DATASHARK

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CHAPTER 1

"Democracy becomes a government of bullies, tempered by editors." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

BROADMAN

The late afternoon heat rose in waves off the Hackensack parking lot, baking Tony Broadman's dress shirt to his chest despite the best efforts of his seven-year-old Jeep's air conditioner. Broadman loosened his tie further. He had already sat for an hour in his Cherokee waiting for his overdue contact. Only the occasional shriek of a jet on short final to Teeterboro broke the monotony.

Tony Broadman wasn't an idealist. He wasn't on a quest to change the world. He just wanted to make an honest buck. But some days making that buck was harder than others.

Previous experience had taught Broadman to bring along an assortment of "toys" to help pass the time. The first was a laptop with a prototype wireless modem that promised to "usher in a new era of mobile Internet connectivity." He'd see about that. The claims hardware and software companies made for their wares kept Broadman expecting a computer guaranteed to cure herpes, along with an optional upgrade that fixed speeding tickets.

Broadman loved gadgets. Like a little boy at a toy store, he was always pulled into shops with the latest computer, cell phone, or digital organizer. If it wasn't for the technology "fixes" he received on the job, he might have racked up a serious personal debt.

His technology column for the New York *Times* gave him the perfect excuse for gadget collecting. Whether it was the virtues of the latest pocket PC or the Windows bug fix of the week, Broadman was paid to make sure "The User's Edge" talked about it first. He hoped the upcoming interview could be turned into a week-long feature, if this guy Yoshida showed up at all.

The new laptop's wireless modem *was* fairly speedy. It also threw corrupted data onto the page whenever a jet flew over. That one would go back to the manufacturer, along with a polite note suggesting more field testing.

Broadman was an electrical engineer, but technical details weren't his true strength. His real skill was making friends quickly. He earned his pay by finding the people who *were* technically adept and talking them into spilling their secrets. Yoshida had promised secrets worth spilling. Broadman's job would be to work those secrets loose.

Broadman was street-smart, but his easy charm put even jaded New Yorkers at ease. He had a smile that lifted one corner of his mouth, then widened until the twinkle in his eyes pulled people in. Strangers often confided in him without even knowing why they had done so.

Too bad his charm hadn't worked on the balky laptop. The next toy was a combination wireless handheld computer and GPS locator. One of the uses the brochure touted was surfing into a nationwide database of public restrooms--he wondered who got stuck with drawing up *that* list--then using the GPS to navigate to the closest one. If his wife got her wish, she might find this extremely handy. A bathroom was something an expectant woman never wanted too far away.

Broadman smiled. Parenthood was a big step, but he was looking forward to it, especially since he knew how much Christina wanted children. She wasn't pregnant yet, but she had openly expressed her hope for a boy, one who would have "the same wavy black hair and luscious brown eyes that make my Tony so handsome." It made him blush, especially when she said it around her girlfriends. But after years of being self-conscious about his average height and slender build, it was a pleasant kind of embarrassment.

Traffic on nearby I-80 was thickening. It would take him forever to get home from here in Jersey if he waited much longer. He reached to put the Cherokee in gear. An hour was the limit of his patience, no matter how important the interview. His cell phone chirped. This guy had better be calling from the hospital.

"Broadman!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," a familiar voice purred. "I was trying to reach the man I make love to."

An electric tingle made him squirm. "Is it time?"

His wife Christina was testing another gadget for him, an electronic fertility monitor called OvaCue. By placing a sensor on her tongue, the OvaCue measured her electrolytes, calculating the optimum time for conception. She had practically ripped the package from his hands when it had arrived from the manufacturer.

Broadman could hear road noise past the breathy voice on the other end. "That's what the little box you gave me says. What's the matter, don't you trust your technology?"

"Oh, *absolutely!*" Broadman had suspected something was up from the very unlibrarian-like black miniskirt his wife had worn to work that morning. In his mind's eye he pictured it riding up as she drove the winding road to their house.

"Then *hurry*, lover man, or I'll start without you!"

That nailed it. Fertility provoked a distinct earthiness in Christina, which he was always willing to indulge. "Hang on, honey! I'm on my way!"

Broadman almost ripped the gear shift from the console. The underpowered V6 seemed to roar with more gusto than usual. He was just yards from the parking lot's exit when a black Honda Civic cut him off. Broadman stood on the brakes, barely stopping in time. The Civic's driver rolled down his window.

Broadman did the same. He was about to vent his anger and sexual frustration, but the other driver spoke first. He was holding a device that looked like an improvised version of the cellular phone scanner an FBI agent had once demonstrated for Broadman.

"Family hour can wait, Mr. Broadman," the young oriental man prodded. "Or should I call you 'lover man?'"

Broadman was fuming. That this punk had kept him waiting and *then* listened in on his phone calls wasn't the only reason. He knew by the time he finished this interview the traffic going north would be thoroughly screwed. He'd be lucky to get home by eight. He swallowed his irritation and followed Ken Yoshida from the lot.

Until today, Broadman had never met a hacker face to face. Hackers were always a faceless, disembodied enemy in his electronic world. They were a danger he warned his readers about frequently. Pointing out such hazards was part of Tony

Broadman's job. Professional revulsion had prevented him from interviewing one.

But there was also a personal edge to his dislike of hackers. He had recently spent the better part of a week recovering from a virus hidden inside a software upgrade. He had downloaded it from the MegaComp corporation's supposedly "secure" business software site. MegaComp of course denied any responsibility for the virus, which then infected every computer on Broadman's floor and made him a techno-leper with the *Times'* staff. His stinging editorial against MegaComp never made it into print.

But Kentaro Yoshida was supposedly a "reformed" hacker. He had served federal prison time a few years ago for hacking corporate computers and stealing everything from credit card numbers to proprietary research data. Now he worked as a computer security specialist, charging the same corporations he had hacked large fees to plug holes in their networks' security.

Broadman's Cherokee was hard-pressed to keep up with the Civic. It sped to a run-down apartment complex, the kind with two letters missing from the curbfront sign. Broadman left an apologetic message on his home machine for Christina, then set his car alarm and double-checked it.

He wondered what had drawn the hacker out of the woodwork for this interview. The government had done its best to paint Yoshida as a Public Enemy during his incarceration. They also made sure cameras from every network were at the prison gates to stigmatize his re-entry into society. He had since stayed out of the spotlight, refusing interviews and even a book deal.

Until last week. Yoshida had called *him*, offering to share the latest hacker tricks with Broadman's readers. He refused to give a contact number, insisting their communication be one way only. The cellular number that flashed on Broadman's display was different on each call. It was only after several last-minute cancellations that this tardy appointment was arranged.

Yoshida didn't stop to make introductions, bounding up the uneven stairs to the second floor.

"From your reputation," Broadman called to Yoshida's back, "I pictured you driving a fancier car." Not to mention living in a better neighborhood.

"Even Batman has a second car."

At least Yoshida had a sense of humor. He stopped Broadman at the door. "Did you remember what I said about electronics?"

Broadman showed his empty hands. Yoshida had been adamant. No electronic devices of any kind were allowed. "I even left my cell phone and pager in the car," Broadman assured him. "Is that why you tapped my cell, to make sure I followed the rules?" If he hadn't needed this interview, Broadman would have been tempted to pop Yoshida for that little trick. They *were* in Jersey, after all, where the left jab was a time-honored form of communication.

A knowing grin. "I've found it helpful to know who my clients are talking to right before they talk to me. It's helped me avoid customers who, shall we say, didn't have my best interests at heart. It also lets you know that Big Brother could always be listening. I'm taking a big enough risk using *my* gear. I don't want you throwing any more variables into the mix."

It also shows off the power you have over other people, doesn't it? "Whatever you say." Broadman always agreed to any ground rules the subjects of his interviews requested. It was part of making them feel comfortable. And if they weren't comfortable, they might not talk.

Yoshida motioned Broadman inside and scanned the breezeway for several seconds. He locked the door behind them.

"Expecting visitors?"

"In my line of work, paranoia is a virtue."

It fit, Broadman reasoned. Look over enough people's shoulders and eventually you'll believe someone *has* to be looking over yours too.

* * *

The stretched Econoline bore the markings of the local cable company. The two workers in the van's front seats had corporate IDs and even golf shirts with the appropriate matching logos, but they belonged to a different "company" altogether. Hard hats covered their military haircuts.

Senior Airman Dave Jackson went in and out of a vacant apartment, keeping up the show of an extended but routine service call. Master Sergeant Tom Kramp, the driver, appeared to be on lunch break, but a trained observer would have noted that his steely blue eyes never stopped moving.

In the back of the van, Colonel Carl Richter waited. Two men were with him, one facing a tinted window, the other working at a computer terminal. The window was a design they had "borrowed" from the FBI. A silk-screened cover stretched over the opening. Painted the same color as the van, the cover made the window invisible from more than ten feet away.

Seated at the window, Staff Sergeant Bill Womack motioned to Richter. "Target in sight. He's got somebody with him, too."

Richter squeezed in next to Womack. "How often does he receive visitors here?"

Womack lowered his binoculars. "At *this* place? Never, that I know of. He's always gone to a neutral site for his meets before."

Richter didn't normally allow Kramp to park this close, but it was a good thing he did this time. Through the window they watched a man in a shirt and tie walk away from a Jeep Cherokee. "So who's *this* guy?" Richter asked.

"Never seen him before," Womack said. "I'll run his tags."

Richter keyed his radio. "Let's reposition. Don't want to make him nervous."

* * *

Broadman was even less impressed by Yoshida's quarters. Spartan was the first word that sprang to mind. Monastic was the second. There was no furniture in the living room, not even a couch or a TV. He followed Yoshida back to the single bedroom.

"Be sure and thank your wife for that call," Yoshida goaded. "I thought I was going to *die* of boredom while you were surfing that database of public restrooms. Did you need to use the john?"

Broadman held back a retort. "No, I was just trying out a new piece of hardware."

"Good, 'cause I'm short on toilet paper. By the way, that GPS thing you were using was still uploading your position onto the Internet until you stuck it under the seat."

"But I put it in sleep mode."

"Then it sleeps with one eye open. That's why I was trying to lose you coming over here. Just to show how I could track you down again from that leaking GPS signal."

"Okay. Nice to know." Broadman hoped his shock wasn't too obvious. *That* would certainly make an interesting footnote for his product review.

There was no bed in the bedroom, just a long folding table covered with wires and computer hardware. Two metal shelves packed with computer manuals and books in Japanese were within easy reach. A pile of copy-paper boxes filled the opposite corner, like he had just finished unpacking.

Yoshida made a crash-landing into his chair, his momentum rolling him to the table. He moved in fast forward, powering up three laptop computers and checking the spaghetti-web connections between them with quick, bird-like motions. He hummed *Ride of the Valkyries* fervently, as if preparing to charge into battle.

It took a few minutes for Yoshida to realize there was no place for his guest to sit. He waved a hand at Broadman. "Grab a chair from the kitchen."

The dust on the counters and the smell of three-day-old takeout pizza made Broadman's nose wrinkle. The folding table was obviously used more often as an overflow desk than for eating.

He unfolded a chair at Yoshida's side and pulled out his notebook. Broadman was so used to taking notes with his laptop that paper and pen felt stone-age to him. And he had *never* conducted an interview without a tape recorder.

A physical description came first. Yoshida was in his late twenties or maybe early thirties. He was slightly shorter than Broadman, his build more athletic. Straight black hair fell almost to his shoulders. A prominent brow cast shadows over deep-set, brooding eyes, and his lips were perpetually pursed, as if he was contemplating a puzzle.

Broadman attempted a handshake. "I guess an introduction would be a waste of time, right?"

"Correct." Yoshida shoved a fat folder into the offered hand.

Broadman hefted the file. "What's this?"

"It's you."

On top was Broadman's short bio from the *Times* website. Printouts of several recent columns followed, along with web search pages showing articles by other writers who had quoted Broadman in their stories. Nothing a computer-savvy grade

school student couldn't duplicate. "Okay, so hackers can use search engines too?"

"Keep reading." Yoshida was fixated on his task. He stabbed at the laptop's controls with frenetic motions, pushing ahead to the next web page before the last one had finished loading.

Broadman continued digging through the folder. He realized he was reading printouts of his own e-mail. And files from his boss's computer. One of them was his performance appraisal.

"Broadman communicates technical information effectively," the document read, "but his articles frequently lack the depth and originality readers of the *Times* have come to expect. He is temperamental when challenged on this and other matters. He also missed a deadline recently which resulted in a substantial layout change shortly before press time. Because of these facts, I recommend an average raise of three percent."

"Why, that two-faced little..." She was the *reason* he had missed that deadline! All because she was afraid his column critical of the MegaComp corporation might stir up trouble for the *Times*. Had she ever heard of the truth being its own defense? Or of the *Times'* staff of lawyers?

The slightest of smiles curved Yoshida's lips. "I see you've found the good stuff. Keep going."

Broadman thumbed through the stack, finding more half-truths and outright lies his boss had used to minimize his share of the raise pool. His anger mounted. How would *she* know that his articles lacked depth? She couldn't troubleshoot a computer glitch if someone held a gun to her head. "I didn't think they *put* this kind of information on the computer."

Yoshida snorted. "They make sure the really sensitive stuff is *only* on the computer. That way if they want to fire you, any records useful to your lawyer would be--zip--deleted."

"Temperamental when challenged..." Broadman mumbled. Well, she *did* nail him on that one. The User's Edge was his baby. Nobody liked changing something they thought was correct as it stood. She just wanted to put her mark on his column because it *was* popular. But it was the "lacking depth" comment that really burned him. She couldn't even schedule her computer for an automatic backup without his help.

"Hey, if it really bothers you that much, we can change it," Yoshida offered. "I have root access to most of the computers at

the *Times*, just like I was the head sysop. I can't raise your salary yet, but I could change your personnel records to a more glowing review. If I time it right, I might even be able to change the headline for tomorrow's paper. How about, 'Tony Broadman is a computer god?' Would that make up for what your boss said?"

A few choice comments about his boss would make an even better headline. "Could you really do that?"

"With root access, I *own* the *Times*. The computer thinks I'm the systems administrator for the whole damned network. I could even program every computer on the network to reject certain words or phrases. So if somebody wrote a story critical of hackers, the system would refuse to print it."

He knew hackers had a long reach, but this was a whole new level. "I'll try to keep my words soft and sweet."

"Never a good idea to piss off a hacker," Yoshida agreed.

* * *

The van had moved to the far side of the complex. Kramp noticed the bearded man in a tie-dyed shirt stalking toward him. He keyed the radio in his lap. "Trouble, partner," he whispered.

"On my way."

The man approached the Kramp's window, his face livid. "Hey man! Your service *sucks!* I called you people a week ago, but now you're here working on somebody else! How long have *they* been waiting for you to show up?"

Jackson returned to the van. The wiry young Airman moved with a quick, confident gait. "What kind of trouble are you having, sir?"

The man waved his hands. "Look, man, like I told you on the phone! Everything was fine one minute, then *bam*, it just turned to snow! Every channel! I've had to go back to the damned rabbit ears, for Christ's sake!"

Jackson kept his smile relaxed and friendly. "Sounds like a bad converter box. We get a lot of those." He reached into the van's front seat and pulled out a spare. "I bet this'll fix you up. Let's go take a look."

That took the edge off their "customer's" anger. He led Jackson to his apartment. The radio in Kramp's lap crackled.

"Everything okay up there?" Richter asked.

Kramp grinned. "Have no fear, cable guy is here."

"Excellent."

"This position is getting a little exposed," Richter told the man at the computer. "How's it coming?"

Senior Airman Tim Feldman reviewed the data they were capturing. The van had TEMPEST gear, able to suck in the faint radio signals from PC and laptop monitors and read their displays. But he had to get close for that, less than a hundred yards for the laptop their target was using. Add to that the interference from scores of PCs and TV sets in the complex and Feldman would have a real headache skimming the target signal from the electronic sewer around them.

Luckily their target had taken advantage of the cable company's broadband Internet service. Using their cover, they had hooked a repeater to their target's computer line in the main cable box. Now Feldman could pick up their repeater's clear, clean signal from anywhere in the complex. The only hard part had been tracking this hacker down. Earlier efforts had succeeded only in locating the empty apartments where their target *used* to be. But even the smartest hacker couldn't hope to outwit the entire NSA indefinitely. It was just a matter of time.

"He's close enough to smell the cheese," Feldman said. "Give him a few more minutes."

* * *

Broadman was sufficiently rattled that he flipped through several pages before realizing the files were from his *home* computer. "Hey! How did you get this? My firewall program is the top of the line!"

Yoshida teased him with an arched eyebrow. "It wasn't your firewall program's fault. Your wife was kind enough to be logged on when I hacked your Internet service provider's server. Then I just slipped down your phone line as another packet of information. *Voilà!* Instant access!"

Broadman drew in a quick breath at the next page. A voluptuous brunette reclined nude on a couch, licking her upper lip seductively. Several painfully familiar pictures like it followed.

Yoshida gave Broadman a smirk. "And *look* what I found under 'Miscellaneous Tax Info!' Does your wife know about those gals?"

Broadman closed the folder, his face burning. "Thanks. I think I've seen enough."

Yoshida feigned astonishment. "You haven't even *looked* at your credit reports yet! I hacked into three different databases so you could compare the numbers! I can even change them if you want."

"Gee thanks, that's nice of you to offer."

Yoshida's smile broadened. "Feeling a little naked, Tony? Take off your clothes and get comfortable. Actually, *everybody's* this vulnerable, it's just that now you *know* it." He resumed typing.

Broadman unconsciously held the file closed, as if the contents might make a break for freedom. He needed to regain control of the interview. "Uh, where exactly are you going?"

Yoshida continued his manic tempo, occasionally sliding sideways to switch laptops. "Ever heard of MINTNET?"

"Some kind of government database, isn't it?"

Yoshida's grin melted away. "Monetary Intelligence Tracking Network. It's the *mother* of all government databases."

Broadman scribbled the acronym on his notepad. "Is that why it takes three laptops to break into their system?"

"Just one to break in. The other two are to make sure I don't get caught. That's where most newbie hackers screw up. Breaking into a computer network is the easy part. You only get to be a grizzled old graybeard like me by covering your tracks."

"Mind showing me how you do that?" He had always wondered how hackers could wander like ghosts over the Internet, undetected until the damage was done. He was sure his readers did too.

Yoshida turned one of the laptops. "The trick is root access and multiple jumps. I'm leapfrogging across four Internet service providers, ISPs, to get to my current target, and I have root access to all of them. I can do everything the ISP's system administrator does, and I can watch every command entered at root level."

The SONY laptop's screen was split into four Unix windows, all idle at the moment. "I planted a Trojan horse program called a root kit at all four ISPs. It deletes my keystrokes from any system logs and defeats any program looking for those kind of system alterations. That's my first line of defense."

It sounded more like the software equivalent of a nuclear weapon to Broadman. "Where would you *get* a program like that?"

"You can download one from any hacker website, but I wrote my own just to make it harder to spot. If the root kit is defeated or if the system administrator at any of the ISPs starts launching defensive programs, it'll show up on one of these screens. But I picked these four ISPs because none of their administrators appeared to be the sharpest knives in the drawer."

"But what if the watchdogs at MINTNET detect you and start running a trace *through* these ISPs? That wouldn't show up, would it?"

Yoshida placed his hands together in a mock oriental bow. "Ah, grasshopper! Truly you begin to think like wise serpent!" He pivoted a Hewlett-Packard laptop to face Broadman. "That's where screen number three earns its paycheck. This monitors traffic through each of my hacked ports. If one of these shows a spike in activity, either someone's running a trace, or more likely an automated security program like EtherPeek was tripped at one of the ISPs. Either way, we sack the hack and disappear."

The way Yoshida used "we" made Broadman feel like an active participant in this criminal enterprise. It was an uncomfortable but strangely exhilarating sensation. "So what makes MINTNET worth all this trouble?"

Yoshida was busy with the Compaq laptop in the center. An MIT web page popped onto the screen. "Years ago, the courts decided a citizen's financial information was one of the last pieces of information the government couldn't traffic in for fun and profit. If the IRS had built a case against Joe Blow for tax evasion, they couldn't just throw the data over the fence to aid the FBI's investigation of Mr. Blow for money laundering. The FBI had to come to court with their own evidence and convince a judge why they needed the IRS's data."

Yoshida clicked on the button for the MIT Supercomputer Center. "Well, you can imagine how that sat with the Feds. Privacy is a four-letter word for them. That's when they created MINTNET. They use the National Security Agency to suck in data on virtually every financial transaction conducted in the US, then they classify it as 'intelligence.'

"They have two hundred people from every alphabet soup agency we've got working at the NSA facility to swap that

'intelligence' around. But share financial data? Hell no! And since everything the NSA does is classified out the wazoo, no judge is going to get close enough to shut them down."

A window opened on the screen. "PLEASE ENTER YOUR ACCOUNT NUMBER." Yoshida filled in the blank.

"WELCOME PROFESSOR ERSTWINE. YOUR BATCH JOB IS COMPLETED."

"What does Professor Erstwine have to do with MINTNET?" Broadman was struggling to get all this on paper.

Yoshida downloaded the file. "Other than his idle account on MIT's supercomputer, nothing. Even though MINTNET is located at NSA headquarters, the agencies who want to access their data still need a pipeline to MINTNET's database. That's what I think I've found."

"MINTNET's back door?"

Yoshida shook his head. "Front door. Actually more like an entry hall. Every agency that wants in has its own door in the hallway and its own password to get through that door. After I picked the lock for the hallway, I dug out an encrypted password file. I was just using MIT's supercomputer to crack the encryption."

Yoshida opened the batch file. A sequence of alphanumeric strings filled the screen. He leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing. That's the password file all right, one for each portal into the system. It was almost too easy."

"So what's next?"

For the first time, Yoshida turned from his computers. "Next, Tony, I need you to make a decision. If I'm going to risk my butt hacking into MINTNET again, I need to know whether you'll publish what I find there."

Broadman pushed away, rocking the folding chair back on two legs. "Whoa, wait a minute! A hacking *demonstration* is one thing. Stealing government secrets is way beyond that!"

"C'mon, I've read your material. Isn't electronic loss of privacy one of your favorite rants? I figured you'd *jump* at the chance to expose something like this."

"Well yeah, but only if I can come by the information *legally*. You're talking about hacking into a *classified* government computer. That's one of those things that gets you a ten-year vacation at a federal resort."

Yoshida laughed. "If the NSA knew we were hacking into MINTNET, they would probably kill us on the spot, take my computers, and leave our bodies for my landlady to find."

Broadman's stomach clenched. "Oh good, I thought we were talking about jail time." If he had left that parking lot just five minutes earlier, he might be home making love to his wife by now.

"I'm serious. These guys are using the Constitution for toilet paper. Somebody's got to stand up and say 'Enough!' I'll get the goods on them. That's my part of the bargain, but I need to know that you and your management won't choke on me when I deliver."

"And here I thought you hackers were all anarchists. I hardly expected a civics lesson." A voice in Broadman's head told him his life was about to be permanently changed, regardless of which choice he made.

Yoshida encrypted the password list and filed it away. "Even hackers grow up eventually. And I learned my civics lessons the hard way."

Broadman massaged a growing tightness in his neck. "If they're so intent on keeping MINTNET a secret, wouldn't they come after me if I tried to go to press?" Part of him was intrigued by the information Yoshida was offering, but another part reminded Broadman of how hard he had worked to get his life into its current ordered state.

Yoshida powered down his laptop trio. "They'll give you a hard time, all right. But once you go public, they can't physically harm you. It would just confirm your story."

"That's comforting." As a reporter, Broadman had seen how the government could turn someone's life upside down without laying a finger on them. Yoshida's assurances were really no comfort at all. "And what would they do to you?"

"We would have no further contact. I make the delivery and disappear. Even if they check phone records, I've made sure they can't tie the two of us together."

"I'll have to talk it over with my boss. The one who said my stories lack depth." This was going to be a tough sell. A well-done product review was a lot more popular with his management than testing the boundaries of the First Amendment.

Yoshida pushed back from the table. "I hope I've given you enough material to justify the trip."

Broadman flipped his notebook closed. "More than enough. I'll call you in a couple of days." It was probably a moot point. He could count on the editors quashing any idea that fell outside the narrow scope of his column.

"No, I'll call *you*. Thanks for stopping by."

Broadman hardly noticed the traffic on the way home. He had other things to think about.

* * *

Yoshida was annoyed by Broadman's attitude. Despite what Broadman's boss thought of him, Yoshida had been led to believe that he was a solid guy, if a little immature. His source had said nothing about an underlying streak of cowardice. So much for the *Times* being on the cutting edge of journalism. He hooked his cloned cell phone to a scrambler and punched in the destination number. It was answered on the first ring.

"So are the Rangers taking the Cup this year?" a gravelly voice asked.

"You know damned well I'm a Devils fan," Yoshida replied. "The proposal has been delivered."

The scrambler lent a metallic tone to the voice. "Do we have a sale?"

"Unknown. He'll consider it and get back to us. Maybe we should start looking for another customer."

"Understood. Keep me posted."

"Always." Yoshida ended the call and slid out the phone's battery. Later he would pull the phone's chip and reprogram it with a new electronic personality, but that could wait.

* * *

"He's definitely off-line now," Feldman reported. "If we need to reposition, this would be a good time. He's a methodical guy. He usually takes a couple of hours between hacks to plan his next move."

"Where's he been?" Richter asked Feldman.

"The Supercomputer Center at MIT. Looks like he cracked the password file. Record time, too."

Through the window he watched the Jeep Cherokee leave the complex. "Do we have an ID on this guy yet?" Richter asked.

Feldman retrieved a sheet from the printer. "His tag came up as Anthony Broadman of Mountainville, New York. Yoshida hacked into several accounts of the same name last week. Probably part of his legitimate security business."

"If Broadman's legit, then he's not a factor. You think Yoshida will hit MINTNET again tonight?"

Feldman snickered. "He's got the decrypted password file right there in his hot little hands. Would *you* be able to resist?"

Richter nodded decisively. "Okay, it's taken long enough, but I think we finally got this bastard. I'll call the Snake Pit. As soon as he gets his pants down around his ankles, he's ours."

THE HUNDRED HACKER RAID

"Every general is on stage" - Frederick the Great

Lieutenant General Jonathan Stoyer's phone rang. He looked up at his reflection in the tinted windows of the Director's office. The darkness outside National Security Agency headquarters turned the shielded glass into mirrors, allowing Stoyer capture to the moment. The late hour assured him this would be no ordinary call. He allowed the phone to ring twice.

"Stoyer."

"General! We have a massive cyberattack in progress." It was Jeff Archer, the NSA's Deputy Director.

"How bad?"

"Sir, the entire state of Nebraska just dropped off the map. You'd better come check it out." Dread radiated from the other end.

"On my way."

Stoyer went through the ritual of leaving his office at NSA headquarters. He secured his classified material in the Mosler safe concealed inside a cherrywood credenza. He placed his granite paperweight on one of the unclassified documents neatly arrayed on his desk, reminding himself where to resume work when he returned. He gave the granite cube a final pat for good luck. Its inscription said it all:

POWER. FOCUS. CONTROL.

The ride down to the command center gave him a chance to adjust the lines of his Air Force uniform on his thin, wiry frame.

The air in the elevator felt electric to him, as crisp and sharp as his graying crew cut.

The elevator halted. With his general's face firmly in place, Stoyer marched into the National Information Command Center. His office upstairs might be the outward symbol of his authority, but the NICC was the seat of his true power. In this chamber, he was the best-informed military commander on the planet. The communications and intelligence equipment surrounding him here connected him instantly to the NSA's own Army, Air Force, and Navy elements, which included dozens of aircraft, fleets of ships and satellites, even a nuclear submarine.

Just as important as the technology in the NICC were the two dozen people staffing it, the NSA's top-drawer analysts. Most of them monitored data from specific sources: satellites, listening posts, surveillance ships and aircraft. Others searched the full spectrum of the NSA's data stream for specific threats, such as terrorist activity or hacker intrusions. Some of the NICC staff were in uniform, but most wore business suits.

The NSA's first string was having trouble coping with tonight's crisis. Information was their lifeblood, and precious little was flowing. Even with the recent emphasis on homeland defense, the NSA was having more difficulty gathering intelligence on American soil than they would have in some hot spot half a world away. Consternation was mounting as the employees of the world's largest intelligence agency were reduced to flipping through cable news channels or attempting telephone calls into the affected areas, without success.

In the center of the chaos the NICC's watch officer spoke into his headset and the handset of another phone while nodding or shaking his head at notes his subordinates placed on his desk. One of his two pagers went off while Stoyer passed. The watch officer dropped his phone trying to silence the pager and salute at the same time. Stoyer returned the salute stoically, enjoying his superiority over the Army colonel.

The NICC was shaped like a fat pie wedge. Stoyer had entered on the narrow end and mounted the stairs to a glass-enclosed balcony. From there he overlooked the huge central screen and four smaller screens on each side that took up the wide end of the room. A custom-made leather captain's chair placed the controls for the screens at his fingertips. Sitting in the elevated seat, Stoyer exuded the calm and confidence a good officer should exhibit in a crisis.

"Report!" he barked.

Jeff Archer was anything but calm. He had jumped to his feet when Stoyer entered. Now he nervously retook his seat at one of the three stations along the front edge of the balcony. This vantage point let him see not only the screens but the workers on the floor below. Archer would monitor the execution of the General's orders, while Stoyer need only concern himself with the data on the displays.

Archer's fingers danced on a keyboard. "This is the latest spy satellite feed. The view is centered over Omaha."

The central screen went dark, then showed a networked constellation of lights. A gaping void consumed the center of the image, pitch black.

Stoyer leaned forward, not fully able to believe the picture. The blacked-out area closely followed the state boundaries, although it was harder to see in the sparsely-populated panhandle.

"Am I seeing what I *think* I'm seeing?"

Archer nodded, his expression grim. "They cut everything. Electricity, telephone, fiber optic lines, even microwave links. It's like somebody dropped a Nebraska-shaped cookie cutter from orbit."

The sight sent a shiver down Stoyer's spine. "I think someone is sending us a message."

"Anywhere, anytime," Archer agreed.

The blackout area was not entirely unlit. Small orange glows flickered in the darkness.

"Are those *fires* burning down there?"

"My people are trying to find out right now. The watch officer should be reporting back momentarily."

Stoyer studied his second-in-command. A clean-cut man in his early forties, Archer had a doctorate in mathematics from CalPoly and was a detailed but efficient manager. He watched over day-to-day problems, allowing Stoyer to focus on the NSA's future. Stoyer could tell that beneath Archer's professional veneer, *fear* was gnawing on the man's insides.

The phone next to Archer rang. He snatched up the receiver on the first ring.

"Sir," Archer reported, "we're picking up police radio intercepts from all over the state reporting natural gas explosions. One incident in Omaha and one in Lincoln sound

pretty bad. They're screaming for ambulances and mobile triage units."

"Great Plains Natural Gas still has their switching network on the Internet, don't they?"

"Yes, sir. We warned them all about that. Great Plains apparently didn't listen."

Stoyer allowed his shoulders to drop. "I assume all the appropriate agencies have been informed?"

"We're ringing the fire bells right now."

"My god, my god. Then it's finally happened." And in the President's home state, Stoyer mused.

There was horror in Archer's voice. "The Hundred Hacker Raid. We warned them it was coming, didn't we, sir?"

Stoyer made sure he matched Archer's tone. "Yeah, Jeff, we certainly tried."

His work here was complete. Damage control was not his concern. "Jeff, it's going to take a lot of detective work to find out who caught us napping. In the meantime, the politicians are going to want me to hold their hands, and I'd prefer to do that with a good night's sleep. Besides, I'd just be in your way if I stayed here."

Archer blinked. "Uh, yes sir. I'll call a driver."

"No, I knew I'd be working late, so I drove myself. Listen, why don't you route my home phone here tonight? I don't want some junior White House staffer waking me up. Tell them I'll brief the President myself at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow morning. Have a car at my house at oh-seven and make sure you fax me the brief before then. If I have any questions, I'll call you on the way."

"Consider it done." While Stoyer was getting a good night's sleep, Archer would get none at all, but that was assumed.

"Thanks, Jeff. You're a good man to have at the wheel."

Archer worked up a half-hearted smile. "You're welcome, sir. Glad to be of service."

Stoyer took one more look at the black hole punched into the very heartland of America, then stepped briskly to the stairs. He needed to visit the Snake Pit right away.