THE ALEXANDRIA PROJECT :

Prologue

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Guillaume Paumier, CCA3.0 Unported

Late in the afternoon of a cold December afternoon a panel truck approached the gate of a concertina wire topped chain link fence in a run-down section of Richmond, Virginia. The words "Commonwealth Wholesale Paper Goods" appeared on its sides, as well as on the gray coveralls worn by Jack Davis, its driver.

Rolling down his window, Davis punched a code into the control box set on a steel post rising from the cracked pavement, and the gate clanked slowly to one side. After wheeling the truck around, he backed up flush against the loading dock of the warehouse inside. The gate closing behind him.

Davis rolled up the rear gate of the truck from the inside of the empty truck, unlocked the metal loading dock door, and raised that out of the way as well. Stepping inside, he threw a light switch, and then stamped on the brake release pedal of a hydraulic lifter parked against the wall. The few bare bulbs in the ceiling dimly revealed long rows of loading pallets, each stacked nine feet high with large boxes of paper plates, cups and towels.

Closing and locking the loading dock gate behind him, Davis pushed the lifter along the row of pallets, counting them as he moved along. He turned the long tines of the lift to the right and slid them under pallet 19, raised it a few inches, and backed it up until he could swing the pallet through 180 degrees. The pirouette accomplished, he slowly began to back into the space where the pallet had stood, pulling it behind him until it was back where he had found it.

Davis had plenty of room to work with, because there was an open space where the pallet in the second row should have been. Instead, a large metal plate was set in the floor. Set in its surface was a handle and a biometric security pad.

When Davis pressed his thumb against it, he heard a click, and the plate swung slowly upwards, revealing a familiar ladder disappearing into a shaft dimly lit by a

single red light bulb. He stepped on to it and climbed down through twenty feet of reinforced concrete while the door overhead swung silently back into position. Arriving at the bottom, he opened a door in the wall, this time taking care to shield his eyes with one hand.

As usual, even with this precaution the bright lights in the enormous room beyond nearly blinded him. But soon he could clearly see the familiar row upon row of seven foot high metal racks crammed with what appeared to be identical grey, metallic boxes. Every one displayed a row of small, rhythmically blinking white lights, and each was connected to bundles of brightly colored wires.

The room hummed softly with the sound of thousands of cooling fans, one to a box. Davis felt more than heard the other vibrations that filled the room, generated by the pulse of the thousands of gallons of cooling water coursing every minute through the collectors that lined the walls of the room, absorbing the waste heat that the fans threw off. No heat signature would give this facility away to an enemy satellite; the coolant ran underground to a nearby power plant happy to take the pre-heated water from wherever it was it came from.

Walking along the perimeter of the room, Davis looked down briefly through the open grid of the floor at the first of the several additional floors of computer servers that extended down beneath him. But that always made him slightly dizzy, so he looked up to see the guard he was relieving approach from the opposite direction. When they met, the guard stopped briefly to chat and slip on the coveralls he carried over one arm. Like the semi-automatic pistol the guard wore in his shoulder holster, they were identical to those that Davis also wore.

"What's the weather like outside?"

"Sucks. Sleet and more of the same predicted till morning."

"Figures. Tomorrow's my day off."

With that, the other man went on his way. In a few minutes he'd be driving off in the truck parked outside.

Well, the weather won't be bothering me in here, Davis thought. The room was climate controlled to within a tenth of a degree, and well-insulated by the bombproof walls and roof that had been installed underneath the warehouse. It had taken two years for all that dirt and rock to be carried away in delivery vans like the one he had arrived in. The same vans returned with cement, steel, and eventually those thousands of servers, accompanied by the technicians that had set them up. Now, the whole bloody world could come to an end and he wouldn't know it till his shift was over.

Davis walked up a flight of steel stairs that led to a bullet proof, glass walled security booth attached to the wall overlooking the room. He stepped inside after touching one final biometric pad, and then began settling in for another long, boring shift guarding the blinking servers below.

In front of Davis stood a row of video displays that allowed him to see every inch of the outside of the warehouse, and racked on the wall behind him were a high powered rifle and a shotgun. It wasn't likely he'd ever need any of the fire power at his disposal, though. One flip of the large red switch in front of him would flood the server room with enough Halon gas to not only put out a fire, but asphyxiate any intruder as well. Not for the first time, he wished that the house where he lived with his wife and their two small children could be as well protected.

But the government didn't put as high a priority on protecting suburban bungalows as it did on safeguarding its most critical computer network facilities. Some of the most important systems, like those serving the needs of the Pentagon and the National Security Administration, were located not far away at Fort Meade. Others, like this one, were scattered far and wide, hidden in plain site but highly secure none the less.

If Davis had been able to electronically monitor what was happening on server A-VI/147 down below, though, he might have felt less secure. True, concrete and steel walls, surveillance cameras and Halon gas were more than adequate to protect the physical well being of his facility against anything short of a precise hit by a "bunker busting" nuclear weapon – and Richmond wasn't a likely target for that kind of attack. But the data on the facility's servers had to rely on virtual defenses - firewalls, security routines and scanners.

And notwithstanding those defenses, someone had gotten inside.\

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