. What is your plan?' The Merchant still had his hands in the air to either side, ready to do...whatever it was he was threatening to do.

'Then stop us.' The man drew his sword and stepped forward, moving a step up and closer to the Merchant.

'I'm warning you,' the Merchant said, his voice bringing lightning to the sky.

'Why hasn't he killed this guy yet?' Art said to himself. He looked back into the church, as though searching for an exit.

'What's the matter?' Chaos187 said. 'You look scared.'

'I think they've found an exploit he doesn't know about. I've seen him zap people for far less than this.'

The barbarian leader took another step safely, and another, and soon the Merchant was backing away, almost tripping over his toga in his hurry.

'Get the doors closed,' he said as he stepped inside, and Chaos187 did as instructed, slamming the doors closed and dropping the heavy bar across them. Art had moved into the cooler interior of the building and the Merchant followed him. They searched the glass cases, presumably for weapons.

'What's going on here?' Chaos187 said. His voice echoed and nobody paid him any attention. 'I

thought you owned the market? Hello, somebody want to say something?’

A fist burst through the door behind him and he jumped away, squeaking.

‘Very manly,’ Art said as he carefully opened a case and reached inside. He pulled out a hand grenade spray painted gold.

‘What is happening?’

‘Someone has taken the market from me,’ the Merchant said as he opened his own case. He pulled out a scroll and unrolled it. ‘We’re all very fucked.’

Chaos187 wanted to ask how but a sword smashed through the door before he had the chance. The blade pulled back out, smashing through again a moment later. It hit the bar holding the door closed and cut through it.

‘Hold them off until I finish reading this,’ the Merchant said. He began to mumble, running through whatever was printed on the scroll.

‘You’ll owe us,’ Art said, bouncing the hand grenade in his palm, testing the weight.

‘I’ll give you each a thousand dragons,’ he replied without thinking. Chaos187 whistled; a dragon was worth about a hundred quid. This could be a good day after all.

‘Yes, sir,’ he said, turning to the door as it collapsed inwards. ‘Time to die, barbarian scum.’ He turned the plasma rifle to full power and jammed his finger on the trigger. The plasma was now a lightning bolt, a red finger of God, vaporising whatever it touched. He dusted ten, twenty, fifty barbarians before the power light came on, and still they were coming.

‘Step away,’ Art said as he threw the grenade over the heads of the enemy in the doorway. It vanished into the sunlight outside and for a moment there was a calm to the scene. Both sides waited to see what would happen and Chaos187 heard the sound as the grenade hit the steps and bounced. Art turned to the Merchant. ‘It was a dud?’

‘Wait for it,’ the Merchant said, holding his finger in the air as he continued reading.

The explosion threw barbarian parts into the church and rocked the world. Dust fell from the beams in the roof and mixed with the fine spray of blood hanging in the air. The outside world was swallowed by smoke and screaming.

‘That, was, awesome!’ Chaos187 said as he re-primed the rifle while he had the chance. He rushed to the door to take the fight to the enemy, expecting little resistance, and almost ran into the next wave of attackers. They were already coming, swords and AK47s in the air, screaming a battle cry.

He turned and ran away, getting some distance while Art filled the air with his laser bolts, before turning and unleashing the plasma rifle at full power again. He drove the attackers back outside but they kept coming.

‘Sir, I think we’re boned,’ Chaos187 said, his back now almost touching the Merchant.

‘You did good, swordsman.’ The Merchant threw the scroll to the floor. ‘This wasn’t something we could win.’

‘But why?’ Art said, joining them in the centre of the church. Chaos187’s weapon blinked at him to re-prime, but he knew as soon as he let go of the trigger the wave would come through. He wouldn’t have time.

‘Your government took ownership of my region.’

‘They can’t do that,’ Art said. He raised his crossbow, ready for when the plasma rifle was done.

‘They can, just not for very long. Long enough to mount this attack, apparently.’

‘So what’s the plan?’ Chaos187 said. The rifle was warm in his hands. It would explode soon, and though he couldn’t actually be hurt in the game it would be very annoying to lose the rifle. Insurance didn’t cover it if you destroyed it yourself.

‘The plan, swordsman, is to escape.’ The Merchant drew a revolver from his toga, stuck the barrel in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. His headless body fell to the floor as the plasma rifle finally died.

‘I think we should join him,’ Art said, but neither got a chance. They were cut down in a hail of bullets a second later.

Jon jerked away from the loading screen before he could spawn. He didn’t want to see the stupid tree he’d be facing. He’d seen it enough when he first started.

‘That was pretty intense,’ Artamon said. He dropped his FeelyGear to the couch beside him. ‘Thanks, I enjoyed myself.’

‘Yeah, but now I have to walk my arse off to get back.’ Jon was tempted to throw the FeelyGear across the room. He stopped himself though; he didn’t have the money to replace it if he broke it, and was unlikely to ever have it.

‘Console yourself with the glorious video you got of the attack. Should be worth a bit.’

‘Shit. I forgot to record.’ An attack on the Merchant would have been easy to sell. An attack that succeeded and ended with the Merchant running away to his spawn point would have ended in an auction. He’d be set for the rest of the year. He could probably afford his own FeelyGear.

‘Idiot,’ Artarmon said. ‘Get back to work. We’re under contract.’

Jon slipped his Realmware glasses on and brought the main crack screen back into view. It was done, though he’d leave it running until they turned in their findings. A smokescreen was always useful.

‘I got all I need from this an hour ago.’

‘And?’ Artarmon sat at the bar and looked back at Jon expectantly.

‘I’ll stop by tomorrow and break in.’

‘You got something?’

‘Enough. Probably.’ Jon swiped the screen into oblivion and stood, stretching and yawning. His PDA was already getting a cab ready for him. ‘I’m going to go.’

‘Do well tomorrow,’ Artarmon said, turning back to the bar and grabbing a glass. ‘They’re paying us a lot. And I have a reputation to uphold.’

‘I’ll be amazing, of course.’

Jon fell into the cab and let his PDA tell it where to go. He was too busy kicking himself for forgetting to record. He could have made serious money. Now he’d just be the guy who said he was there. The guy who once caught the biggest fish you ever did see, but it got away.

Oh well, he thought. At least tomorrow I’m going to break into the largest corporation in the world and steal their most well-guarded secrets. That’s something.

Chapter 2

It was early afternoon before he woke up. He beat his alarm by two minutes, rolling out of bed and grabbing his glasses in one move.

'Like a ninja,' he said. He stepped into the en suite as the lights came on. When he turned to the mirror above the sink the shower turned on as well, pre-heated to the temperature he liked. 'Today is the day, Jon. Today we make our name.'

'When you're quite done talking to yourself, I'd like a moment.' Jon's PDA, Holmes, appeared in the mirror. It was a two foot tall imp wearing a deerstalker, and it covered Jon's reflection.

'Let me shower first.'

'Artarmon has left you several messages. You might want to get back to him.'

'Later.' Jon took off his glasses and the imp vanished.

The shower was incidental, hot and strong and mostly ignored. He spent the time going over his plan for the day, trying out different attacks and working out what his escape routes would be if someone turned out smarter than he expected.

He kept the Realmware glasses off until he was dressed and ready. The costume for the day was that of tech support. Tech support rarely existed outside old movies, but everyone knew what they should look like. Rumpled trousers – he folded them up and sat on them while picking out a tie – and a lightly stained, short sleeve white shirt. He dismissed the tie – he hadn't seen anyone wear one in a few years – and toyed with the idea of adding a pocket protector, but decided it would also be going too far. Besides, he didn't own any pens.

With his Realmware in place he looked the part. He messed his hair up a bit and grinned at himself.

'I'm a goddamn spy.'

'And a fine one at that,' Holmes said, appearing in the air beside the mirror. 'Though I believe that if you value your job you might want to call Artarmon.'

'No need.' Jon left his room and headed for the kitchen. The coffee was already waiting for him. 'I know what he wants. It's what he always wants before I do one of these; he wants to know the plan, in excruciating detail. He wants to live vicariously through me, and I don't have the time.'

'He would advise you that he is your boss.' Holmes settled on the counter beside the bowl of fake fruit. 'He pays you to be available to him.'

'And we know what I'd say to that, don't we?' Jon downed the coffee, placed the cup in the sink, and opened the cupboard beside the front door. Inside he had a collection of backpacks, suitcases, and briefcases. He selected a single strap, over the shoulder courier bag. It had a skull and crossbones sticker on it.

'I'll have the cab waiting for you downstairs.'

'No need. I'm taking the tube. Want to guess why?' PDAs weren't smart, not really. They had a great conversational interface and if you had enough money, which lately Jon did, you could get all kinds of upgrade modules to make them more impressive. Underneath it all though, they were simple algorithms doing things in incredibly complex ways. Jon liked to test those algorithms when he got the chance, if only to chart the progress of the technology. It was good, but not flawless.

'You enjoy the smell of the lower classes,' Holmes said, sarcasm dripping from every syllable.

Jon left the flat and stepped into the waiting lift. He'd hacked the controller shortly after moving in to ensure it wouldn't stop on the intervening floors if he was on board. It made the only pain of living on the eightieth floor – everyone who lived on the floors below him – a thing of the past.

'No, but that's very classist of you. Now, try again; why am I taking the tube?'

'You realise I have better things to do, like field calls from your boss. Also, your father called. You're a man in demand.'

'You're dodging the question.'

'You're asking stupid questions.'

He had it, trapped facing a question it couldn't answer. If it understood more of the situation then it would be able to work out a decent guess, but going in blind it had no imagination.

The lift moved smoothly to the ground floor and he stepped into the lobby, his cheap shoes squeaking on the polished floor. He waved to the doorman and ignored the look on the man's face; he thought Jon was a player, visiting different girlfriends on different days of the week, and using different clothes as part of his scam.

London was cold this time of the morning, with the kilometre tall buildings blocking out the meagre sunlight. He hurried to the tube, wishing his disguise had come with a jacket.

Wednesday Minds occupied an older building on the edge of the mile, the old part of London reserved for historic buildings and untouched by the explosive growth of the city over the past few decades. The underground got him within easy walking distance a bit faster than a taxi would have done, though he had no intention of making a habit of it.

He stood before the building for a few minutes before entering. This was the moment, if he could pull it off. This would make him a name, make him the person companies went to when they needed their security tested, or when they needed to break through someone else's security. He could do it, he knew. He could be that cool.

Taking a deep breath, Jon hurried up the stairs and got into character. As soon as he stepped through the front doors his PDA, and most of his HUD, vanished.

'High, darling,' he said to the lady on reception, stumbling over the words when she looked up at him. She was a gorgeous redhead in a low cut top, and it fit his character to be flustered by her. Also, it gave him an excuse to check her out, which wasn't a bad thing.

'Can we help you, sir?' Her voice held the ghost of a French accent, as though she'd worked hard to get rid of it. She smiled up at him and only briefly noticed his hands on her pristine desk.

'Yeah, please. I'm here to take a look at Mr Preston's personal computer.' He smiled at her shyly and looked away, the picture of inoffensive awkwardness.

'His what?'

'Personal computer. Like the servers that run the minds, the PDAs, only smaller. Let's you run simulations and things in private.' He needed to be careful here, he knew. She was the first weak point in his plan, someone he had no way of anticipating in advance.

Luckily, Wednesday Minds was on his side here. They didn't allow the common staff to wear normal Realmware at work, so she couldn't just run a search. She had to use company approved glasses, which meant she was trapped in their walled garden. She had no way of verifying what he said, or finding out the machines in question were disposable; nobody would come out to fix them. They were too cheap to bother.

'Why would anyone want one of those?'

'Why do people still watch old movies, or listen to records?' He was losing her. Her eyes flicked to the security guards near the door and down to whatever she had on her HUD. 'Rich people like weird things.'

She looked up, his words striking a cord. 'Tell me about it.'

He ran with it. 'I had a guy call me once who had some old games consoles with saves on them from last century. He spent thousands and thousands on the stupid machine instead of just going to the arcade. Or, actually, for that kind of money he could have had them simulated properly and used FeelyGear. He wanted to pay me some serious cash to make sure his saves weren't lost.'

'So weird,' she said, smiling less at him and more at whatever memories were bouncing around her head.

'So yeah, Mr Preston keeps his own computer in his office and he thinks it's broken. Called up my boss all worried, and now here I am.'

'Your company name?'

'Arty Bytes.'

'One moment.' She waved her fingers through her HUD, searching for appointments or notifications that he was expected. She wouldn't find any, but she'd be able to confirm the company name. Artarmon kept a hundred companies for every occasion.

'No rush, darling. Take your time. I get paid by the hour and my clock started when I walked in the door.'

'Mr Preston didn't mention you, I'm afraid.'

‘Then just give him a call.’ The crack he’d run hadn’t broken through the security but it had found unsecured traffic on the outbound network. Mr Preston would be out this morning, and his Realmware was upstairs. Nobody would answer the call.

‘I can’t interrupt him at the moment,’ the receptionist said.

‘Then perhaps give his assistant a call, if you could.’ The assistant was with Mr Preston, in a hotel room a block away. ‘Most of the arrangements were made through her anyway.’

‘Oh,’ she said, frowning and raising her eyebrows. And Jon had another puzzle piece.

‘From what I hear she sounded kind of stupid.’ He put his hand over his mouth. ‘Oh, sorry. That was rude.’

‘No, you’re not wrong.’

‘I just meant she sounded...a little distracted. But I’m sure she entered me in the system.’

‘No, sorry.’

Jon put on a thinking look, furrowed brow and a frown. He practiced in the mirror. ‘Well, Mr Preston can just reschedule. If she screwed up, and you can’t help me out here, then I can just come back next month.’

‘Next month?’

‘Yeah, there aren’t a lot of people who can fix this sort of thing. I’m in high demand, and today was booked ages ago.’

The redhead thought about it, Jon could see the gears turning in her head. He wasn’t the best manipulator in town, but he had his gifts, his insights. If he could get through reception he was home free.

‘Here,’ she said, handing him a card from a drawer. ‘How long do you think you’ll be?’

‘An hour, tops.’

‘That long?’

‘These things aren’t designed for regular use. Just for rich people to waste their money on. It can take a little while to get them ticking along properly.’

She nodded and waved toward the bank of elevators nearby. ‘Thanks,’ he said, already moving.

He shared the lift with a few suited business types, their collars extraordinarily flared and starched. Suit styles escaped him entirely; Artarmon’s office was more of a jeans and t-shirt kind of place.

The fiftieth floor was practically empty, as any successful modern business would be. He didn’t bump into anyone and entered Preston’s office – using the key card from the lovely receptionist – unnoticed. He’d be on camera somewhere, of course, but as long as he got out of the building he’d consider it a success. As would his employers.

Preston was having an affair with his assistant, a young woman from Liverpool recently moved to the city. He needed to keep it from his wife, of course, and also his employers. They had rules where such things were concerned. Wednesday Minds allowed the higher-ups access to their Realmware and PDAs while in the building, but everyone was made to sign a contract forbidding them from using the technology outside of strict guidelines. They also forced these higher-ups to allow their PDAs to be interrogated.

It was draconian, especially from the company that had created the software minds and owned all the patents on the technology behind PDAs. It was also Jon’s way in.

Preston had placed a call to set up the morning rendezvous using an outside data service. The traffic showed up in the log Jon had cracked, and it hadn’t been secure. He also said he’d leave his Realmware, and therefore his PDA, behind in the office. Jon spotted it on his desk and smiled.

PDAs couldn’t be hacked, though Jon and everyone else in the security community had tried for years. You either had to get access to the servers running them – servers in South America with more security than most governments – or you had to be the person who owned the PDA. With Wednesday’s strict policies in place, Preston’s PDA wouldn’t be able to access the cameras in the building, and so shouldn’t have any idea who it was talking to.

That was Jon’s theory, and the basis for his attack today. He sat in Preston’s high-backed leather chair, put his own Realmware to the side, and put on the other pair.

A busy HUD leapt into place, most his field of view dominated by graphs and systems reports. He waved them away and pulled up local server access. When the PDA icon appeared he dismissed it before the software could run, switching it to a passive terminal. No conversational interface, no attempt at smarts.

Preston – and now Jon – had the keys to the kingdom. With a few simple queries and a bit of hunting,

Jon had access to everything below the executive level. Sales reports, R&D, even the military budget paying for the few squads Wednesday kept on standby around the world. As long as he didn't want to know the thoughts of the two or three people at the top he was happy, and he now had enough information to work out what they'd be planning next.

He pulled the fingernail off his right thumb and slipped the almost invisible interface out, plugging it into Preston's Realmware and downloading everything he could find. The copy took ages – five minutes – but it was a lot of data. He ordered the curtains open and spent the time admiring the view. From the desk he could see right across the square mile to the city opposite, as well as pick out historic buildings in between. St Pauls rose above the street to the left, the London Eye, forever stationary, was directly ahead. A pretty city, though he seldom entered the mile outside of business.

When the copy was done he replaced his fingernail, put the glasses back on the desk, collecting his own, and left.

He waved and smiled at the receptionist on the way out, dropping his key card on her desk and walking out of the building as confidently as he could. His heart wouldn't stop hammering in his chest, but otherwise he was as calm as any man had ever been. He paused for a moment at the top of the steps to take a breath and smile, before walking slowly down the stairs, down the block, and onto the tube.

He'd done it, broken into the biggest company in the world and stolen everything that wasn't nailed down. He'd proven Artarmon's sales pitch right, and earned the – hopefully – enormous bonus he'd receive. Hell, if he stayed on the underground until he was out of the city he could get a cab to take him far away and sell the information on his own. He'd make hundreds of millions.

Of course he never considered it seriously – he didn't need hundreds of millions and Wednesday Minds had a corporate military budget – but it was fun to let his mind touch on it.

He went home to change, muting his PDA until he was ready, then called a cab and went to the office.

Chapter 3

Em met Jon at the door to the office and wouldn't let him pass.

'Did you do it?' she said, leaning against the wall to take up more space and cut him off.

'Well, that depends what you're talking about, I guess.' He tried to step by her but she wouldn't allow it. She was his primary rival in the office; if he was honest with himself – something he tried not to do with any regularity – she was better at the game than he was. The Wednesday job would keep him the favourite though. It must have been killing her.

'So you did it then.' She shook her head and stepped aside. 'You lucky bastard.'

'It isn't luck, Emma dear,' he said as he walked past. 'It's pure, clear, Tesla quality, genius.'

'Balls. You're an Edison and you know it.'

He stepped into the office and waited for everyone to turn and stare. They all knew what he'd been up to, what the company was on the verge of pulling off. Everyone had a vested interest in his success, even the new guys. When every eye was on him and the silence was getting silly, he smiled and nodded.

His co-workers, most of whom had nothing to do with the Wednesday Minds job, applauded, patting each other on the back and shaking hands. He got his share of patting and shaking too, but the feeling was for everyone, the success for the whole company. He stepped through them and made for Artarmon's office.

The boss waited in the doorway, leaning against it with his arms crossed.

'You don't look jubilant,' Jon said.

'You need to start taking my calls, especially during the day. Especially, especially on a work day. And really especially on an important work day. Got it?'

'You know how it is; I don't want anything to throw me off my game. You were good once, you should understand.' He waited for Artarmon to crack a smile, but the man just stood there, glaring at him. He let the silence grow to an uncomfortable level before he gave in. 'Alright, I'm sorry. Dude, I'll take your calls.'

Artarmon laughed and launched himself at Jon, hugging him quickly and stepping away. 'You, my boy, can do whatever you want. Take my calls, don't take my calls. Fuck my wife. Doesn't matter, as long as you bring home the prize.'

'You don't have a wife.' Jon stepped into the boss's office and collapsed into the comfy leather chair.

'Jon, buddy, I'll go get one just for you. Do you have a preference?' Artarmon handed him a can of something sugary he had waiting and leant against his desk. 'So you got it.'

'I got it.'

'How much?'

'Enough to plug into a cheap mind and get their business plans for the next five years. Enough to mark out a roadmap for the next twenty. They could pull something spectacularly crazy, but anything less and we'd know about it.'

Artarmon looked like he might cry. Jon knew the feeling; he wanted to hug someone himself, to jump around and get crazy. What he'd done was amazing, and it changed his world. It would change all their worlds.

'Well done. Now, though you'll be giving her shit for weeks, and enjoying it immensely, Em found the exploit that let us sniff for unencrypted traffic. While I in no way wish to imply that you should share the glory, she deserves some of the credit.'

'She'll be rewarded handsomely,' Jon said.

Artarmon moved to the chair opposite Jon and sat. 'Agreed. This is yours. You did the heavy lifting and you'll be getting the credit, to dole out as you see fit.'

'Naturally.' He slurped his drink to hide the grin on his face. 'When do we meet with the powers that

be at Wednesday Minds?’

‘The meeting is set for tomorrow. I think they have another company working to try and get the data back before the meeting though.’ He waved at his HUD and a graph of network traffic appeared on Jon’s. It had been spiking all morning; someone was throwing everything they had at the office security. ‘I’m guessing they want to find out if they can get it back should someone else pull something like this.’

‘And if they succeed?’

‘We still get paid, never fear. But I’m not putting the data on our network anyway. I have no interest in having Wednesday suspicious of us, thinking we kept a copy. They’ll do a full audit after we hand it over.’

‘So it goes in the safe?’

‘It goes in the safe.’ He held out his hand and Jon dropped the fingernail drive into his palm. ‘You should go out and party with the rest of these lazy gamers. I suspects drugs will shortly be had, which means no more work today anyway.’

‘I’ll stick around for a few minutes, but I’m going home. Today has been a little nerve wracking.’ He stood and finished his drink.

‘Go, sleep. Tomorrow is a big day. Huge. Monumental.’

‘And before you try to come up with more adjectives, I’ll see myself out.’ He moved toward the door, stopping when Artarmon grabbed his hand and shook it.

‘Seriously, Jon, good work. We’re moving into a whole different realm here.’

‘Down boy. You’re getting slobber on me.’ He shook the boss’s hand and stepped back into the office.

Em still stood at the front entrance, waiting for him.

‘You’re not partying with everyone else?’ he said, wondering what she was up to. Their rivalry had been friendly before, but this changed the dynamic; he didn’t know what would replace it after what he’d pulled off.

‘I just wanted to say, through gritted teeth, well done.’ She stuck her hand out and he shook it carefully, half expecting an electric shock. ‘Having said that, it was my sniffer. I hand rolled that bad boy.’

‘My PDA could have made something as good.’ He didn’t let go of her hand. ‘The awesome was in the execution, dear girl.’

‘You “dear girl” me ever again, and I’ll smack you.’ She squeezed his hand and pulled away. ‘In the meantime, I have fantastic intrusion applications to go and make. You can leave.’

She dismissed him with a wave and he smiled after her, admiring her behind more than he should have. Bad office behaviour be damned, he thought. I’m king for the day and if I want to check out Em’s delightful ass then I will.

He stopped when she looked back though, and hurried out of the office.

He’d told Artarmon he was going home but he had another destination in mind. It was ludicrously expensive and probably a bad idea, but he called a taxi and told it to take him to Chun’s Sushi and Hotdogs.

Chun’s had once been the genuine attempt by a Chinese woman to serve Japanese food with American options, and it had failed. Spectacularly. The legend went that she didn’t get a single customer in the six months she ran a legitimate business.

So she did what any business would do; she diversified. She shifted her business model to something that brought in money.

Jon waited at the front for someone to seat him, checking out the restaurant. It was a weird mix of what a Chinese person thought a Japanese and American restaurant should look like; there were neon lights under the knee-high tables and Harley Davidson paintings on the walls. Chrome robot waiters with too many pointy bits wore cowboy hats and spoke with a racist Texan drawl. There was a bar straight out of a roadhouse movie serving Saki and cheap beer, and of course the menu was predominantly made up of sushi and American diner food.

A waiter rolled over and asked him what he was looking for, it’s accent barely comprehensible.

‘I’d like a seat downstairs please,’ Jon said. The waiter paused for a few seconds, as though it had run into some loop in its programming, before trundling away, gesturing for him to follow.

‘Welcome back, Mr Dee,’ the robot said when it reached the stairs. It bowed and waved him on. ‘Y’all have fun now, ya hear.’ It rolled away before Jon stopped chuckling.

He’d been to Chun’s twice before. Once when he’d first struck out on his own and had his father’s money in his pocket. That had ended with him broke, homeless, and howling at street lights. The second

time was after his first big win for Artarmon. He'd blown the bonus in one night at Chun's, instead of buying a nice house in the country. When he'd sobered up a few days later he swore he'd never return.

The downstairs décor hadn't changed any more than the restaurant. Chun found the activities that kept the place open distasteful, and decorated accordingly. As Jon moved down the stairs he left the colourful world that Chun loved and entered the drab hallways below. The sounds of the pai gow room filled the otherwise silent area.

A lovely American waited for him, her kimono open yet covering everything it should. She must use tape to keep it in place, Jon thought.

'Hi, Jon is it? Welcome back.' Her hair was blonder than hair normally got and it was unlikely she was naturally shaped the way she was, but he'd take it. Chun knew where his tastes ran, even after a few years away.

'Thanks.' He followed her down the hall and into a side room. She gently pushed him onto the couch and shut the door.

'We're going to have to give you a little scan, alright? Just need to make sure there aren't any nasty creatures on you.'

'I'm not really here for that,' he said, but he relaxed into the chair. It was standard procedure and the woman didn't bother explaining it to him any further. She lowered the lights and pulled the wand from beneath a cushion. Jon had one at home – everyone did – but in her hands, in that room, it looked particularly phallic. Then she licked it slowly and put it in her mouth, cementing the image.

'You ready?' She wiped it off with a cloth and stepped toward him, waiting for him to nod before straddling him. 'This won't hurt one little bit.'

She ran the wand over him slowly, sensually, moaning as she went. It got him hard and made his hands itch to grab her, but that wasn't the point. This was all theatre, foreplay to keep him in the mood while the medical scanner made sure he was clean. It would also check for cancer and potential aneurisms and all sorts of other things, which they'd add to his report for when he left. He sat back and enjoyed it; he might have no intention of using these particular services, but he was still human.

With the scan done the lovely American left and menus appeared on his HUD. The first twenty pages were for the sexual situations on offer. He skimmed them, noting the addition of several FeelyGear based adventures. They would be half real and half virtual, enabling you to do things on the back of a dragon or something, he guessed.

The last ten pages were what he'd come for; drugs, and lots of them. Unique, tailored, powerful yet harmless drugs. Chun had begun importing her chemical printers long before the laws changed in London, so she was well ahead of anywhere else in the city. Using her suddenly legal profits she'd expanded, bringing in specialists to add to her repertoire. He could choose from synthetic versions of the classics, or the latest nanotech brain warping machines, and everything in between.

He selected the platter for one, a mix of almost everything in small enough doses that it wouldn't kill him outright, with a chaser of a synthetic that would be made for him and him alone, tailored to his DNA and neurochemistry, and guaranteed to be the best ride he'd ever have.

The table in the middle of the room corkscrewed away into the floor, replaced by a new one moments later with the first course of his evening entertainment. The American came in at the same time and held her hand up to keep him in his seat.

'Seriously, it isn't why I'm here,' he said. He stayed where he was anyway.

'I'm just here to help you along, Mr Dee. You don't have to do anything you don't want to.'

The following hours were heaven. Expensive, debauched heaven. He found himself powerless before the flirtations of the American and he paid for her as well. The final drug felt like the lead up to an amazing orgasm, but it lasted an hour and he rolled on the floor with the agony of it. At the end, when the high was fading and the urgent need to cum was gone, the American knelt at his side and stroked his head.

'Was that what you wanted honey? That what you had in mind?'

He couldn't speak but she took the look on his face for an answer. She smiled, kissed him, and left.

He was allowed to stay the whole night, if he wanted. He'd paid for a deluxe package and it had emptied him out, but he wanted to go home and sleep in his own bed. He stumbled around, pulling his clothes on until he was somewhat presentable, before leaving the room. The American, whose name he had never asked for, showed him out the back way and Holmes called him a cab.

'Your father would like to speak to you, if you have a moment,' Holmes said. It sat on the seat beside him, the deerstalker cocked at an angle.

'No interest, but thanks. What's he want?'

'I've done a little research in anticipation of your question.'

'Stop trying to impress me with your advanced algorithms. You're a spreadsheet with eyes.'

'That's hurtful.'

'Sorry, a search engine with a hat. What's he want?'

'He's getting married again, to a Korean ballerina.'

'Of course he is.'

'I suspect he'd like to invite you to the wedding.'

Jon had no time for his father, and most of the time his father had no time for him. The relationship worked and he saw no reason to mess with it.

'Tell him I might stop by, in the realm anyway.' His father would understand, he was sure. He'd probably be happy.

The city blurred by as the drugs wore off, a beautiful, immense, fascinating construction. And soon he'd own it. He'd be at the peak of his field. He wouldn't be able to brag about it in public for a few years, but he'd have successes in the meantime and then, when his non-disclosure agreements expired and the machines got better at his job than he was, he'd write books and give interviews.

The city was his and the future was spectacular.