

Chasing Boxes

By

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For EOD

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<3

Chapter 1: Out of Place

It didn't matter how heavy the coat was or how many layers of cloths he was wearing. He looked uncomfortable and out of place; shivering on the corner alone. The biting wind swirled snowflakes around him. He tried to hide his dark complexion behind the Russian newspaper he pretended to read. Fortunately the corner was in a quiet neighbourhood. Most who walked by, held their heads low and paid him no notice. Only a couple of cars and trucks plodded past on the slushy street.

"Cold, isn't it?" a voice behind him asked in Russian. "You look like an Arabian popsicle" he said with a chuckle.

Turning to see a man about 50 years old with a greying beard and dark hair, he answered in English, "I don't understand how you people can live like this... Komelov?"

"Da, and you must be Fahaj", he answered. "Let's go back to my home. You can warm up."

Fahaj looked around nervously as the two men shuffled off towards an alley. "Are we in any danger of being followed?"

"Bah!" Komolov answered gruffly. "Not in a year have we seen Police in these neighbourhoods. Most of the officers are paid more by local criminals to stay away than by the state to enforce laws. Despite what you read in the papers, the KGB still operates, but many of them haven't been paid in months either. They say in the West that Glastnost and democracy in Russia is greatest thing, but in two years things are falling apart. I can barely afford a loaf of bread for my family."

"The Americans should keep their noses out of other country's business," Fahaj interjected as he followed down the alley.

"The American's, Gorbachev, the British, the Germans. Everyone thinks they know right thing, but none of it is putting food in my family's mouth." Reaching up to a small blue door with peeling paint and cardboard in place of a broken window, "Here we are."

Behind the door, a narrow staircase led sharply up. A bare lightbulb hung overhead as the two men creaked their way up the wood steps. At the top another door led into a small drab apartment with dirty green walls. An elderly woman at the sink didn't look up from the pots she scrubbed as the two men entered. Across the room two teenage boys crowd around a book. From another room a female voice calls, "Alexi... Did you get it?"

"Yes, I've got it here," Komelov answered as he produced a loaf of bread and three crudly marked tin cans from under his heavy coat; leaving them on the counter. Fahaj

looked around nervously at all the people in the room, but they didn't acknowledge his presence. "Come my friend. Into the bedroom."

Closing the door behind them, Komelov steered Fahaj to a chair in the corner. "Please. Sit... I've got what you came for, here." From behind a closet door he picked up a large black case with a handle. "The case is lead lined so you can carry it safely without worrying about loosing your hair," he chuckled lightly. "It makes it heavy though. More than seven kilos."

"Is it what we agreed to?" Fahaj asked tentatively as he backed away from the case in his chair.

"Oh yes... Approximately two kilograms of weapons grade material, just like I promised. I started sneaking it out in the soles of my shoes over a year ago. When the price of bread tripled over the weekend and we hadn't been paid in two weeks. I have been faithfully processing their nuclear material for over twenty five years and I won't see my family out on the street with the rats." Komelov's expression changed as he looked more serious. "This will ensure that I can take my family away from here and into one of the southern states away from this insanity. I have it all arranged."

Pulling two thick envelopes from his coat lining, "This will ensure that it happens. As promised, two hundred thousand dollars in hard currency."

"Then we have a deal!" Komelov's expression lightened again as he slid the case across the floor towards Fahaj with his foot. Raising his legs, Fahaj slunk deeper into the chair. Komelov chuckles again at Fahaj's nervousness.

Chapter 2: Chasing Boxes

Staring at his screen Jimbo worked frantically to follow a series of red dots spread across a huge schematic. “I need some kind of idea here Jimbo!” Onyx’s voice boomed out of the speakers.

“I know, I know, but there are eight targets here moving in five different directions! I can’t route them all manually and if I let the NCT system do it, you’ll never be able to keep up with them all. We’ll loose at least half the targets!” Jimbo spit back as he banged a few keys on his keyboard. One of the red marks on the screen abruptly changed directions.

“Look I know,” Onyx answered back, “but this is what we’ve got and we’ve got to identify them all so we be in position for the pickup.”

“Look guys!” a female voice interrupted. “Can we hold it together. I’m running around in circles here... Jimbo, I’m at junction C-18 and I haven’t seen the two targets go by yet.”

“I’m sorry Laura,” Jimbo answered as he rattled out more commands on the keyboard. “I missed them at junction C-2 and they ended up on a conveyer for section B.”

“God damnit!” Laura called back as she turned down an isle, running towards a large metal door with a big letter B painted on it. Overhead, layers of conveyers moved hundreds of boxes, packages and bags across the room.

Over in section G, Dave walked along with a pair of boxes. “Jimbo, I’ve caught up with two of the target packages and I’m with them into the terminal.”

“Ok,” Jimbo answered, “now we’re getting somewhere. There’s one more package that should catch up to you before you get to the final sort and pickup queue.”

“Jimbo, I’m at the pickup terminal now and I’ve got one in the machine waiting for pickup, but someone has already grabbed the other package. I didn’t see it happen,” a new voice called. Looking at his display, Jimbo saw one of the eight red dots fade and disappear.

“He just went out the door, did you see him InThrees?” he asked impatiently.

“Jimbo... Six people just went out the doors and all I saw were the back of their heads!” InThrees called back.

“Damnit, we have to get a visual on this guy. If the package goes off the grid we can’t track him and we’ll loose it forever,” Onyx interjected impatiently. “Intelligence said this was the final destination. This is our only chance at it.” Onyx looked around impatiently

as he could feel the deal slipping through his fingers. The cargo terminal at Atlanta International is hundreds of thousands of square feet and chasing eight boxes with only four team members on the ground is far from standard operating procedure.

“Look, we’ve still got seven packages in play, lets focus on those and hope we get lucky,” Jimbo reassured. “Dave has three moving into position for pickup, InThrees has one waiting. Laura has almost caught up to two more and the last one seems to have gone into a holding area in section F.”

“Alright, I’m going to move into position in the terminal to make the arrest,” Onyx answered back.

From his position behind the package delivery system InThrees could see the crowds of people picking up shipments of all shapes and sizes. Large containerized shipments moved out the other end of the freight terminal, but the target today was a small package.

The cargo tracking systems around the world have equipment to detect explosives, biological or chemical agents, but the criminal organizations have long known how to shield against most of the detection equipment. Intelligence, detective work and luck are the only viable tools left for catching illegal shipments of the really nasty stuff. This package had been tipped off and the pickup guy identified by an informant, but if he got out the door with the package, he wouldn’t be found.

The huge parcel pickup room was mostly full of couriers with swipe cards bringing the packages out for pickup. In these dozens of faces was that one face and he had to be caught with the box in his hand.

“My package just got picked up... It’s not him,” InThrees reported.

“Roger,” Jimbo confirmed. “Move over three sections and join Dave with his three targets.”

“I’ve got the two moving through section B,” Laura reported. Walking along the conveyor she could see the tracking serial numbers on her hand-held computer, indicating that she was close enough to receive the tagging transmitter’s weak signal. “I should be at the pickup terminal with them in two minutes.”

“I’m at the door now,” Onyx reported. “As soon as we finger the guy I’m good to go.”

“Roger... Onyx, I’m still getting that latency warning on the router. The data packets from the airport systems are lagging. I don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it either, Jimbo, but it can’t be helped now. After we get this guy we can run a circuit trace and see what’s happening.”

Across the terminal Dave and InThrees waited by an access door. Three packages waited in view, in the machinery. They could see as each package passed out of the machinery and into the waiting hands of the recipient. "Here's our guy for the first package... It's not him... It's a chick... Wow, a very hot one at that. Can I arrest her anyway?"

"Stifle that Dave," Onyx barked back. Dave and InThrees exchanged a quick grin and turned back to the crowd of people swiping cards and picking up boxes.

The second box went as well, to a UPS courier. One box left ready for pickup. "Hold everything," InThrees whispered, "I think that's our guy."

Onyx stepped out of the access door and circled around behind the crowd. "I've got the doors," he said softly as he tried to blend into the waiting crowd. Scanning the head of each of the lines, he saw a short, dark haired guy step up to the card reader.

"That's our guy," Dave and InThrees whispered, almost in unison. He slid his card through the reader and the machine began its cycle to move the target package into position.

"I'm on my way!" Laura called. Her heavy panting gave away her sprinting for the terminal.

In one fluid motion the conveyors ejected the package out of the delivery chute and into the waiting arms of the pickup guy. "Hit him!" Dave sang out. Both Dave and InThrees leaped from behind an access panel towards the alarmed man. Onyx drew his gun and began pushing his way through the crowd. At the far end of the room Laura burst through an access door gun drawn. Clearly shocked, the guy dropped the package and tried to run, but instead came face to face with Onyx.

"You're under arrest, for the illegal international shipment of prohibited materials," he shouted at the man, pushing him down. All the other couriers in the room slowly backed away or headed for the door. The team of four closed in on the subject guns drawn, as Onyx cuffed the man.

Behind them a group of five men in suits threaded their way through the crowd from outside. Two other men in courier uniforms stepped out of the small group still in the terminal, guns drawn. Slowly becoming aware of the group approaching, Dave tried to interrupt Onyx. "Um... Onyx... I think we've got a problem here."

"Well thanks guys, you've done a good job on this guy. We'll take it from here," one of the suited men offered cheerfully.

Standing up slowly, Onyx almost growled, "Agent Vetis... What the hell." He turned to face Vetis as two of the other agents picked up the suspect; leaving Dave, InThrees and Laura looking at each other; not knowing what to do. "This guy was picking up a

package containing an illegal biological agent shipped from Asia... International... The FBI doesn't have jurisdiction."

"Wrong as always, my friend. This package passed through San Francisco on its way here to Atlanta. That makes it domestic and makes him fair game for the Bureau." Vetus cracked a smarmy grin as he turned to follow the other agents out with the suspect. "Be sure to thank Jimbo for all his help... Oh, and give Clammy my best."

Onyx seethed as the crowd began to disperse and airport security began arriving to close off the terminal. "Jimbo... I think we found the source of that data lag."

"Yeah, I heard everything," Jimbo groaned back. "I can't believe they hacked my data stream! Clem is gonna shit." At the top of the console a new alert message popped up. "Onyx... We don't have time to deal, with it now. The four of you need to get on the next plane to Chicago. An alert just came in and there's a senior staff meeting in the Chicago office in three hours. It must be big, because they've included permission to bump first class if we have to."

"Shit... What now," Onyx muttered. "Alright, let's go. We'll meet you there."

Chapter 3: Call Them All In

Around a large conference table, members of the agency's senior staff sat. Onyx, Jimbo, Joshy, Biggles, and Lon talked amongst themselves quietly. The room was dimly lit, with a large pool of light illuminating the table. Much of the room was in shadow.

With a loud clank, a heavy door closed in the corner and Clme walked to the head of the table. "Gentlemen," he began, "we've got a situation and we're activating the entire agency in to handle it. There was no way to bring Fen in from Japan in such short notice, so I'll fill him in separately."

"And Bitchgoddess?" Biggles queried.

"She was on a flight from Seattle to Midway two hours ago... I donno." Shuffling a few files in front of him, Clme continued, "This is a big one... Bigger than that pound and a half of plutonium with stopped in Portland back in 2016."

"So, what... we're talking nuclear?" Joshy interrupted. "I thought it had all been accounted for by 2017."

"Not all... This one was thought to have been an audit mistake, but intelligence has surfaced in South Africa that has changed some minds over at the Department of Homeland Security."

"Pencil Pushers," Onyx commented quietly.

Ignoring the comment Clme continued, "Because of the importance of this one, I'm bringing someone in to run it. He'll fill you in on the background and assign the teams."

"Who are you bringing in?" Biggles asked.

"Rufus," Clme said bluntly as he moved to sit.

"Rufus?!" Onyx asked incredulously. "That control freak, jerk! Christ, if I take a shit he's gonna want to know what the consistency was!" he snapped.

From the shadows of the corner of the room a figure began to move. The loud clack of the hard soled shoes echoed through the room like a drum. Emerging from the shadows a tall man in a sharply pressed suit and blonde hair, silvering on the sides, slowly walked behind Onyx towards the head of the table.

"If by shit, you mean your last deal... I'd say that it was pretty lumpy," Rufus began. Onyx quickly tried to hide his anger and surprise. "You had Fen tag six packages in Tokyo and then Tin Sloth tags two more in San Francisco. You still manage to find the

guy, despite having too many target packages to track properly, and then you loose the bust to the FBI because they hacked your feed from the NCT system.”

“Look, I had that data stream encrypted by the book. I didn’t have a chance to figure out how the feds got in,” Jimbo tried to explain. “If only I had a…”

Raising his hand, Rufus interrupted. “I’m not here to criticize. We’ve got more important issues to deal with. This job is going to involve just about everyone we’ve got and a few we put out to pasture. It’s a lot of people, so they called me in to run it. Not to step on everyone’s toes.” Onyx looked clearly unhappy, he was about to appeal again to Clme, but the door banged open and a figure entered.

“BG… Right on time, as always?” Rufus commented to her sarcastically as she walked towards the table. With a wicked look, Bitchgoddess flipped her middle finger at Rufus and sat down in an empty seat by Biggles.

“Now that we’re all here, let’s begin the briefing,” Rufus said, with a quick wink to Bitchgoddess before turning. With a few keystrokes Clme brought up a large display with a photograph of a dark haired man with a greying beard. He was crossing a slushy street, seemingly unaware of the picture being taken. “This is Alexander Komelov, a senior Russian physicist. From 1964 until late 1989 he worked in a nuclear weapons facility just outside Belomorsk, North of St. Petersburg. The facility processed nuclear material for the Russian’s missile subs in the North Atlantic. Komelov disappeared from his job in early October, 1989. He turned up again two weeks later. He and his family were killed by a car bomb on a road leaving Akstafa in Eastern Azerbaijan.”

Turning back to the group Rufus continued, “In a 1996 review of nuclear material at Russian facilities the Belomorsk facility came up two and a half kilograms short. As most of you are aware we tracked and intercepted half a kilogram of weapons grade plutonium in 2015 that was traced back to Belomorsk. The other two kilograms had never surfaced… until now.”

The room was filled with a murmur as everyone mumbled and whispered to each other. “I thought they never managed to pin anything on Komelov and the missing two kilograms had been chalked up to a record keeping error,” Joshy finally offered.

“That was the case,” Rufus answered back, “but we’ve got some new intelligence from South Africa that has changed some minds back in D.C.”

Hitting a few keys Clme brought up a screen full of text. After a few seconds he began, “What you’re looking at here is a shipping log for a case leaving Messina heading North on an aircraft for Egypt. You’ll notice that the shipping weight is consistently one point eight kilograms as it moves through the system, except when it passes through the junction between the sorting system and the aircraft loading queue. A system independent scale picked it up at seven point eight kilograms.”

Onyx spoke up, somewhat perturbed, “Tell me that you didn’t call us all in because a package was too heavy. We see out of spec packages all the time and they aren’t some mythical two kilogram shipment of plutonium.”

“No,” Rufus answered, “but most organizations moving out of spec packages leave a digital trail when they hack the shipping system. This one was clean. We’ve also got some information from an operative in Turkey. A pair of devices left there; one for Portland and the other for Los Angeles. Each one is about right for a one kilogram payload. We think the devices are intended to meet up with our case somewhere, either in Chicago, New York or D.C.”

“So why don’t we have someone in Egypt nab the target case and be done with it?” asked Biggles.

“We tried that,” answered Rufus. “The case disappeared before the European Union group could tag it. They had covered every possible route and they finally narrowed it down to a container on a cargo ship from Alexandria that’s due to hit the port in Marseille in seven hours.”

“Those idiots over there couldn’t find their asses without a map,” Lon commented quietly. Rufus ignored the comment but Onyx smiled for the first time as he suppressed a giggle.

“So what’s the plan?” Jimbo asked. “Grab it in France?”

“No. D.C. thinks it’s going to move through Paris, to come stateside. They want to let it pass through and grab the package and the people receiving it when it comes together with the devices.” The room again filled with hushed whispering.

“That’s a huge risk,” Joshy spoke up. “One slip could lead to the target slipping off the system on U.S. soil and with the devices in the same place... D.C. can’t be serious.”

“They are,” Rufus answered. “The organization that’s moving these three targets is better than we’ve seen in a while. D.C. wants to shut them down. That’s why I’ve been authorized to call everyone in.”

“Everyone?” Onyx asked suspiciously. “Define ‘everyone’.”

“Well, I’m sending your team to France to hook up with the European Union group to try to tag the package before it gets on the plane in Paris. For the duration of the operation I am putting Jimbo on the ground with your team.”

“You’re putting Jimbo on the ground with Laura?” asked Biggles.

“I’ll take responsibility for that,” Rufus said.

“This isn’t because of the last deal is it? Because...” Jimbo asked anxiously.

“No,” Rufus said, interrupting Jimbo. “It’s not that. I’m putting someone else at the console for this operation.”

Onyx’s eyes narrowed as he leaned towards Rufus. “Who?” he asked seriously.

Hesitantly, Rufus answered, “EOD.”

Again the room erupted into a murmur of whispering. “You can’t be serious,” Onyx spat back as he slumped into his chair. “You’re going to have to drag him out of a bottle first!”

“I realize that,” Rufus answered back, “but there is still some magic left in him and we’re going to need it.”

Cleme broke in before Onyx could open his mouth again, “You won’t get EOD unless you take Weis too.”

“Yes, I know. I want him on the ground to run the west coast group,” Rufus answered.

“Christ... This just keeps getting better,” Onyx said angrily. “What other lunacy are you going to saddle us with? Xclusive?”

“No,” Rufus answered calmly. “Since he dropped out last year he’s become unreliable. D.C. thinks he’s been compromised. I’ve got someone else for you though. An old friend of yours. You’ll be taking Monju with you to France.”

“That crazy Cajun ass! What the hell. Everyone knows he plays both sides of the fence,” Joshy shouted from across the table.

“Which is why we need him,” Rufus said, turning to Joshy. “We won’t be able to tag the package once it hits the Paris cargo system and we expect the package to drop out of the system after it gets off the boat in Marseille. We need his contacts to get close enough to the package before it hits Paris. If we can’t tag it before Paris we’ll never find it when it lands state side.”

“So, what are our next steps?” asked Biggles.

“I’m going to Portland to get EOD and Weis. Lon, you’re with me. Onyx and his team will be leaving for France immediately.” Turning to Onyx, “Monju will meet you in JFK.” Onyx grimaced at the news. “Biggles and Joshy... Put your teams together. Clem will assign to you anyone you need to fill out your team. BG... I want you in Los Angeles with Starr. Clem... make sure Tin Sloth meets me in Portland.”

With a nod of approval Clme stood up to leave. “Ok, we’re done here guys... Call them all in.”

Chapter 4: Cajun's Travel Light

Moving through the crowds in the JFK terminal, Onyx led his group of five. Overhead the schedule screens show their Air France flight, on-time to depart in nine minutes. "Damn it, Clem is cutting it close," Laura complained as she trailed Jimbo and Dave.

"Yeah well, maybe we'll be lucky and Monju will miss the flight," Onyx called back.

"Well if he is there, I'm gonna slug him right in the face if he touches my ass again!" Dave said as he dragged a wheeled cart piled with baggage.

Turning off the main concourse, the gate came into sight. All of the passengers had already boarded and the gate agent was preparing to close the gate. Onyx started waving his Department ID as the group jogged in.

"You're just in time sir," the agent reassured as they reach the jetway door. "Can I have the exception permits for your luggage?" she asked.

Dave offered up a small booklet of documents asking, "Has a scruffy looking guy with dark hair, a goatee and a southern accent been here yet?"

Her expression changed as she looked at Dave. "You mean he's with you?" she sighed. "He was here an hour ago, but went to the bar after making some inappropriate advances. I almost called security, but he had a Department of Homeland Security ID."

The group all rolled their eyes. Onyx slowly admitted, "I'm sorry... Yes he's with us."

"HEY THERE BOYEEZ!" a loud voice called from behind them. "Just like old times again, eh!" He rushed forward to try to grab everyone for a group-hug. Laura stepped back quickly, turning her nose up at the smell of Rye. InThrees and Jimbo, less fortunate, found themselves trapped in a bear hug.

"Oh my god, get away," InThrees begged.

Onyx rolled his eyes as he asked, "Monju... Give that a rest. We need to check your carry-on for the inspection exemption certificate."

"Not to worry my love," he said as he released InThrees and Jimbo. "This is it here," he said producing a pocket computer. "Us Cajuns travel light, ya know."

Dave recorded the serial number and passed the final document to the gate agent, who was trying to keep a healthy distance from Monju. "Ok sir. We've got a reserved section in first class for you and your group," she said, handing an envelope of boarding passes to Onyx. "Have a good flight."

“Alright folks,” Onyx said as he rallied the group. Grab your carry-on and let’s get rolling. Mon... hands to yourself!”

“Aww!” he complained. “Can I have Dave if I tell you that I’ve got a contact lined up for when we get to Marseille?” he asked hopefully.

Dave stopped dead in his tracks and looked at Onyx with an intense stare. “Don’t you even...” he started. Onyx shrugged and started down the jetway towards the plane.

Chapter 5: A Job to Do

A light rain wet the streets down as Rufus and Tin Sloth walked into an ally. Trash lined the alley and small groups of people huddled around doorways, under rusty signs. The crumbling decay seemed out of place in the cosmopolitan city of Portland. Rufus looked somewhat out of place under his London Fog coat and suit, but with his tossed dark hair, long sideburns and metal hanging from his ears and nose, Tin Sloth seemed to fit right in with the shady characters lining the alley.

Coming to a dingy purple door the two men stopped. Above the door an old neon sign blinked erratically. "The Crapper" it read. With a quick look to each other, they turned and stepped in.

The bar was almost empty. They walked past a couple men, passed out on benches. At the bar, a lone man sat. He was bald and looked worn down, his face long and drawn. The trademark goatee, now grey and untrimmed, gave him away. Half a dozen empty shot glasses sat in front of him and an almost empty bottle of whiskey.

"EOD..." Rufus began. "Long time, no something, something..." EOD didn't look up, instead taking a sip from his drink.

Looking to the far corner, Weis sat behind a large round table. Around the dozen empty beer mugs he was slowly propping up playing cards into a tower. Smoke circled his head and filled the corner with a thick haze, as he took another drag from the cigarette dangling from his mouth. The floor was littered with half a dozen empty donut boxes. Tin Sloth moved over towards Weis to sit at the table with him.

"So," Rufus began again, "how's the bar business suiting you?"

"Eh..." he answered slowly. "Drunks check in... They don't check out..."

"Sounds quiet..." Leaning on the bar and nodding towards Weis, Rufus asked, "What about him? He must be the last person on the west coast still smoking. The inspectors don't hassle you?"

"Well... They tried... After the sixth or seventh charge for smoking indoors mysteriously disappeared from the city's computer system, they stopped bothering," EOD said, as he looked up finally. His expression softened with a bit of a sly smile.

"Ah HELL!" Weis' voice yelled out from the back of the bar. EOD and Rufus looked back to see Weis' card house flattened and Tin Sloth's arm extended holding a single card in mid air. He put the card down sheepishly while Weis gathered the cards together to start again.

“Listen...” Rufus began again, “we need you to push some buttons for us. Work a little of the old magic.”

EOD chuckled a little. “Check your calendar bucko... I was through with that after the Anthrax job got out of hand three years ago. I’m out.”

Leaning in Rufus responded, “No one blamed you for the Anthrax job. You did everything you could and we lost someone. It happens.”

“Yeah... Tell that to Magicgoo. Oh wait... She’s DEAD,” He sneered.

“And Jumper’s in the can for a long time for doing it. You did everything you could to prevent it.”

“But she still got killed. I watched it happen on the security cameras. I can’t do that again,” EOD said as he threw an empty shot glass at the floor behind the bar. It exploded into a shower of glass. “I need another drink.”

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t important,” Rufus continued. “This is a big one and without you at the terminal we’re probably going to lose a lot more than just one. Whoever it was, they managed to move an out of spec package and they left the shipping system audit logs absolutely clean. They’re inside the system.”

“Ahhh!” he groaned, throwing another shot glass. “Why are you doing this to me? You don’t need me... You’ve got Psyci. He can run it.”

“Psyci moved to Penternet operations when Xclusive left. Xclusive went under last year and we haven’t had any contact with him. He’s either deep under, or we’ve lost him.”

EOD sighed heavily. “How big are we talking?” he asked placing his head in his hands.

“Two kilograms, weapons grade,” Rufus responded coolly.

EOD looked up incredulously. “You can’t be serious.” Rufus’ expression remained unchanged. “What about him?” he asked, poking a thumb in Weis’ direction.

“I’m going to give him a West coast team.” Rufus responded, as he looked for a clean glass behind the bar. “Sara is down town opening up the office again with Lon.”

“Sara...” EOD muttered. “For a year she tried to pull me out. She came by here last year. That was the last time I saw her.” He laid his head back in his hands again.

“Well this deal is bigger than you, me and the whole agency put together. It’s time to pull yourself together.” Rufus admonished. He finally found an *almost* clean glass and filled it with water from the bar fountain.

Over his shoulder EOD yelled to Weis, “Hey! It’s time to close up the bar!”

Again his stack of cards fell and Weis looked back at EOD. “Close the bar? But the bar never closes! What the hell?”

“We’ve got a job to do!” EOD shouted back. “Get your shit together.”

Weis’ mouth drooped open, and his cigarette fell into his beer... “Shit!”

Chapter 6: Into the Deep End

“Biggles!” Clme called from down the hall as he rushed after Biggles. “Listen... I hate to do this to you,” he said, catching up, “but I’ve got a pair of new people that I’m placing in your team. They’re waiting in briefing room ‘C’ for you.”

“New people?... You don’t really want to break-in a couple *noobies* on an operation this important do you? Is Rufus aware of this?” he asked seriously.

“Yeah, he’s not happy about it either, but we’ve lost so many people lately. Doomy leaving for that research job in D.C. has left a gap in your team that we don’t have anyone to fill.” Clme responded. “Look, I’ll walk you down. Shinyquarter processed them in, but they’ll need the standard agency introduction and briefing.”

Continuing down the hall and into a door marked ‘Briefing Room C’ Clme and Biggles walked in to see two men sitting, patiently. “Gentlemen,” Clme began, “this is Biggles. He will be giving you your initial briefing and you both will be joining his team.” Pointing to the left, “Biggles, this is Sveeb... and on the right... Call sign: Wedge.”

Quietly, Biggles leaned into Clme and asked, “Umm... Wedge looks a little old... What is he... Sixty?”

“I know,” Clme whispered back, “but he scored well in the recruitment tests, and he’s all we’ve got right now.”

Nodding to each, Biggles dropped the stack of files he’d been carrying on the desk and began, “Welcome to the Agency.” With a nod to Biggles, Clme quietly excused himself. As the door closed Biggles continued, “As you are aware, this agency is dedicated to identifying, tracking and intercepting illegal and dangerous materials as they enter the country. We are an independent agency, but we are funded 100% by the Department of Homeland Security, so the suits in D.C. have final say on how we handle an operation.”

Hitting a few keys on a keypad built into the podium, Biggles brought a large screen at the front of the room to life. Displayed, was a chart showing a historical time-line of the agency. “In 2011 a dirty bomb was exploded near an American military facility in Germany. Nuclear material that had been smuggled from a Russian nuclear power plant made its way into the hands of a terrorist group. Because the material was not weapons grade plutonium and they didn’t have the technology; it didn’t create a nuclear reaction, but they managed to irradiate just about everyone on the facility. Out of the base staff, two thirds of those that survived the initial explosion had subsequently died of cancer within five years. Of the handful of people surviving today, most have been diagnosed with cancer.”

“It was found in the subsequent investigation that both the nuclear materials and conventional explosives had moved through the European unified shipping system undetected. This allowed the terrorists to assemble the bomb without having to carry the materials with them into Germany. In response this agency was created to track suspect materials being shipped into the US using the National Cargo Tracking system.” Behind him, on the screen, Biggles opens up a top level schematic of the NCT system. “The NCT system is an open, industry run cargo tracking system that manages the flow of everything from shipping containers, to an envelop. It is jointly run by U.S. Customs, the Post Office, commercial courier companies, railroads, shipping, and airports. It interfaces with international systems to manage the seamless movement of cargo around the world. Its strength, however; is also its weakness. Organizations of all sorts have learned to exploit the system to move all manner of illegal substances around the world. The system evolves constantly; trying to come up with new ways to detect illegal shipments, but with each breakthrough, came a new hack or workaround. Our job is to catch the shipments that aren’t caught by the standard detection schemes, and arrest those that are trying to ship dangerous materials.”

“Does that mean nuclear material?” asked Sveeb.

“For a number of years the agency had been tracking and intercepting nuclear material that had found its way out of, mainly, Russian facilities in the nineteen eighties and nineties. Most of the material that had been unaccounted for was located by 2017, but there are still a few discrepancies in what the Russians had accounted for. And we don’t know anything about what may have leaked out of the North Korean and Iranian nuclear power programs.”

Wedge seemed surprised, “I’d heard about the bomb in Germany, but nothing had ever been said about other nuclear material being missing. You know... Other than rumours about missing Russian, suitcase nuclear bombs and things like that.”

“That’s right,” Biggles answered, “whenever possible all of our operations have been kept top-secret. The Department of Homeland Security does not want the general public being aware of just how much deadly material there is floating around, nor do they want the various terrorist organizations to know just how much nuclear material has been floating around. In recent years, most seizures have been chemical or biological agents, but they find new ways to sneak conventional explosives through now and again. We do track drugs coming into the country occasionally, but we leave that to the ATF mostly. When we are forced to do a public bust, people usually assume it’s an ATF drug bust and we don’t go out of our way to dispel that.”

“Doesn’t the FBI do this sort of thing? I’ve seen the news stories of FBI busts.” Sveeb offered.

“Yes... The FBI can bust someone for moving something domestically, but they don’t have jurisdiction over international shipments. We try to snag anything we find in either

case, since the Department of Homeland Security bases our budget on the number of packages we track or intercept and the number of busts we make.”

With a few more keystrokes, Biggles opens up an image of a tiny microchip on the screen. “What you’re looking at here is a package tracking tag. It is a low power transmitter that we use to identify suspect packages. The signal strength is specifically kept to a minimum so that they are not picked up by the EMF detectors in the NCT shipping system, but they can still be identified using the NCT tracking system and our software. The signal is encrypted so that we can use it to locate packages within a shipping facility. We can filter our tag signals using the NCT tracking receivers to locate the packages in the system, but the NCT system or any other group hacking the NCT can’t tell that a package has been tagged. We have our own off-line equipment installed in some cargo terminals as well.”

“How do you know what package to tag? And if you do, why not just intercept the package?” asked Wedge.

“Yeah,” added Sveeb. “Why not just confiscate anything that’s illegal in the system and call it a day?”

“Sometimes we do, but usually we want to identify the people responsible for the shipments. If we just nab everything we find, then they’ll just try again and we may not be so lucky the second time around. It’s impossible to identify the people responsible for the shipment without catching them with the box in their hand. Most of them have gotten almost as good as we are at hacking the system to move things anonymously and any effort to permanently lock the system down would break it.”

Biggles continued the briefing, with operational guidelines and regulations that began to make their heads spin. After about an hour each had a stack of reading material in front of them and a fresh new Department of Homeland Security identification card.

“I’m sorry to dump all of this on you both this quickly. You’re being thrown into the deep end here. The operation that you are about to be involved in is one that may be the most serious cases we’ve had to deal with. You’ve been assigned to my team and you’ll get the details of the job along with the rest of the team in about an hour.”

Chapter 7: On-Line Again

On the corner a huge white house sat. The street out front was wetted down from the recent rain and the white siding was dull under the overcast sky. The old house was a stark contrast among the modern glass and steel buildings nearby. It hadn't seen much use in the last two years, but the lawn and flowerbeds had still been carefully manicured.

The old exterior design gave no clues to the high technology that waited inside. On the second floor, Lon worked to power up racks full of computer and telecommunications equipment. XPeter had kept the equipment maintained and operational, but it had sat mostly idle for the last two years. In the large basement garage XPeter worked to unload boxes of new equipment onto an elevator. After two years, it would take a little more than a few service pack installs to bring the Portland control center back on-line.

Near the front entry, Sara worked, hastily digging through file drawers pulling out dozens of files, quickly stacking up on the large marble desk. She barely looked up as Rufus swung the heavy leaded glass door open. Tin Sloth quickly stepped past and up the stairs to help Lon. Weis followed through the door, a fresh box of donuts under his arm. Quickly, Sara spun around and growled. "Put that out!" she said, pointing at the cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Eyes big as saucers, Weis fumbled around, trying to figure out what to do with the half smoked cigarette. Weis feared no man... and Sara is definitely no man. He disappeared towards the bathroom in a hurry.

Sara's look softened as EOD stepped through the doorway tentatively. He looked around the entry and finally settled his gaze on Sara. Neither spoke as Rufus hung his coat. "Sara, what's the system status?" he asked, ignoring the building tension between Sara and EOD.

"Lon and XPeter are bringing us on-line with the Penternet, upstairs. Phyci has the circuits hooked up in Chicago. We're almost ready."

"And Tons?" Rufus asked as he picked up a stack of files off the desk.

"Lyzic dragged him out of a Vancouver bar this afternoon for me. He's on a plane with Hussain right now," she answered quietly, still looking at EOD.

"Alright, as soon as he gets here we'll get things rolling." Glancing towards EOD, Rufus asked her quietly, "Do you need a minute?"

"No..." she answered, "He already had his minute..." Finally, she turned back to the file cabinets to begin pulling out tiny wireless ear-pieces. "I'll have the encryption key updated in these and have them to you for the briefing."

EOD hung his head as Rufus walked toward him. “Let’s go up and see if Lon has everything fired up yet.” He put an arm around EOD to steer him upstairs.

Upstairs, Lon was sliding a piece of equipment into a hardware rack. Behind him a desk and large black chair sat. A bank of three flat panel screens sat idle on the desk. The three walls surrounding the desk were blank, white and windowless. Rufus and EOD walked in as Lon locked down the locking clamps on the last piece of equipment. EOD walked towards the desk, looking around. “Things have changed,” he said as he reached for the chair. “Who’s idea was it for the minimalist look?”

“Oh, there’s a reason for the walls. I think you’re going to like this,” Lon spoke up. “Have a seat in the big chair. We’re ready to fire everything up.”

“We’re on-line and operational?” Rufus asked.

“Everything is in place and the backbone his humming. He just has to push the button,” Lon answered, poking a thumb over his shoulder at EOD.

“Ok... Time to go to work, EOD,” Rufus said, as he leaned against the back wall. Reaching forward EOD pushed a key on the keyboard in front of him. The displays instantly sprung to life as the system boot-up process began.

Leaning through the doorway, Lon shouted, “XPeter!... We’re firing the thing up... Make sure the new encryption router doesn’t lock up again.” Rufus looked at Lon with a raised eyebrow. Lon simply shrugged at Rufus and turned to EOD, “Alright EOD. Everything is essentially what you’re used to, but I’ve got a new twist for ya.” Picking up a set of glasses with clear lenses, he continued, “These should give you a new look at things.” He pressed a small button on the frame of the glasses and soft tone briefly filled the room. On the screens a message read, ‘Aux Display Enabled.’ “Here... put these on.”

EOD lowered the glasses over his eyes and surrounding him in the room, status windows began to appear in mid-air. His mouth began to hang open as he raised the glasses from his eyes and the windows disappeared, only to reappear as he dropped them back down. “Cool...” EOD mumbled in approval. Reaching out with his right hand he grabbed at one of the windows. Closing his grip and moving his hand, the window followed his hand movement as he waved his arm around. “Aw yeah...”

Rufus and Lon exchanged a smile. “I knew you’d like that,” said Rufus. “You’ve got a lot of catching up to do, so I’ll leave you to that. I’ll be briefing the team in an hour, but everything you need to know is on the system.” EOD didn’t answer as he continued to wave his hands around in the air, starting to giggle a little.

Rufus and Lon turned to leave as they started discussing the system status. To bring the office up in only four hours meant cutting a few corners. Adapting the switches and security protocols that Xclusive had put in place two years ago to the current scheme took some detective work and some inspired guesses. On the good side, the hybrid setup

would make it impossible for the FBI to figure out how to infiltrate it before the operation was long over.

Chapter 8: One Shot

Slowly the light of dawn started to shine through the windows of the train. Onyx sat quietly watching the countryside slip by at over 300 km/h. Jimbo, Laura, InThrees and Dave lay in various uncomfortable looking positions trying to sleep. Jimbo sighed heavily as the sunlight hit his face. “Tell me again why we’re taking the train all the way from London and not just flying into Marseille.”

“Because we’re keeping a low profile,” Onyx answered coolly. “We don’t know how well connected the group we’re dealing with are and for us to fly into Marseille on the same day that the ship hits port would definitely draw attention.”

Onyx looked away from the window to see a tall, attractive, dark haired woman walking quickly down the isle. She kept glancing over her shoulder with a worried look as she walked. Behind her the door slid open at the end of the car and Monju stepped through, “AW COMMON BABEE! You’ll like ‘little Mon’... He just wants to see your, *trou de gloire!*” With a look of disgust, she burst through the door heading for the next car. Monju stopped next to the group, clutching his undone pants at his waste to keep them from falling. “I don’t think she *parle mon français*” he said calmly.

“Monju... Nobody speaks your French,” Jimbo responded flatly as Monju sat. “You call this low key?” Jimbo asked turning to Onyx... Onyx rolled his eyes a bit and looked out the window again with a sigh.

As the sun rose the group slowly came to life. Jimbo managed to get Monju to stay quiet and in his seat as the train neared Marseille. Dave sat quietly poking at his palm computer. The illicit smile made it rather obvious he was surfing for porn. InThrees was the only one still slumped in his seat with his ball cap pulled down over his eyes.

It was spring in the South of France and the tourists were flocking for Marseille. Cruise ships headed out into the Mediterranean and dozens of sights and attractions drew travelers from around the world. Onyx hoped that the crowds would make it easier to go unnoticed. They rolled into the modern train station, shimmering of glass and steel, and he scanned the platform for anyone or anything that seemed out of place. As the train stopped finally, an alert message popped up on Dave’s computer. “They’re waiting in the parking lot,” he said.

“Alright, let’s go,” Onyx responded. He got up, kicking InThrees foot to finally wake him. Jimbo and Laura began herding Monju towards the door.

As they reached the station exit the crowd fanned out towards buses, taxies and the parking lots. Across the lot Dave spotted a black van with no windows. “That’s it,” he said pointing.

They reached the van quickly, trying their best to look like tourists. As they walked past the last row of cars the van the side door slid open and Lamfear jumped out with a big grin on his face. "Welcome to the South of France my friends!" he announced.

"Hoo YAA! Where da chicks at!?" Monju responded exuberantly.

"He wasn't my idea Onyx!" Faran called from inside the van.

"How many times in the plane?" Lamfear asked Jimbo as he walked up...

"Only three." Jimbo answered. "Some guy kept hogging the bathroom on the plane."

Laura gave Jimbo a dirty look as she complained, "Are we so predictable that you guys are keeping score or something?" Jimbo and Lamfear shrugged at her innocently.

"Ok, what have we got?" Onyx asked as Faran slid into view in a chair mounted in the back of the van.

"Ok, Fakie is down in Port St. Louis watching the West Basin for our ship. The target will be unloaded and processed through the Fos-Distriport facility. That's where we'll have to tag the package. We suspect it will disappear from the system before being processed out, so we need to tag it there."

"You realize that the Euro-Mediterranean Logistics Centre there is 500 square kilometres," Jimbo spoke up.

"Yes, and to make it even harder, we can't go through the usual channels with the Port of Marseilles Authority. We think the Port Authority has been compromised," Lamfear responded. "Now, I realize that leaves us with no way... into... the..." Lamfear's sentence trailed off as his gaze wandered over to a Range Rover backing into a parking spot a few isles over.

"Lammy! Focus!" Faran snapped as he reached out of the van and slapped Lamfear across the back of the head.

"Ow... Oh, Sorry!" he apologized. "Because we can't get in through the normal channels, that's where Monju comes in. He's got a contact inside the Port Authority that can get us passes into the facility without being noticed."

Leaning on the van, poking at his computer, Monju responds, "Already on it."

"What about Cdbee?" InThrees asked.

"Oh... We lost him in Alexandria... He was going to grab the package before it went into the container for France," Lamfear answered. "We lost track of him for about an hour."

When his GPS signal reconnected, he was face-down, floating in an empty berth in the harbour.” The group exchanged a concerned look.

Faran broke the silence, “Ok, this is the plan... Jimbo and Laura... There’s a silver Citroen in the parking lot. Take it and go play tourist in the West end of Port St. Louis.”

“Oooo, is it a convertible?” Laura asked with a girlish grin.

“As a matter of fact, it is,” Faran answered. “Jimbo, I’ve already transmitted the key to you, so you’re all set.” Turning to Monju he continued, “Mon, how about that meeting point?”

“I’ve got the spot... It’s in the South end of Marseille.”

“Alright, everyone else in the van... We’ll drop Monju for his connection and I’ll fill everyone in on the rest.”

With that, the group split. Jimbo and Laura headed out into the parking lot in search of the car. Laura already bouncing along in anticipation of cruising the South of France in a convertible. Lamfear headed for the driver’s seat of the van and everyone else piled into the back.

With Lamfear at the wheel, they slipped into the busy vacationer traffic. In the back, surrounded by racks of computer equipment and displays, Faran briefed the group on what they were up against. The Fos-Distriport facility is a huge facility, handling tens of thousands of packages every day. Once the modular containers are lifted off the ship and unloaded onto the conveyer systems, the automated package handling equipment takes over the routing of everything in and out of the facility.

Only a small staff of security, supervisory and maintenance people work in the building. According to information Faran has been able to pull from the Port Authority’s systems, the daytime shift is a total of 74 workers. In the last two days since the ship left Alexandria 75 have passed through the security gate. Someone internal to the Port Authority had removed the record of the extra person through the gate from the payroll time and attendance records, but the security gate log could not be tampered with.

Only someone internal could have tampered with the interface between the security gate and the payroll system, so clearly the Port Authority had been compromised.

It seemed obvious that the planted person was there to pull the package out of the system undetected. The task for the group was to tag the package and identify the pick-up man, without being noticed.

Taping into the antenna equipment built into the van, Onyx used the opportunity to connect his hand-held computer to one of the nearby access points to send a report. Wireless access is generally available everywhere, but they do not provide the connection

encryption capabilities required by the Penternet. Winning a bet with Dave, he received a request for an update sent by Rufus as soon as the connection was made.

Reaching a quiet, more industrial part of Marseille, Monju was quickly dropped off on a street corner. He continued off into an alley as the van drove on around the block. It took only a few minutes to circle around, but Monju was already waiting again on the sidewalk. The van barely stopped as he jumped in and slid the side door closed.

“Alright, here’s the story.” He began, little out of breath. “I’ve got three key cards to get you through the gate and into the building. The Port Authority won’t be able to resolve the codes when it reaches their time and attendance system, but by that time we’ll be long gone... You European agency types can smooth it over with the French officials later,” he said, with a wink to Faran. “I’ve also got one other piece of news for ya... It seems that my guy knows another guy who just sold a hacked vehicle transponder about a week ago. It’s for a 25 foot enclosed truck and it has a switching mode that randomly changes the vehicle ID code every five minutes. I would only assume it’s for moving our target package.”

“Well, what the hell!” Onyx spoke up. “That means if we don’t tag the package before it leaves the building, it will probably end up on a truck that we have no way of tracking. Even if we do see which truck the package ends up on Laura and Jimbo won’t have any way of identifying the truck once it leaves the port. The package will end up back in the system in Paris and we won’t have any idea which one it is.”

Faran spoke up, seriously, “Looks like we’re only going to get one shot at this.”

Chapter 9: Covering the West Coast

Sitting in the briefing room, Rufus had just finished bringing Tons, Hussain, Lon, XPeter, Tin Sloth and Weis up to speed. Tons had grumbled a bit about Weis taking over the field lead, but he had been around when Weis had been in command of field ops. He knew Weis was capable.

Hussain would be sent back to Vancouver to monitor the Vancouver terminal with Lysic. Even if the intelligence on Portland and Los Angeles was accurate, it would be a simple matter to divert to Vancouver or San Francisco.

Everything was in place to intercept the incoming devices. All that was required was for Fen to identify the targets before they left Japan.

As Rufus wrapped up, Sara poked her head around the corner to interrupt. “Rufus, a report has just come in from Onyx. It’s been authenticated... Do you want me to forward it to you?”

“Yes, I’ll pick it up in a minute,” Rufus responded. “Alright guys. As soon as word comes in from Fen, we’ll head for the terminals. We’ve already lined up the scanning equipment, but any delay in the target’s movement will likely alert the shipper that we’re onto them. There’s no way to prevent them from knowing that we’re running an operation, but for this to work we need to be able to lead them to believe we’re just chasing our tail.”

Leaving the briefing, Rufus made his way towards the control room where he had left EOD to get himself up to date with the system and the situation. Approaching the room, a faint growling roar slowly grew louder and louder. Reaching the doorway the sound booming from the speakers was the familiar wail of an engine roaring up and down through the gears. At the desk, EOD sat with both arms extended, gripping an invisible steering wheel. From behind, Rufus could see the lenses of EOD’s glasses almost entirely covered by flickering images.

EOD didn’t notice Rufus until he was only a few steps away from him. In a rush EOD spun around, pulling the glasses off and dropping his arms. The sound in the room quieted as the engine noise coasted down... followed by squealing tires and a loud crashing noise. EOD cringed as he reached back to silence the racket by hitting a key on the keyboard.

“I see you’ve gotten yourself ‘up-to-speed’ quite nicely,” Rufus said calmly, as EOD bit his lip to hide a smile.

“Oh... Ah... Yeah... I’ve been through all the material. It’s quite a pickle,” he responded sheepishly.

“We’re just waiting for word from Fen right now. I’ve also got a report from Onyx to pick up as well.”

“Oh yeah... I’ve seen it,” said EOD. “They’ve made contact with the European team and they’ve got a plan to tag the package after it comes off the ship.”

Rufus raised an eyebrow as he looked at EOD. “So you’ve not lost your touch at all... Obviously my inbox poses no challenge to you.”

“Yeah well...” he chuckled a little, nervously. “Actually, I filtered it out of the data stream after the hardware decryption and before it was forwarded into your inbox.”

Rufus was about to speak again, but he stopped short as the computer displays sprung to life. Fen appeared on the right monitor as EOD spun around in the chair. “EOD... Rufus... Good... I’ve got news. You’re not going to like it though.”

“Fen... We’ve been waiting for the word. What have you got over there?” Rufus responded.

“It’s ugly... Worst I’ve ever seen. Based on all the intelligence and tracking data for the past week, I’ve only managed to narrow it down to 34 suspect packages. Ten were tagged before getting on a plane for Los Angeles; fifteen will be on a plane to Portland; four to Vancouver and five to San Francisco.” Fen looked down to type a bit as a number of lists open up on the monitors in front of EOD. Next to each item is flight information and expected arrival times. “The first group of packages begin to arrive in the Portland terminal in a little over six hours. The LA and San Fran arrivals a few hours from then”

Rufus sighed heavily as he leaned over EOD’s shoulder to survey the list. “I was afraid this might happen. The intelligence wasn’t very specific. See if you can narrow this down a bit EOD. I’m going to go gather the troops and get everyone into the cargo terminals with enough time to catch all this mess.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” EOD answered as his demeanour switched to all business. He slipped on the glasses again and began digging into the shipping details on the packages.

I’ll leave you to that... Fen, thanks for your efforts...” Rufus said as he turned for the door.

Rufus barely broke his stride as he flagged the other guys into action. Sara took a few last minute instructions as the group headed for the basement garage and into a waiting van. Hussain had already left to fly back to Vancouver. Weis would be covering the Portland terminal with Tons and Lon. It was going to take all night to get the scanning equipment set up before the plane landed, so the three would be up all night. Rufus was booked to leave for LA within the hour for a Hotel room and a short night’s rest. Tin Sloth and XPeter was on their way to San Francisco, but Tin Sloth would be joining Rufus in LA,

after getting XPeter set up. No sleep for either of them as well. It was going to be the start of a very long night.

After a short drive into the airport everyone dispersed quickly to get onto the first available flight for their destinations. Rufus walked through the terminal with Weis as they talked quietly. Finding an empty corridor, they stopped to talk before Rufus left for his flight to LA. The concern was evident on Weis' face, but Rufus reassured him. As they talked, a familiar voice interrupted.

"Well, well... Who do we have here." Rufus and Weis both turned slowly. "If it isn't Rufus and... oh my... Weis, crawled out of the hole he's been hiding in for the last three years. I wouldn't have believed it, had I not seen it with my own eyes."

"Agent Vetis," Rufus began... "You do get around... And I see you've got agent Bill with you this time. I am honoured."

"Oh no..." Bill responded, "It is us who are honoured, to find the great and powerful Rufus... And the legendary Weis...A surprise bonus."

Weis struggled to contain himself... He looked at Vetis with enough intensity that it would seem he was trying to set him on fire. Vetis looked back, appearing unaffected by the death stare. "Look Vetis... Cut the rhetoric. What do you want?" Rufus asked, as he tried to step in between Weis and the two agents.

"Look, Rufus... I don't care how big your political wang is back in Washington. I know you guys have something cooking and we're not going to let you guys run with it, without our supervision. You contractor idiots are reckless and I'm not gonna have you guys screwing anything up on my watch." Vetis looked around awkwardly. "Given that I'm standing here looking at Weis, then EOD is probably somewhere at a terminal looking at me through the airport security cameras." Bill looked up and waived at the ceiling awkwardly. "If you guys are so desperate that you have to drag drunks and losers out of the gutter, then you definitely need our help." A thinly veiled smile of satisfaction taunted Rufus and Weis.

Weis was fuming so much that there was nearly smoke coming out of his ears. Rufus remained calm and unaffected. "Listen guys... I'm just out here connecting with a few old friends. I don't know what deal you think we're running, but you FBI guys have always had trouble with faulty intelligence."

Before Vetis could respond, Tons emerged from around the corner with a cheerful smile. "Well if it isn't agents Vetis and Bill... Good to see you guys." Vetis and Bill looked at Tons with a sneer. "Listen guys... Aren't you feds still driving the blue Fords? I just saw a tow truck dragging one with Fed plates out of a red zone. You might want to look into that."

“What... That’s not possible... It’s a government vehicle with parking immunity.” Vetus responded back as the air of self satisfaction drained out of both of them. They started towards the doors out of the terminal. “This isn’t over.” Bill called over his shoulder.

“Bu-bye guys... Look forward to seeing you again...” Tons chimed politely as the agents headed for the door. As they disappeared down the walk towards the main entrances, Tons produced, from behind his back, a small black box with a few loose wires hanging off of it. “Guess they’re having a little trouble with their vehicle transponder,” he said with pride.

Weis and Rufus both looked at each other with a smile. The anger drained out of Weis almost immediately as he started to chuckle. “Listen Tons... I’ve got a little side project that only you are eminently qualified for,” Rufus said, turning to Tons. “That pair will be dogging us all the way across the country as we track the two targets. I need you to keep them occupied.”

“Oh, I think I can manage to give them a few problems to think about.” Tons responded as he heaved the transponder into a nearby trash bin.

“Alright... Weis... You know what to do here. Tons will look after the airport administration people for you. Set up the scanning equipment before the plane arrives. You’ll be seeing the first target packages, so the other teams will be looking to what you find to help with the analysis of their targets.” Rufus looked at Weis with a look of reassurance. The significance of his importance was not lost on Weis. “I know you and Vetus have a history, but I want you to stay away from him... Leave him to Tons. OK?” Weis seemed reluctant, but nodded in agreement. “I have to go board my plane for LA. I’ll be waiting for your report first thing.”

“You got it.” Weis responded, pulling a donut out of his pocket.

With a quick nod to Tons, Rufus turned on his heels and headed for his gate. As he walked, he placed a call to the Chicago office. There was one piece left out of place.

“Uhh... Hello?” a groggy voice answered.

“Clem... It’s Rufus... Sorry to wake you.”

“Oh... Yeah, no problem... What’s the situation?” Clem responded as he became more coherent. When an operation is in progress he always slept in his office. The shipping system runs 24/7, so he needed to be available 24/7 as well.

“It’s not great. We’ve got 34 suspected in play. It’s just past 11:00 here. The first targets will be hitting Portland some time around 4:30. I’ve got the four key centers covered, but I’m short a body in San Francisco. I need you to grab someone from one of the Midwest teams and have them meet XPeter in San Francisco.”

“34... Jesus... Alright... Not everyone is here yet, but I’ll wake someone up and get them on a plane. It might have to be a charter though. The first scheduled flight probably won’t get someone there until late morning,” Clme responded as he shuffled around files on his desk.

“That’s alright. Swipe one of the Department regional jets if you have to. We can’t have XPeter in San Fran, by himself and there’s no one else available out here.” Rufus said as he rounded a corner and the gate came into view. “Listen, I’ve got to go... I’m getting on my plane for LA right now.”

“Ok, I’ll look after it,” Clme reassured. As he disconnected the call he muttered to himself, “Ok... Who’s going to be the least pissed off about being woken up at 1:00 am to find out they have to get on a plane for San Francisco.”

Chapter 10: Plan B

Fakie looked a little scruffier than usual, but standing on a hillside since the very early morning hours, staring at a shipping port will do that. He was grateful to see the van pull up on the road to pick him up. He was less grateful when he opened the side door to see the back of the van stuffed full of people. He considered not getting in when he saw Monju wearing only his boxer shorts and chasing Dave, who was trying to hide behind Onyx. “What... Are you idjits guttered or something?” he asked, incredulously.

With a bit of coaxing Monju put his pants back on and Fake cautiously pulled himself into the van and gave his report. The ship they were waiting for had docked and was being prepared for unloading. It would be impossible to find a single box in the vast facility without knowing where to look. Knowing where the ship would be unloaded meant knowing which intake processing conveyers would be used. It wasn't an absolute location for the package, but it narrowed it down to a manageable area.

As they approached the facility they could see the truck loading area. Dozens of trucks lined up to freight doors and waited at an open area where automated lights and signs sent trucks to the correct loading positions for loading and unloading.

“There... Look at that,” Lamfear said as he pointed at the sea of trucks. “Come look at this.”

Onyx and Fakie leaned forward into the front of the van to see what Lamfear was pointing out. “What... It's a sea of trucks... What am I supposed to be seeing?” Onyx asked as he scanned the area.

“Over there... Off to the side... That truck there, that's not as tall as all the others.” he said, pointing to an area slightly isolated from the main lines of trucks. “Trucks like that are not as tall as the standard trucks for a specific reason. It's to fit into the drive-on railway cars for the high speed trains.”

“But this facility can transfer shipping containers direct from ship to train... Why would they load a truck and then put the truck onto a train?” Dave asked from the back of the van.

“Exactly,” Lamfear responded.

“I think we might have found our phantom truck,” Onyx said as he moved back towards Faran. “That explains how they plan to move the target off the system, but not spend two days driving it half way across France... We'll put our people into the facility and then maintain surveillance on that truck.”

“Alright...” Faran said nodding to Onyx and turning to his equipment, “InThrees, Fakie and Onyx... I’ve encoded your eye-scan onto the pass cards that Monju furnished. They’ll get you into the facility. Fakie is familiar with the layout of the building, so he will be able to get you to where the packages will be coming off the ship. We think our guy will be grabbing the package after it goes through the first destination scan.”
“Why not swipe it before it even hits the first scan?... Or later?” Dave asked.

“The French system has a hole at that point. The first scan takes it off the ship, but it doesn’t register into the facility until it hits the second sorting scanner... Pull the package before the first scan and it will still register as on the ship. Pull it after the second scan and it will cause an immediate fault when it is missed at downstream sorting scanners... The missing package won’t show up as missing until the evening audit process.”

“And by then, it’s on a plane to the US,” Dave added.

“You got it.”

The van stopped just short of the main gate for the facility to let the three men out. The day shift had started almost an hour ago, so there wouldn’t be anyone around the entrance to notice three unusual people walking into the building. They slipped out of the van quietly, wearing the standard coverall uniform worn by the maintenance staff.

Lamfear gunned the van, on queue, and pulled into the staff parking lot near the entrance. Circling a couple times and then charging back out had the desired result, as the security camera covering the front door panned away to look at the van. Fakie, InThrees and Onyx made a dash for the door. Once inside the building, they wouldn’t draw any attention, but walking into the building almost an hour late for the day shift, surely would.

Without a word, they quickly swiped their cards and posed for the eye-scanner. The cards worked perfectly and they were into the building without a hitch. They slipped quietly past a few offices and the employee lounge (fortunately empty).

Once they passed into the first section of the facility the rattle, hum and banging of machinery allowed them to relax. “Alright... The ship is unloading one building down. The container that has the package hadn’t been lifted off the ship yet, but by the time we get down there it won’t be long,” Fakie yelled over the din of banging and clattering. “Faran will contact us when the container is being unloaded and you have a physical description of the package. Tag anything that matches the description. Ken?”

With a quick nod, the men headed off into the maze of passageways. Stretching to the ceiling were racks full of containers with all manner of bulk material packages, parcels. At the top of one rack a large whirlpool tub was shrink-wrapped to a pallet; in another section, huge spools of cable. True to its reputation, the facility was enormous.

Passing between the buildings the three men could see the huge cranes at work unloading the modularized shipping containers. Most were being unloaded onto trucks to be forwarded onto their destinations, but some were being dropped into the automatic unloading machinery. As the container was unsealed and opened, robotic equipment would reach in and extract the cargo onto high speed conveyers. The security guards overlooking the operation didn't notice the three men as they moved into the building.

Once inside the noise was even louder than the first building. To talk the three plugged their wireless ear pieces into an ear. As they separated and headed into the maze of equipment Fakie said, "Alright, the six conveyors into the building are along the right wall. Keep your eyes open and be careful. If we take a position near the entrance, should be able to tag the package without being seen by the pickup guy."

"Acknowledged," InThrees answered as he headed for the far set of conveyors.

The packages streamed into the building at an incredible rate of speed. At the end of each of the six incoming belts was indexing machinery sending the packages in one of six different directions. The room seemed empty, but just outside the security personnel kept watch over the operations on the docks.

"Look alive boys," the message crackled. "The target container was just indexed into the system."

"Roger," Onyx called back. "I'm in position."

"I'm good to go," InThrees called as well.

"I'm fit," Fakie answered. "I thought I saw someone else in here, but they didn't see me. Mind yourselves."

After a minute packages started streaming into the facility. Onyx watched intently as a steady stream of envelopes and soft parcels streamed by. Fakie stood in a dark corner ready to go, but every package going by wasn't even close to matching the description. InThrees watched carefully as well. Canvas bags of wheat and rice streamed by, punctuated by the odd box or envelop, none matching the target package.

For five minutes the three stood and watched. As the stream of packages ended abruptly, Faran's voice came again, "The container shows as empty... Did we tag it?"

"I didn't see anything remotely like the package we were looking for," Fakie answered back.

"Nothing looked even close here either." Onyx called back anxiously, "InThrees must have gotten it... InThrees?" Moments passed as they all waited for an answer. "In Threes, do you copy?" Again, there was no answer. "Christ... InThrees!" Onyx again called as he started moving towards where InThrees had been hiding.

“Faran, I think things have gone pear-shaped in here,” said Fakie as he looked around for any movement.

Onyx rounded a large indexing machine looking intently for InThrees. He wasn't near the conveyor entrance. Muttering under his breath he paced around the scanning equipment looking for him. Finally, down an isle he could see him laying face down. Racing to him his heart was in his throat. “I've got him... He's down,” he called over the radio... As he reached him he checked him quickly for injuries. “He's unconscious and bleeding from the back of the head, but he's alive.” he called again.

“What happened?... Did he get the package?” Faran asked anxiously.

Checking his computer, Onyx answered, “I donno what happened... His computer still has all its tags, so he didn't tag anything.” In his peripheral vision Onyx caught a glimpse of a group of men walking towards him. “Faran, I'm about to have some company.”

“Oh shite... What do we do?” Fakie's voice cracked.

“Faran answered back coolly, “Fakie, get out... Onyx... We can't do anything for him now. We need you to get out of there... InThrees will be looked after.”

“God damnit,” Onyx muttered as he pocketed InThree's computer and ear-piece. As the men approached they started to run, shouting all at once. As they reached Onyx and InThrees, he looked up and the group. “Je ne sais pas ce qui s'est produit. Je l'ai juste trouvé.” he said, trying to hide his poor pronunciation. He didn't have to fake the worried look. Onyx stepped back as the men focused their attention on InThrees, still laying face down on the floor. They gathered around him, jabbering back and forth to each other as Onyx slowly melted back into the machinery. He was two isles over and running for the door before any of the men looked up for him.

“Guy's... I'm getting a lot of radio traffic now. You've got to get out of there before security locks the building down,” Faran called to the two.

“I'm almost at the door,” Fakie answered over his panting.

“Onyx?”

“I'm going for that truck!” He called back as he sprinted through the warehouse. “He didn't tag the target. We have to catch that truck before it leaves, or we're cooked!”

In the van, Dave and Faran watched the monitors. “Get a shot of that truck,” Dave said anxiously.

“I can't... I can't see around that tree... Lamfear, roll forward about ten feet so I can get a shot of that truck.” They watched intently as they slowly rolled forward and the truck

came into view. Just as it did, a figure appeared from behind the truck. “Is that our guy? He doesn’t have anything in his hand,” Faran said anxiously.

“It must be in the back of the truck,” Dave said as the truck started to roll.

“The truck is starting to roll,” Faran called over the radio.

“I’m outside the gate, but I can’t make it to the truck gate in time,” Fakie answered.

On the monitor Dave and Faran watched as a second figure came running around the corner in time to spot the truck pulling away. He pulled a small disk from his pocket and hurled it at the back of the truck. It bounced off the rear door and landed on the ground behind the truck. “Fuck!” he yelled into the radio. “God damn composite fiberglass doors! It didn’t stick!” Onyx tried to catch his breath as he watched the truck pulled into the street and the heavy gate locked behind it. “Alright... Time for plan B... Get Jimbo and Laura rolling.”

“Roger,” Faran answered back. “I’ve got a shot of the truck to send them. They should be in position to pick it up as it leaves the industrial park.”

Onyx started jogging up to the truck entrance gate to get out of the facility. The heavy gate could keep vehicles out, but it would be a simple matter for him to climb over the gate to get to the van.

Fakie too had started up the road towards the van. As the two men neared the van they stripped off the Port Authority coveralls and threw them into the ditch. Faran again called over the radio to them, “I’ve just picked up an emergency call from the security office. They’ve called an ambulance and the police. It sounds like he’s just been knocked out. He sounds stable.”

“Well, it looks like InThrees is going to be a guest of the French authorities for a little while,” Onyx answered back as the van came into view.

Fakie and Onyx reached the van and quickly hopped in as the sound of sirens began to grow close. “Let’s get out of here Lamfear,” Faran said. Looking towards the back of the van, Monju hung from a support brace in a set of handcuffs, again in only his boxer shorts. Onyx looked at Dave, mouth open.

“He touched my ass,” Dave said to him in disgust.

“Oh Ya!... He likes that kinky shit!” Monju bellowed from the back.

In the warm morning sun, Jimbo and Laura laid out across the trunk of the convertible. Jimbo’s hand probed down the back of Laura’s pants as she lay on top of him kissing him. The insistent beeping of Jimbo’s computer interrupted the kiss. He reached down to bring his computer into view as Laura ran her tongue down Jimbo’s neck.

“Sorry babe... It’s time to go to work.”

“Aww...” She complained as he sat up, pushing her into the passenger seat. “Just when things were getting good!”

“Yeah I know... but we’ve got a truck to catch. Shit’s coming apart.”

Jimbo fired up the car and pulled off of the grass of the park onto the street. There was only one highway route out of the port and Jimbo and Laura had been waiting near the road to intercept anything if necessary.

At the end of the deserted street they turned onto the main highway. Merging into the traffic they scanned the road for trucks. Laura looked intently at the image of the truck they had been sent and compared it to the trucks on the road.

“Do we know if the target is ahead of us or behind?” he asked as he strained to see the traffic in his rearview mirror.

“There’s no way to tell for sure, but based on the time-stamp on the image and our position, there’s no way he could have gotten ahead of us already.”

Jimbo slowed up as he continued to watch his mirrors. The morning traffic was sparse and there were few trucks on the road. Three or four trucks slowly motored by, but none of them matched the photograph. “Are we sure, there’s no other route out?”

“No... I checked... There are no trucks allowed on any of the other routes in or out of the port. This is it,” Laura reassured.

Jimbo shook his head in concern as he continued to study his mirror. Exiting a bend, he finally spotted a white, short looking truck growing in his mirrors. “I think we’ve got our target vehicle.”

Laura looked over her shoulder as the truck approached. Under her arm, she concealed her computer. Pressing a button it beeped and she turned back to see the results. “The vehicle transponder doesn’t correspond with the license plate. That’s got to be it.”

Following the truck at a discrete distance for a short time they quickly found themselves out into the French countryside. The traffic quickly thinned out. Slowly Jimbo worked his way up behind the truck. Before long he was right up behind the truck. After another five minutes Jimbo turned to Laura. “Ok... It’s a small car... We are so close that he can’t see us in his mirrors. He’s probably forgotten that we are even here. It’s time to make our move.”

“Move, what move... Aren’t we going to just follow him?”

“No... That’s too big a risk. The package has to be tagged and this is our only chance at it.”

Laura looked at him with growing horror as she realized what Jimbo’s plan was. “You can not be serious... That’s crazy.”

“It’ll be fine... Take the wheel... The car is on cruise control, but you’ll have to take over after I get out of the seat.”

Without giving Laura another chance to protest, Jimbo hopped up, first onto the seat and then standing on the top of the driver’s side door sill. The truck cut most of the wind, but the vortex of swirling wind made it hard for Jimbo to hang on as he stepped around the windshield and onto the hood. Laura had hopped into the driver’s seat and, as Jimbo waived her on, she eased the car closer and closer to the back of the truck. Almost touching the bumper of the truck, Jimbo quickly stood up on the hood and lurched forward to grab the back of the truck. Laura could hardly catch her breath as she watched helplessly.

The roll-up door didn’t have a shipping seal on it, so Jimbo was able to open it while standing on the car. He rolled it up slowly, looking to see if there was a window between the truck cab and the cargo area. There wasn’t one, so he hauled himself up into the back of the truck. Inside were several piles of boxes. Most of them were larger than the target package, but many were just like what he was looking for. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small radiation monitor. Pointing it around at the boxes it failed to identify anything. Looking back to Laura he shrugged his shoulders, unsure what to do next.

After a few seconds he began picking up each box. One after another he picked a box up, and then set it back down where he found it. There were at least forty boxes, all of them with shipping labels for New York, Washington, Atlanta or Miami.

After frantically picking up box after box he finally picked one up that was different. He cradled it in his arms for a second feeling it’s weight and then looked up to smile at Laura. Pulling a package tag from his computer he pushed it down into the cardboard corner of the package. He checked it quickly with his computer and then quickly scrambled towards the door again.

Lowering himself into the hood of the car again, he reached up for the door. Laura cringed as she watched him lower the door and close the latch. Pushing off the back of the truck, he reached for the top of the windshield, missing. Sliding down the hood he tried to stop his slide with the toes of his shoes. Laura nearly screamed as he just barely managed to grab a windshield wiper arm.

Pulling himself up on the wiper arm, Jimbo managed to get to the top of the windshield and get his feet under him. He stepped around the windshield and plopped into the passenger seat next to Laura.

As she slowly eased back from the back of the truck, Jimbo regained his composure. “Man... Faran is going to be mad. He won’t get his security deposit back on this rental because I bugged the windshield wiper arm and scratched and dented up the hood.”

“JERK!” Laura yelled at him as she slugged him in the shoulder.

Chapter 11: Phantoms

Surrounded by cargo handling equipment; Weis watched intently out a small window. Outside, airport ground handlers pushed and pulled equipment around in preparation for the aircraft's arrival.

"Relax Weis," Tons said, behind him. "It's just a straightforward cargo scan; nothing to get excited about."

"Easy for you to say," Lon said to Tons, sounding more sympathetic. Weis didn't look away from the window.

"Air traffic has the aircraft on the ground... Are you guys ready to go?" EOD asked.

"Yeah, we're all set here," Weis replied back as he finally stepped away from the window. "Lon, fire up the scanner."

As Lon started powering up the scanning equipment he radioed to EOD, "EOD, we've got the scanner parallel with the unloading conveyer and we've spliced in a diverter. It's not on the NCT system, but we've run a data-line for it so it should show up on your system. We need you to divert the tagged packages without slowing down the rest. Any slow down in the unloading will cause an alert on the NCT system and Rufus wanted to make sure that we didn't leave any evidence that we're scanning cargo."

"Yeah, I've got it," EOD responded.

Weis sat down with Lon near the scanner, as Tons walked around the expansive sorting room, looking for anyone who shouldn't be there. Other than the sorting equipment and the three men, the room was deserted. The ground workers working to handle the aircraft and the shipping containers would never know that they were there. All the automation had made it unnecessary for humans to handle packages being shipped, except in exceptional cases or problems. The machines were still not perfect.

The scream of the jet engines was loud as the plane pulled into the gate outside. As soon as the plane came to a stop the pilot cut the engines and a ballet of men and equipment began. Cargo doors opened up and machines rolled into position to extract the cargo bins for unloading.

EOD watched intently as the system registered each bin as it was connected to the unloading equipment. There were fifteen targets on the plane, spread over four cargo bins. Once the bin began unloaded he would only have a couple seconds to divert the tagged package before it entered the airport cargo tracking system.

“Here comes the first container... There aren’t any tagged packages in this one,” EOD announced. Weis and Lon sighed a bit as the stream of packages started moving by. The tension was clearly beginning to get to them both. In five minutes the first container was emptied and the flow of packages paused while the next bin was positioned.

“Ok, this bin should have four targets,” EOD announced.

Weis and Lon snapped to alert as boxes started moving along the conveyer again. With a loud clank, the diverter pulled a large rectangular box off the conveyer and into the loading belt for the scanner. The box rolled slowly into the large scanner and an image of the box contents appeared on the screen. Inside it looked like a tangle of metal bits, wire and plastic. “This doesn’t look like anything,” Weis said after a few seconds. “It’s just a mishmash of stuff.”

“Yeah, I agree... It looks like a decoy,” Lon agreed. With a push of a button the box ejected out the other side of the scanner and rejoined the stream of packages flowing into the sorting equipment.

A second package of miscellaneous stuff dumped into a box with no order or purpose passed through the scanner. The third box finally emerged was shunted aside. “Did you see that?” Weis said to Lon as the box moved towards the scanner.

“See what?”

“When the box was diverted... It moved kinda weird... like it had no weight.”

As the box entered the scanner, Lon examined the images. “Here’s your answer. The box is empty. It weighs just a little over a pound. The weight of the cardboard.”

“Empty? Why did we tag a package that was empty?” Weis wondered aloud.

“The NCT system says that box should weigh 42 kilograms.” EOD answered over the radio. “Every scale it’s crossed before getting onto the plane in Japan has said 42 kilograms.”

“So someone has figured out how to hack the system scales?” Weis asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” EOD answered back.

Lon ejected the empty box back into the shipping stream and they waited for the fourth package. Weis pulled a donut out to ease the tension. He couldn’t have a cigarette in the cargo terminal and he was teetering on the edge of sanity at this point.

With a loud clank the package diverter again swept into the package stream and closed again. Lon and Weis look at each other and again back to the empty conveyer. After a few seconds of stunned silence EOD said, “Guys... The tag on that package must be

malfunctioning. I can't see it at all. I only caught the package because the package ID matched one of the targets."

"Ummm... EOD," Weis began tentatively, "we're looking at an empty conveyer. The diverter opened into a gap in the package stream and closed again with nothing."

"But the unloading equipment registered the package ID. It unloaded it and put it on the belt," EOD protested. "The system shows the package there."

"Oh Jesus..." Lon said, exasperated. He leaned against the scanner looking at the empty conveyer. "Phantom packages... They don't just have us chasing out tails... They've got us chasing ghosts."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Weis asked, turning to Lon.

"Once before this happened, about six months ago... Someone was able to simulate a series of packages in the system that didn't actually exist."

"So what the hell did Fen tag in Japan?"

"I donno... We figured it out early on last time because there was nothing to tag... Dummy packages?" he offered with a shrug.

"Well Christ..." Weis threw his hands in the air. "We can't trust the NCT information for anything."

EOD interrupted again, "Heads up... The next bin is being loaded... Three targets."

"Listen, we'll just run the scans on what we can and ignore the chaff." Lon reassured Weis.

In only a few minutes the bin had been emptied, with another empty box and two more phantom shipments. The next two cargo bins produced three more boxes of random metal bits and pieces, another empty box (this time the size of a shoe box). Each box that was scanned was different in some way, but nothing that looked anything like a nuclear detonator.

While waiting for a bin with no targets to empty, Lon reviewed the images from each of the targets scanned. "Umm, guys... I've been looking at these scanner images and I think I've picked up on something. In every one of these decoy packages there's a bit of a metal frame. The pattern of the bracing seemed random, but after looking at it for a minute, it looks like letters."

"Letters?" Weis asked. "That would be new... Some kind of message?"

"Each has the same sequence of letters... T W I N K... Twink."

“What did you just say!?!” EOD burst in.

“Twink!” Lon repeated emphatically.

After a few seconds of silence Weis asked EOD, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“fraid so,” EOD answered. “This is bad... This is really bad...”

Lon seemed somewhat bewildered, but there was little time for explanations as the next cargo bin began unloading. Another empty box and two more boxes of metal passed through the scanner. As the package stream ended Weis called to EOD, “Alright... we’re ready for the last bin... One more target and we’re done.”

“Ah... Weis... I don’t know how to tell you this... That was the last bin...”

Weis seemed ready to pop a blood vessel. “EOD... That was only fourteen targets... There’s got to be one more.”

The conveyor system stopped and the room was briefly quite until the roar of jet engines spooling up outside broke the silence.

“I’ve double checked the weight sensors from the floor of the aircraft. It was empty,” EOD answered. “At least as far as the NCT system was concerned it was empty,” he added beginning to sound doubtful.

“We’ve already seen that the NCT data can’t be trusted,” said Lon.

Silently Tons emerged from the shadows of the equipment. “No one even tried to come near the building.”

“Of course... The device didn’t pass through here. Why would anyone come here,” Weis said to him in disgust.

“I’ve got an idea,” EOD interrupted. “The aircraft flight computer records the weight data from the aircraft to trim and balance the aircraft. I can get in through the FAA system and pull that data right off the aircraft and compare it to the weight data from the NCT.”

“You can do that?” Lon asked in amazement.

“I can’t, if anyone from the FAA or the Department of Homeland Insecurity asks.” EOD responded coyly.

On one of the monitors, EOD looked at a schematic of the aircraft’s cargo floor, showing the weight data from the pressure sensors built into the floor. Rewinding the data he could see as the cargo bins were slid forward in the aircraft and out the front loading door. At the back of the aircraft the weight of new cargo bins showed as the ground crews

loaded cargo at the back for the next leg. After a few minutes of typing and hunting around, a second schematic appeared on the monitor parallel to the original. As EOD watched the unloading and loading sequence again the two schematics seemed to move in unison. All, except for a single spot on the new schematic.

“Weis... I think I’ve got our answer... There’s a forty kilo spot on the aircraft that wasn’t unloaded.”

“So it’s still on the plane... Well shit,” Weis said, exasperated. “Where’s the plane going now?”

“DFW”

“Alright... Get us on anything that will get us to Dallas... Ahead of that cargo plane if possible.”

“I don’t think that will be possible, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Snatching his box of donuts from the top of the scanner, Weis looked at Lon and Tons. “Guys... Grab your spurs, we’re going to Texas.”

Chapter 12: Redemption

BANG—BANG—BANG

Rufus groaned as someone pounded a second time at his hotel room door. Stumbling out of bed, he tiptoed over the cloths spread haphazardly across the floor and pulled a robe from the chair. He reached the door in the dark and peered through the peep hole for a second. Opening the door, Tin Sloth stepped into the doorway.

“Rufus... I just got here from LAX. I left XPeter when McDrewbie got to Frisco. The report from Portland wasn’t good... Have you seen it?” Tin Sloth was agitated and nervous. It seemed he had one too many coffees, staying up all night.

“No, I haven’t picked anything up yet.” Rufus rubbed his eyes awake. “Give me the short version.”

“They scanned eleven targets. Empty or decoys. There were three phantom packages.”

“And the fifteenth?”

“Didn’t get off the plane. EOD found a faked change order that the NCT system sent to the ground crew to leave a small bin with the target on the plane. Weis is on his way, with Lon and Tons to Dallas to try to catch up with the plane.”

“Every trick in the book,” Rufus sighed. “Alright... I’ll meet you outside the lobby in a few minutes.”

“There’s one more thing.” Tin Sloth added as he started to step out the door. “The dummy packages had a word spelt out in the metal framework inside. Twink... EOD didn’t say what it meant.”

Rufus looked up, suddenly very much awake. “Twink... Alright...”

Tin Sloth wandered out the door, a little puzzled by it all. Rufus turned back into the room and wandered back towards the bed in the dark. Over his shoulder the closet door slid open a bit and Bitchgoddess’ face appeared. “Is he gone?”

“Yeah... While you’re in the closet, you may as well get dressed. It’s time to go to work...”

“Aww... Ok then... But I’ll need my bra... It’s on the floor over there somewhere.”

After a few minutes, Bitchgoddess opened the room door and peered out into the hall. Satisfied that it was empty, she quickly made her way down the hall towards her own

room. Within minutes of her leaving, Rufus stepped out of the room. He struggled with the door a bit, as he tried to pull his jacket on while reading from his computer. The report from Portland was not what he had hoped for. Hussain reported similar results from Vancouver as well.

As he walked down the hall he slipped an ear piece into his year and then dialed the Chicago office on his computer. “Clem?... Yeah... I’m just on my way to LAX. Have you seen the report from Portland?... Can you send a team down to Dallas to meet Weis?... Yeah... No, I know... Ok... Have you gotten anything from France yet?... No... Ok, do me a favour and see what you can do to a get a hold of him... Rattle his chain for me. I need to know what’s going on out there... Yeah... Alright, I’ll talk to you in a couple hours.”

He finished his call as he reached the lobby. Outside, Tin Sloth waited by a large black car. “Alright, let’s get rolling.” He said as he jumped into the passenger side of the car.

Just as the car left the parking lot for the short drive to the airport, Bitchgoddess emerged from the lobby with Starr in tow. “So, I came by your room early this morning... You weren’t there.”

“I was probably out cold and didn’t hear you knocking,” Bitchgoddess responded, trying to brush her off...

“Are you sure about that?” she asked suspiciously. “I know that Rufus had a room booked here last night.” Starr could hardly contain a Cheshire grin.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” Bitchgoddess responded impatiently, as she crossed the parking lot, towards another large black car. “You know the agency doesn’t approve of that sort of thing.”

“Yeah? What about Jimbo and Laura?... Staring Goldfish and Shinyquarter?”

“You know damn well that Jimbo and Shinyquarter aren’t field operatives. Give your imagination a rest.” Starr didn’t seem convinced, but Bitchgoddess brushed the issue off as she jumped into the driver’s seat.

It was a short ride from the hotel to the airport. The morning rush hadn’t quite begun. Pulling up to the security gate, Tin Sloth and Rufus showed their Department ID to the guard. The guard took an extra long look at Tin Sloth, with his furry sideburns and numerous rings in his ears and nose, but finally passed an iris scanner into the car for both to give an eye scan.

Pulling away, Tin Sloth asked, “The security at LAX is tighter than just about anywhere else in the world. You don’t think that there’ll be anyone waiting for the device here do you?”

“This deal has already crossed a few lines we didn’t think were crossable. I have to work under the assumption that they have inside people. Either their own, or just paid help,” Rufus said, looking a little worried. “Someone has been stringing us along. I think they’ll continue throwing us curves, trying to pull the rug out from under us.”

“And that ‘twink’ thing?”

“A calling card... Meant to tell us that he knows who’s chasing him and he’s not afraid.”

“We’ve dealt with this guy before?” Tin Sloth asked a little puzzled.

“Yeah... A few years back... Few knew the whole story, but we lost someone. It nearly tore the agency apart.”

“You’re talking about Magicgoo.” Tin Sloth said, tentatively.

Rufus sighed heavily... “Yeah.”

The two fell to silence as they rolled up to the freight terminal.

Inside they found the scanning equipment set up and waiting. Bitchgoddess and Starr had spent the previous evening ensuring that the equipment was in place. While Rufus powered up the scanner and made sure it hadn’t been tampered with, Tin Sloth established communications with EOD back in the Portland office.

Two more messages arrived as Rufus finished checking the scanner out. The first was a report from XPeter and McDrewbie. The target packages had moved through San Francisco. Similar to Portland, there were a mix of empty and full boxes and one phantom package. No device was found.

The second message was entitled: “Here’s Your God Damn Report!” Rufus smiled a bit as he opened the report from Onyx. Everything was detailed about getting the target tagged, InThrees being jumped and how they had gotten onto another train back to Paris. Attached was an image of a man getting into a white truck. Rufus looked intently at the image for a second.

“EOD. This is Rufus... Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, I’ve got you.”

“I’ve got a picture I want you to look at. I think I know who it is, but I want you to confirm.”

Within seconds the image was up in front of EOD and he examined it for a second before a look of both recognition and disgust came across his face. “KetchupRat!” he blurted out.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Rufus responded coolly. “If KRat is involved as well, then this thing is bigger than we had imagined.”

Just then, Bitchgoddess and Starr came through the door. “Ok, boys... Are we ready to scan some boxes?” She looked at Rufus and immediately noticed the concerned look on his face. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing... It’s fine...” Rufus answered. “Tin Sloth just left to check the South end for anything irregular. You two, go check the North end.”

Bitchgoddess nodded and the two started out. She looked over her shoulder at Rufus as she trailed Starr around the corner.

As the two women passed out of sight Rufus continued, “EOD, KRat usually runs his own scams and he hasn’t run anything this big in a few years. If he’s got something put together with our old friend Bleh, then we’ve got a huge opportunity to grab the both of them, once and for all.”

“Yeah... That sounds great and all, but it also means the risk is also bigger than any other operation we’ve ever run. They both know the system and either one of them would off an operative as soon as look at them,” EOD said, the tension in his voice escalating with every word.

“I know the danger... but you also know that either one of them wouldn’t hesitate for a second to set off a nuclear device, in the most populated place they can think of, if we don’t stop them.”

EOD sighed heavily. “God damn you, Rufus... Why didn’t you just leave me in that hole I’d dug for myself.”

“You know the reason,” Rufus responded calmly. “No one else can get into every system with the speed that you can. You know Bleh and how he operates better than anyone. You’re the best we’ve got.”

EOD didn’t answer as he sat, blankly staring at the monitor. He only looked up when a hand touched his shoulder. Sara smiled slightly as she looked down at him. The tension eased in him as she gently set a cup of coffee on the desk for him and turned to leave. EOD watched her leave silently and then turned back to the monitors. “Alright,” he began firmly. “The aircraft is due to hit the ground any minute. I’ve written some scripts that will automatically kick out the target packages for the scanner. They worked well for Frisco. Let’s get this shit done.”

“Alright then... Patch the team’s radio’s together and we’ll get organized. Oh! And passa message to Clem. Pat is on loan to MI-5 in Ireland, but he’s got some contacts in France. He can pull some strings to make sure InThrees is released as soon as he’s well enough.”

“Ok... You’ve got it.”

“Tin Sloth... What’s the situation?” Rufus called.

“Everything is quiet here. There was some maintenance staff working on one of the conveyor systems, but they finished up and just left,” Tin Sloth responded.

“Alright, come back here and help me with the scanner. The plane should be in the gate in the next five minutes. Starr, BG? Report?”

Starr’s voice responded, “We split up... I’m in an adjoining section. Everything seems normal here.”

Bitchgoddess answered as well, “Everything normal here too.”

EOD interrupted before Rufus could respond, “Rufus, there’s something strange going on in the system. It looks like there are a whole series of maintenance scripts running for the adjoining sections. Is that normal for sections about to process cargo? In never used to be.”

“It still isn’t,” Rufus responded. “What sort of maintenance scripts?”

“I can’t tell... I can’t find any source for them. The process IDs are from the protected pool so I can’t inspect the process resources either.... Wait... What the hell?...”

“What... what’s going on?” Rufus called, becoming more uneasy.

“I pulled up the status lists for all the adjoining sections and I’ve got all sorts of security door closure messages. Since when did we lock down all the security doors to process cargo?”

“That’s not normal either... Everyone, get your asses back here... There’s something weird going on.”

“I was already starting back, but I’m stopped at a security door. It’s locked and my security card won’t open it,” Starr called. “It’s door B-62, EOD... Can you open it for me?”

“I’m trying” EOD responded, “I can’t... One of the maintenance scripts is blocking commands to the door and I can’t kill the process... Wait... I’ve found something else... There’s a palette lift robot moving through the North section.”

“EOD, this part of the terminal doesn’t process freight on palettes. There’s no reason for a palette lift to even be in this area!” Rufus said emphatically as he jumped up and started running in the direction that Bitchgoddess and Starr at left in.

Breathing hard from running Tin Sloth called, “EOD... I’m at a security door to get back, but I can’t open the door... Is there any other way out of this section?”

“No... Every security door has been locked out. I can’t open anything and I can’t kill the processes in the system.” EOD’s voice was starting to become frantic as he worked to try to break into the maintenance system.

Rufus reached a security door leading into the North section only to find it locked tight. As he looked around for another way in he could hear the jet engines of the cargo aircraft pulling into the gate. The conveyor systems started rolling in preparation for the cargo that would start moving through the sorting equipment.

“EOD!” Bitchgoddess’ voice broke in. “I just found your robotic palette lift!” she said, urgently. “I was walking down an isle and it went by the end of the isle doing about 25 miles an hour!”

“Where is it now?” EOD asked.

“Oh, it’s about fifty feet behind me and gaining!”

“Christ!... Ok, new priority... Stop the palette lift,” EOD said as he continued hunting through screen after screen looking for a way to shut down the processes.

“You’re damn right!” Bitchgoddess yelled as she reached up to an overhead conveyer. She swung herself up and pulled her legs clear, just as the lift passed under her. She dropped to the floor again as the lift screeched to a halt and turned around in place. Running full tilt in the other direction she could hear the whine of the electric motors spooling up behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to see the heavy metal lift forks raise up to chest height. The yellow rotating beacon flashed away menacingly.

As she reached the end of the isle it nearly caught up to her, but she made a hard left turn. The heavy machine slid sideways into the concrete wall, unable to make the quick turn. “Any time EOD!” she yelled as it freed itself from the crater it left in the wall and began picking up speed again.

She made a few more quick turns but the machine began gaining on her again. Running as fast as she could, the thunder of the heavy machine grew louder and louder behind her. Pulling her gun she fired a few rounds over her shoulder into the machine, with no effect. They bounced harmlessly off the heavy steel casing.

Rounding a corner, she found herself suddenly cornered. She backed herself against the concrete wall and fired three more rounds at it. As she watched it approach, it suddenly slowed. All the lights shut off and it coasted towards her. She cringed as the ends of the forks hit the wall. Slowly opening her eyes, she could see the machine sitting silently in front of her. On either side of her the lifting forks were embedded into the wall a few

inches. EOD's voice came over the radio. "I've temporarily cut the power in the machine. It's going to reset in a few seconds and I won't be able to do it again. Get out of there! Get out of there!"

Ducking under, she wiggled past the silent machine, but yelped a little as it burst back to life. It backed away from the wall, spun around and came charging after her again. She turned down another long isle, hoping to evade it. It missed the turn, but quickly stopped, reversed and thundered down the isle after her. As she neared the end of the isle, she was horrified to find that it was a dead end. The conveyor systems on either side were fenced so she could not escape into the equipment and the isle ended at a concrete wall. "Shit, shit, shit," she repeated as she ran.

Almost at the end of the isle an arm reached down from an overhead conveyor in front of her. She grabbed on with both hands and Rufus swung her up into the air. Just below her feet the machine thundered by at almost 30 miles an hour, slamming into the concrete wall with a huge thud. Dust and stone exploded out of the wall as the forks speared into the concrete more than a foot deep.

Bitchgoddess scrambled up onto the overhead conveyor and wrapped her arms around Rufus as she tried to catch her breath. Below, the palette lift struggled to free itself from the wall. Smoke started to pour out of the machine as it slowly lost power. Finally the rotating beacon went out and the machine fell silent.

"I've got it!" EOD yelled triumphantly over the radio. "I cracked into the memory management processes and I took all the memory away from the maintenance processes. It crashed them and freed up everything they had locked down.

"Good job EOD... Everything's ok here..." Rufus responded, relieved. He too was almost out of breath. "I used the conveyor system to get into the North section, but I can't get back that way. Can you get the security doors open?" Rufus stood to look out over the room. The conveyors were now full of packages and parcels of every size and description moving through the room.

"I'm clearing them right now."

Bitchgoddess took a long look at the now silent palette lift as they climbed down to the floor level. Rufus started back towards the bin unloading room and the scanner. Pulling her gun again, she fired a round into the control box on the back of the palette lift. More smoke poured out of the electronics as it sparked and shorted. Rufus stopped and looked back at her. "Satisfied?" he asked as Bitchgoddess walked past him.

"Not, by half," She said, angrily, as she tucked her gun back into its holster under her arm.

Starr caught up with them as they neared the, now open, door. She frantically fussed over Bitchgoddess, trying to make sure she was ok. Tin Sloth was waiting for them by the

scanner when they arrived. He looked concerned as he saw them round the corner.
“Rufus... The ten targets have already passed though the scanner and carried on... I haven't reviewed the images yet to see what went through.”

“Alright... Let's see what we got,” Rufus said as he arrived. With a few keystrokes, he brought up a list of images stored in the machine.

Tin Sloth and Rufus huddled over the scanner while Bitchgoddess and Starr watched from across the room. Paging through each image they saw the same empty boxes, boxes of random metallic trash and a couple blank images. Nearing the end of the list they got to one that was different. The scan was weak and difficult to make out, but the smooth metallic shapes and electronics were unmistakable. As they looked, the image made both Rufus' and Tin Sloth's blood run cold.

“It looks like they tried to shield the box against scanners,” Tin Sloth said, as he studied the image.

“Humm... Yeah... Look at this here,” Rufus said pointing to the lower left of the image. “That looks like the trigger electronics. I've seen triggers like that. They've all been from Korea, but the structure of the chamber looks Pakistani.”

“So... So it's for real?” Starr asked tentatively.

“Yeah... It's as real as it gets,” Rufus answered. He downloaded the scanner data for the package to his computer and forwarded it along to EOD. In exchange EOD transferred the package routing data to Rufus.

“Alright, Tin... Looks like we're going to Chicago. The package passed right through the system and onto another plane for O'Hare. We don't have much time... I'll get EOD to get us on the next thing with wings.” Turning to Bitchgoddess and Starr, “You guys connect with airport security and take care of this mess here.” Bitchgoddess stood up in horror.

“Oh no you don't, Rufus!” She pointed a stern finger at him. “Some bastard just tried to kill me and you are NOT going to sideline me here to deal with the fallout.”

“Look, we can't just leave this mess behind. The airport management will have a cow and we'll end up with the Department all over us.”

“I don't give a shit what excuse you want to use, you are not going to sideline me. I can damn well take care of myself and you know it!”

“Wait...” Starr interrupted. “I can take care of this myself. I can deal with the airport security and there's a guy in administration who owes me a favour. I can get the agency equipment taken care of.”

Rufus looked at the two women disapprovingly for a few seconds. “Are you sure?” he asked Starr. She nodded in agreement and Bitchgoddess started to smile that wicked smile of hers. “EOD, get us three seats on the next thing moving for Chicago.” Rufus knew that if he didn’t take her, she would find a way to go on her own. When determined, there is very little on earth that could stop her.

As the three made their way out of the cargo terminal a group of maintenance, fire and airport security officers swarmed towards the terminal. Rufus stopped for a moment to talk to the security officer and make sure Starr wouldn’t have any problems. Ordinarily three people wouldn’t be allowed to walk away from an incident like this, but Rufus seemed to satisfy him that they needed to leave and that everything would be taken care of.

At his computer terminal, EOD worked furiously to forward the scanner image and a report about what had happened to both Clme and Weis. Before Rufus, Tin Sloth and Bitchgoddess could reach the passenger terminal, EOD had booked them onto a flight for Chicago. It used to be a guilty pleasure of his to bump people off their flights, but he couldn’t give it a second thought this time.

As everything calmed down, the pressure of the situation began to weigh on EOD. He could barely hold his hand still enough to take a sip of the coffee. Once again, Sara moved into the room silently to check on him. As EOD turned to look at her, he just about crumbled. “I almost lost another one,” he said, barely holding himself together. He burst into stream of rambling as he stood up, “I donno what that asshat Rufus is doing, bringing me into this shit. I can’t handle this any more. There has got to be someone else. I’m not the second coming for Christ sake, what does he expect. I can’t keep everyone safe. I don’t know the new shit. I... I... Fuck!” He threw his hands in the air.

Sara smoothly glided into him and hugged him. He rested his head on her shoulder and she whispered to him. “Don’t you get it, you stupid ass. You saved her.” Tears filled his eyes as the emotions drained out of him. “All this time you’ve been looking for redemption. A chance to do it right... You saved her.”

Chapter 13: Getting It On The Plane

Weis looked out the window quietly. He was tired, but between the nicotine withdrawal, the stress and the bright aircraft cabin he couldn't sleep. Lon sat down next to him and leaned over to speak quietly. "I talked to the attendant... Tons told her that, if she brought him another gas of water he'd break her hand. He sent her back to get him another drink."

Weis sighed heavily as he turned back to the window. "So much for keeping Tons sober."

"It doesn't matter now. She said we're beginning our descent in a minute. He won't be getting any more."

"Yeah..." Weis said contemplatively. "I want to be on-line again with EOD as soon as we get off the plane. I need to know where that cargo plane is."

Lon peered over his shoulder at Tons. He sat a few rows back, sucking back his last drink and then crunching the plastic glass in his fist. "I just hope we can keep the airline from trying to arrest Tons when we get to the terminal."

The three waited out the 15 minute descent into the Dallas/Fort Worth airport quietly. Weis tried to scan the airport from his window for cargo aircraft as the plane touched down, but the main cargo terminal was on the other side of the airfield, out of view. Tons was ready to go, but the flight attendant had to ask him twice to stay in his seat while the plane taxied to the gate. He had never been a good flier and the agency tried to keep him working in Portland or Seattle. Bitchgoddess was usually able to keep him in line in Seattle.

As soon as the plane stopped and the jetway was lined up with the door, the trio were up and ready to get off. Lon apologized profusely to the flight attendant while they waited for the aircraft door to open.

As soon as they reached the departure lounge a familiar face was waiting. Biggles greeted them with a wide smile and a handshake. "Glad to see you guys... You're just in time."

"How long have you been here?... Are you 'it', for backup?" Lon asked impatiently.

"Not long... Clem snatched McDrewbie from my team and sent him to San Francisco in the middle of the night. It's just me and a couple new guys." Pointing over towards two men waiting patiently by a luggage carousel, "That's Sveeb and the other guy is Wedge."

"New guys!" Tons let out followed by a belch. Biggles winced and turned his face as the smell of booze wafted over his face. "Get clear, Wedge! You can't do any more good back there!" he yelled over in Wedge's direction. Wedge slumped against a post as if he'd heard it a thousand times before.

“Eh... A little old, isn't he?” Lon asked tentatively.

“That's what I thought, but he knows his stuff.” Biggles said, trying to be encouraging.

“He'll do.” Weis said as he peered over at him. “So what's the story? Where's our plane?”

“I've been on-line with EOD and I've gotten all the briefing updates. The plane landed about thirty minutes ago and was unloaded. EOD tracked our package and it's in a holding area right now. It's supposed to get on another plane for New York, but EOD has delayed the flight by faking a computer problem on the aircraft. Rufus IDed the package in LA and they're tracking it to Chicago, but the real news from LA is that someone hacked the maintenance system there. They just about killed Bitchgoddess with a palette lift robot.”

That got the immediate attention of all three men. “What!... How the hell?!” Weis asked incredulously.

“I donno... Something about locked processes,” Biggles said with a shrug.

“Well, lets get our shit moving over to the cargo terminal... EOD can't spoof the aircraft techs for ever,” Weis said as he pulled his ear-piece and computer out of his pocket. “We have to make sure the target gets onto the plane and doesn't disappear into any side trips for New York.”

The group made a quick dash across the departure lounge to a set of security doors. Biggles slid his security card through a card reader and then looked into an iris scanner to unlock the doors. Outside, a small van waited for them to make the short trip across the airport to the cargo terminal. A little gentle persuasion was required to convince Tons that he didn't need to drive.

As they moved into range of the wireless access points in the cargo terminal, everyone's computers began receiving updates from the Penternet. Both Weis and Tons began reading furiously as the reports came in. In the back of the van Tons tinkered away with his computer, snickering. After a while everyone in the van couldn't help but notice his evil little giggles as he worked away.

“Tons... What the hell are you laughing at?” Lon asked finally.

“Oh, our old friend Agent Vetis. He tried to follow Rufus down to LA last night, but he sorta got diverted to investigate a... umm...mysterious kidnapping report in Santa Clara. Right now he's on a private jet over New Mexico.”

“Yeah... What's so funny about that?” Sveeb asked.

“Oh nothing... except the aircraft transponder number just somehow found its way onto the FAA Suspect Aircraft list.” He snickered some more. “I figure the Air National Guard will escort him down for a little discussion within about half an hour.”

Weis tried to hide his satisfaction and returned to the reports on his computer. Sveeb and Wedge were somewhat bewildered by it all.

The van arrived outside the cargo terminal within minutes and the six men poured out of the van and headed for the large roll-up door. As they approached a man emerged from the shadows, watching them walk towards the building. Weis leaned towards Biggles and said, “Security Manager” under his breath. The men fanned out to walk past the man who held up both hands as they approached.

“Now hold on here guys. I was told that people from the Department were on their way over here, but I just can’t let you guys walk in like this.”

Moving to walk past, Weis snapped his fingers and pointed over his head at the man. Biggles immediately separated himself from the group, pulled the Security Manager aside and began speaking to him. He struggled to say something to the group over his shoulder as Biggles continued to try to distract him, quoting non-existent policies and imaginary security alerts. Weis opened the security door into the sorting facility and everyone else followed him in.

As they stepped through the door EOD called to Weis, “Time’s up... The aircraft techs finally gave up on trying to troubleshoot the onboard computer on the aircraft and just reset the system. The plane will be at the gate to be loaded in a few minutes.”

“Ok, EOD. We’re in the facility now,” Weis responded. “Alright, this is the plan. EOD has the target in this building, waiting to go onto the plane. We don’t have the scanning equipment in place here to verify the target, but by process of elimination it has to be the target we’re looking for. All we need to do is keep an eye on the target and make sure it gets onto the plane, without any detours.”

Sveeb spoke up tentatively. “What do you want us to do?”

“You’re with me. We’ll go locate the target.” Weis responded, “Lon... You take Wedge here and check this place out for anything unusual. Tons... You go watch the loading equipment by the gate. All of you... Keep your eyes open and watch your step. We’ve already had an attempt on someone’s life. We can’t expect any less here.”

With that, the group turned and headed off in three separate directions. EOD started giving Weis directions through the maze of conveyor systems and storage racks, to where the target was waiting to be loaded onto the plane. The facility wasn’t as large as the major cargo hubs, but it was still capable of handling tens of thousands of individual packages on a daily basis. Weis quickened the pace a bit as he heard the whine of jet engines outside the building.

“Ok, that’s the right isle... It’s on the left on the second layer from the bottom,” EOD said, as Weis and Sveeb rounded the corner. Looking at the row of packages, Weis could see a few boxes that looked just like many of the target packages that he had scanned in the Portland terminal.

He started to approach the packages with his computer to identify the specific box, but a loud POP rang out, punctuated by a clang—zing sound as a bullet ricocheted off of a post just in front of him. Instinctively he leapt under the conveyors for cover. Looking around for Sveeb, he found him also taking cover behind a large support column, gun drawn.

“Are you alright?” EOD’s alarmed voice came over his ear-piece.

“Yeah, I’m fine... Can you see him?”

“See who... What the hell’s going on?” Lon interrupted.

“Someone with a gun has Weis and Sveeb pinned down” EOD responded. “I can’t see him, Weis... I’ve tried every security camera in the area. I don’t see anyone.”

Overhead, the conveyors started moving and the noise in the building made it difficult to hear anything. “I’m coming!” Tons broke in.

“NO!” Weis yelled back. “You stay where you are! Make sure the target gets on the plane... Lon, circle around to the Eastern end of the building and see if you can pick this guy off.”

Weis tried to peer out from under the conveyors for the gunman, but another shot rang out and he retreated again quickly. Sveeb ducked out from behind the column and fired a couple shots down the isle blindly.

“Lon... I think he’s up on top of the conveyer system framework,” Weis said as he pulled a cigarette out and lit it. “Sveeb, put another couple rounds into the upper left of the isle.”

“Um... Weis... I don’t think you’re allowed to smoke in here.” Sveeb said looking across the isle at him.

“Yeah... Well I don’t think you’re allowed to shoot guns at people in here either,” he said, wryly.

Sveeb braced himself to take another shot. He started to move, but ducked back as another shot rang out; leaving a gouge in the concrete column he was using for cover. He stood there, white as a ghost and clutching his gun against his chest.

“It’s ok... You’re ok,” Weis soothed. “Fake him into taking another shot, and then take your shots.” Sveeb looked over at him, like he was insane. “Here... Like this,” he said

pulling his gun out. He reached out from under the conveyor with the gun and fired off a couple shots blindly. He pulled his hand back in as another shot rang out from down the isle. "Now!" Weis yelled. Sveeb ducked out from behind the post and fired twice. The bullets created a shower of sparks as they bounced off the framework for the conveyor system.

Weis slowly poked his head out to see if he could see anything, but another shot chased him back under. "What do we do now?" Sveeb whispered anxiously from behind the column.

"We keep him busy, until Lon can get to him," Weis said and he stuck his arm out and fired off two more rounds.

A few minutes passed as Lon and Wedge crept through the equipment towards the end of the isle where Weis and Sveeb were pinned down. EOD still couldn't see the gunman using the security cameras, but did his best to direct the two towards Weis and Sveeb.

"We haven't heard any shots for a minute or so," Wedge commented to Lon as he crept along behind him.

"Humm... Yeah..." Lon said slowly, as he scanned the equipment and framework rising up overhead. "With all the racket from the equipment, we'll never hear him moving."

Finally reaching the end of the isle, Lon scanned the equipment. "Weis, I've made it to the end of the isle where this guy is supposed to be... There's no one here."

Slowly, Weis eased himself out from under the equipment and to his feet. Sveeb lowered his guard a bit as he peered out from behind the column. The two started moving towards Lon cautiously, staying to either side of the isle. "Lon... Let's set up a grid search for this guy. EOD will see if he leaves the building," Weis said.

"Acknowledged," Lon responded as he pointed Wedge in a new direction.

They slowly moved from isle to isle looking. The clanking and clattering machinery made the men edgy. Every loud sound drew their attention as they searched. EOD worked overtime panning the security cameras around, but to no avail. If the gunman was moving around in the building, he knew how to do it just out of view of the cameras.

The after more than ten, tense minutes of searching, the four men came together again at the other end of the building. "He's got to be holed up somewhere, waiting," Weis said as he approached Lon.

"What about an automated gun inside a package?" Lon asked.

"Naw... You wouldn't be able to get an active device past the EM scanners," Weis answered as he slowly holstered his gun.

“Well, should we sweep the building again?” Wedge asked.

Weis slowly responded, “Yeah... I think we’ll...”

BANG!

Weis suddenly broke off mid sentence as a gunshot rang out. The four all spun around to look for the source of the shot and to find cover. Before they could get their bearings, a thin man in dark blue coveralls fell to the floor from behind a piece of equipment. As he hit the floor a gun fell from his hand and slid across the floor towards them.

They looked around for the source of the shot. Slowly Tons emerged from around a corner. He looked and the group of four men and deadpanned, “The target got on the plane.”

Chapter 14: Back To Chicago

Clme waved a little as Rufus made his way across the crowded passenger terminal. As the two met up they ducked into a doorway so they could talk away from the crowds of travelers.

“Hi Clem... We just got in,” Rufus said. “What’s our situation?”

“Well, everything was touch and go, but I think we’re ok. It’s confirmed that New York is the target, but we’re not going to get Weis and Biggles there in time. They ran into a guy with a gun in the DFW cargo terminal. They took him out, but with all the red tape, security and police questioning they won’t get away in time.”

“Damn...” Rufus muttered. “Not only have we lost our safety margin, but we’re short people now... Everyone is ok down there?”

“Oh yeah... EOD reported in that everything was fine as soon as it was over. He sent a picture of the guy along with a rap sheet.” Clme pulled out his computer and showed it to Rufus. “It’s Filious... He’s known to us, but he’s usually involved in moving smaller stuff. He’s never been associated with Bleh or KRat before. There’s a chance he has nothing to do with this operation. He might have been down there running his own scam and was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I don’t know if I’m willing to buy that. It would be too big of a coincidence. You guys brought me in, because I wouldn’t make any assumptions, so I can’t write the incident off.”

“Yeah... It’s just unexpected... What are we going to do about New York now?”

“Well, we’ll have to do what we can with us and Joshy’s team. When you get back to the office call up to Toronto and get Zippy down there as well. If he gives you any argument, tell him I’m calling in a favour,” Rufus said with a bit of a smile.

Clme looked at him cautiously, “Ok... I don’t want to know, but I’ll make the call.”

“I’ve got Tons and Bitchy watching the cargo plane while it’s on layover. The target isn’t being unloaded before the plane carries on the New York, so as long as no one goes near it we’re ok,” Rufus said, changing the subject.

“How’s things on your end?”

“Well... Bitchgoddess is pissed enough to chew nails. She’ll be a challenge. Tin Sloth is worried and on edge. He’s a good man, but he never had the temperament for this kinda work.”

“No,” Clme said, contemplatively. “That’s why Tons took over the West coast. Tons is a handful, but we needed someone who could be cold hearted.”

“Well, he’s fine as long as I keep him on task. Same for EOD as well. He came through for Bitchgoddess in LA.”

“Yeah, I got a report from Sara after. She’s keeping him in once piece, like you asked her to. After he wrapped up Dallas I had Sara put him on a plane here to Chicago. They both should be here in about an hour. I’ll set him up in the control center down town, before you reach New York. Joshy and his team left for New York as soon as we knew everything was headed for JFK. Onyx and his group are due to land in New York in about ninety minutes. Their target won’t hit JFK until early morning, so they’re booked into a Hotel to get some rest.”

“This operation has really been timed to bring all three parts together in New York within the span of a few hours. Organization like that isn’t typical of Bleh and his organization. And since when is KRat working for Bleh?”

Clme shrugged a bit. “I don’t know if KRat is the type to work for anyone, but I can see him partnering with Bleh on something this big... Only if he thought Bleh had some sort of Ace up his sleeve though. Do you think there’s something we’re missing?”

“I think someone knows far too much about, not only the NCT, but how we operate, and has us running through hoops here... If we don’t find out whom that it is and what they know, we’re way behind the play.”

“Agreed,” Clme nodded. “I’ll talk to EOD and see what he thinks, when he gets here.”

“Ok... I’m going to go check with a friend I have inside airport security. Let me know if there’s anything new. I’ll talk to you when I get to New York in about four or five hours.”

With a quick hand shake the two moved out of the doorway and blended into the stream of evening travelers. Clme made his way towards the gate that EOD would soon be arriving at. It had been over two years since Clme had seen EOD. He tried to help EOD after Magicgoo was killed. Bit by bit EOD withdrew into himself. He blamed himself for allowing her to work in the terminal alone and he blamed himself for not getting Weis there in time to stop Jumper. After finding her, Weis caught Jumper, but his anger almost got him killed to.

Within months of her death, the Department forced EOD out of management and Clme took over for him. Even a few within the agency had blamed him, so without the support he lost all confidence in himself. He turned to drinking and soon found himself ousted from active operations all together. Agent Vetis campaigned to get both EOD and Weis

tossed, after butting heads in some joint operations. With the Department now involved, Clme couldn't protect either of them.

With more free time, the drinking took over. EOD and Weis had been inseparable for twenty years, so the two of them became permanent fixtures in EOD's Portland bar, The Crapper.

Clme, Rufus, Lon and a few others tried to keep an eye on EOD after he was out of the agency entirely. Sara stuck it out with him as long as she could, but after he stopped coming home, she couldn't handle it any more.

It was a hard sell, when Rufus told the Department that he wouldn't take command without EOD. There hasn't been an operation this big and this important in over five years. Were it not for the agency being short handed, it would have been an impossible task, even with Rufus' contacts in Congress and the Pentagon. Working for the Canadian government also made it easier to cross departmental lines and go over people's heads, but Rufus' reputation hung on EOD and Weis holding it together.

As Clme waited near the gate he slipped his ear-piece into his ear to make a call. A few clicks on his computer and Zippy's phone started ringing.

"Uhh... Uhh... Hello?" Zippy finally answered.

"Zippy... It's Clem."

"Clammy?... Holly shit! What the hell?"

"Sorry to wake you this late Zippy... I'm calling for Rufus."

"Jesus... Does that guy not understand 'office hours'?" Zippy muttered a little perturbed.

"You know as well as I do, it comes with the territory," Clme said. "He wants you on a plane to New York right away."

"New York? He leaves me up here to run things on my own while he goes down there to manage all those operatives you guys have, and he still needs more people?"

"Yeah well... We had a bunch of people hung up in Texas... It couldn't be helped... Look, it's really important. When you get to New York I'll send you all the briefings so you can get up to speed. Rufus said he was calling in a favour. He'll meet you there."

Zippy sighed heavily... "Alright... Damn it... I'm on my way... But you can tell Rufus that when it's over, there will be some New York strip clubs going on my expense account."

Zippy hung up before Clme could respond. For a few moments he pondered the disaster that could result from Zippy and Dave in New York together. Zippy, Dave and Duke had once run amuck in the strip clubs of Miami once. The lawsuits and damages had been expensive. At least, with Duke having left for a job with the ATF, it might be easier to keep it contained. Duke had been the one who instigated most of the carnage.

Clme had just finished checking on the hotel accommodations for everyone in New York when the plane from Portland pulled into the gate. It was only a few minutes before the passengers started pouring into the arrival gate. He saw Sara first as she came up the gate. He greeted her with a smile, "Hi Sara... It's been a while."

"Hi Clem... You know how it is... It's a full time job keeping the idiots on the West coast out of trouble. If it wasn't for Bitchgoddess' help, I'd never get any sleep."

Behind her, EOD slowly made his way out of the jetway. He looked at Clme cautiously as he approached.

"EOD... It's been a long time. I'm glad to see you," Clme said as he reached for EOD's shoulder.

"It's been a lifetime Clem... I never thought I'd be back here again."

"Well, we're in it up to our necks... We need you..."

"I don't know if I've made all the right moves, but I'm trying... I promised Rufus that I would give him whatever I had."

"You're doing fine EOD," Clme encouraged. "Let's settle you into the big chair back at the office... I've got some stuff that I need your opinion on and then you can get a couple hours sleep."

"Yeah... Listen..." he said tentatively. "Clem... I feel like I owe you some apologies... I never thanked you for what you tried to do back then."

"Look EOD... I did what I did because I believed in you then... I still do now... So let's set all that aside for now. There will be lots of time for war stories and memories after we get these guys."

EOD nodded to him with a little smile. Sara took his hand and smiled at him as they followed Clme through the terminal and into a waiting car.

Leaving the airport, Clme turned the car towards the Chicago skyline. It held an odd familiarity for EOD, but it felt like a shadow from the past.

Chapter 15: Setting the Trap

As the plane touched down Tin Sloth finally jolted into consciousness. From almost the moment he sat down in Chicago he had been out cold. It was the first sleep he'd had in over 24 hours. Across the aisle Bitchgoddess and Rufus sat quietly. Bitchgoddess had managed a small nap and Rufus had been reviewing information on his computer for most of the flight. In all his years in the business he never could adapt well to sleeping on planes.

The aircraft carrying their target had left Chicago less than 30 minutes after they left. The aircraft was locked down and away from the terminal, so there would be no chance for anyone to get to the target. Not until it got off the plane in New York. Onyx and his team had been in New York since Midnight. The target had arrived in the early morning hours, but it was safely locked away in the customs warehouse until 5:30 am. The precision of the timing for the three targets arriving in New York was unnerving to Rufus. It left a very narrow margin for error.

The target from Texas had already arrived an hour earlier, but Joshy and his team had been watching it from the time it left the plane.

Approaching the gate, Rufus wondered what would be waiting for him once he got off the plane. During the three hours isolated on a plane all hell could have broken loose. It wouldn't take long to find out, as Joshy was waiting for the three as they walked off the plane wearily.

"Good morning," Rufus said, trying to muster a smile for him. "How are we doing here?"

"Things are under control, but only just. The shooting in Texas has drawn a lot of attention and a lot of people are asking questions. The FBI is going ape-shit and the CIA has alerted their New York office that we're running an operation."

"I expected that... It'll be ok as long as we keep this operation from leaving the airport. How are you doing?"

"I've got my team in position. DLack and Midnightsquirrel are watching the target and Staring Goldfish is working the airport security to shut down all road traffic in and out of the airport if this thing gets away from us."

"What about Onyx?" Rufus asked.

"He called me about ten minutes ago. His group was just leaving the hotel and they said they had Zippy with them. You didn't really bring Zippy down here from Toronto did you?"

“Had to... With Weis getting stuck in Dallas I needed at least another man.”

“Well... I hope you’ve got a plan for after this is over to keep the strippers of New York safe.”

Joshy and Rufus exchanged a wry smile as they walked down the corridor. Reaching the end of corridor the group reached a large set of security doors. Joshy swiped his ID card and gave an iris scan to unlock the doors. After passing through a few more halls, the group finally exited onto the airport tarmac where a van bearing the JFK Airport logo was waiting.

Joshy mentioned that the airport management had not been very cooperative when he arrived with his team last night, but when news of the gunman in the DFW terminal filtered out they suddenly became more cooperative. If there’s a real threat, no one wants to look like they’re an obstacle to catching them, for fear of being sued if the plot succeeds.

As they reached the main cargo handling building a pair of sleek black cars sat near the entrance. “Oh... Onyx is here already,” Joshy commented. “We only had two agency cars available and Onyx had six people to get over here this morning. I used an airport limo service to get my group here this morning so Onyx could have both cars.”

As they walked into the building everyone was gathered around talking amongst themselves. Zippy and Dave were off in a corner with their computers out; trading porn, no doubt. Onyx and Jimbo were talking to the terminal Security Manager. Monju was busy giving Laura a hard time, but he was the first to see Rufus walk in. “Rufee!!” he yelled out. “Hey BABEE! Give me some sugar!” he said as he sauntered across the room.

Rufus ducked out of a hug and grabbed Monju’s hand in a firm hand shake. “Hey Mon... Glad you’re here... Have you been behaving yourself?” he asked jokingly.

“NO!” Laura yelled from across the room.

“Good man,” Rufus said, with a wink to Monju.

Rufus conferred first with Airport Security and then he talked with Onyx and Jimbo briefly. After a quick update, Onyx took Jimbo, Laura and Dave to go wait for the package from France to come out of Customs. Rufus sent Tin Sloth and Monju out to check the building before the cargo plane from Chicago arrived. Joshy went to join DLack and Midnightsqirrel, watching the target that had already arrived.

After Dave left, Zippy walked over with a scowl. “Hey... Thanks for the wake-up call last night,” he said sarcastically. “I had company; if you know what I mean.”

“Zippy... When do you not have company?” Rufus asked rhetorically. Zippy feigned a smile.

As Zippy and Bitchgoddess went to grab a much needed coffee from the Security office, Rufus put his ear-piece in and linked up to the Penternet to talk to EOD. “EOD... Are you all set there?” he asked.

“Rufus... Yeah, Clem has been great. He’s got me set up here with everything. I’ve been working on looking through all the data to see if I’ve missed something.”

“Come up with anything?”

“Not really... The only thing that seems strange is the data for all these packages and the rogue processes is too clean. There’s no mistakes, no secondary edits, no changes. Like it’s all been scripted.”

“Well... See if you can find any fingerprints in the code... What about our targets? How are we doing here?” asked Rufus.

“I’m watching the target that’s already there. It hasn’t budged since it landed. The FAA has the plane with the second target on final. It should be at the terminal in about 25 minutes. I can’t see the package in Customs. That building is a bit of an electronic black hole, but I’ve hacked into the Customs system to make sure it hasn’t been sidelined. It should transfer out of there in about 30 minutes.”

“Ok,” Rufus confirmed. “Let’s get everyone on-line and geared up.”

EOD sent out an electronic page to everyone’s pocket computer and one by one, everyone contacted EOD to confirm that they were ready and could hear all the radio messages.

After everyone had checked in, EOD called to Rufus, sounding a little worried. “Rufus... I’ve just gotten an alert from a bug I planted in the FBI system. They’ve been freaking since the shooting in Texas, but they’ve just sent orders to send everyone they’ve got in New York to JFK. I think they’ve figured out that we’ve got teams there.”

“Have you got an ETA for them?” Rufus asked calmly.

“I’d say maybe 15 minutes.”

“That’s cutting it a little close” Rufus said, contemplatively. “Staring Goldfish is on the gates leading in and out of the airports. See if you can have him slow them down a bit.”

Rufus pulled Zippy and Bitchgoddess away from the coffee and headed towards the gate where the plane from Chicago would be unloaded. As it was the first cargo plane arrival

of the day, the terminal was quiet. Most of the conveyer systems sat idle, but the sound of the aircraft pulling into the gate soon reverberated through the building.

There had been no time to set up scanning equipment, but the package containing the device had already been identified. There should be no need to scan it again. Just catch the guy who tries to pick it up.

When the three reached the unloading conveyors they spread out and tried to find corners and nooks to wait in out of view. Rufus was close enough to the unloading conveyor that he would be able to pick up the tracking tag when the package passed by.

Onyx had taken the airport van over to the international end of the cargo terminal, where the target coming from France would emerge and join the system. Laura and Jimbo were sent to circle the Customs building while Onyx and Dave waited inside for the package to emerge.

Everyone was in place to spring the trap. Rufus had little doubt that Bleh and his organization would know that the trap was there. He just hoped that he wouldn't know which direction it would come from.

Chapter 16: Cut To The Chase

Like they had done a thousand times before; Rufus, Bitchgoddess and Zippy watched as a parade of parcels and packages flowed out of shipping containers and into the cargo handling system. Right on queue, the target package made its way off the plane. EOD watched the security cameras like a hawk, but the cargo terminal looked empty, other than Joshy's team and Rufus' team.

Holding well back, Rufus trailed the target as it circled around the building. Nearing the back side of the building the package headed into a holding zone. Rufus hung back to watch from the corner while Zippy headed down a parallel isle to watch from the other end. "Joshy... It looks like we're going into a holding pattern here for a minute. What about your target?" Rufus whispered.

"It hasn't moved and no one has tried to come near it," he answered back.

"I've got something strange here," Jimbo's voice broke in. "There's a helicopter sitting here on the tarmac behind the Customs building."

EOD answered him after a few seconds. "I don't have a record for it and there's no active transponder."

"I'm about a quarter mile away... I'm gonna move in for a closer look."

Rufus watched intently, crouching behind a piece of machinery. "Wait... I've got something," he whispered with excitement as a door swung open and a man wearing an airport ground crew uniform walked in with a dolly. Bitchgoddess snarled a little under her breath as the guy looked both directions and sauntered slowly towards the conveyers near the door. "EOD, he's too far off for me to ID him. Have you got a shot with the security cameras?"

"No, the closest camera doesn't give me a high enough resolution to run it through the face recognition software."

Looking around again as he stood near the conveyors, he finally made a fast grab and pulled the target package onto the dolly. "HIT HIM!" Rufus yelled as he leapt from his hiding spot. Bitchgoddess chased after him, gun drawn. From the other end of the isle Zippy came charging around the corner.

Looking both directions, the guy dropped the package where it was and ran out the door. Running full out, it took Rufus a few seconds to reach the door. Before he could make it outside, the unmistakable whine of a turbine started winding up. Without hesitating he charged through the door, with Zippy and Bitchgoddess hot on his heels.

Before he could get near the helicopter it spooled up to speed and began to lift off. Reaching into his pocket Rufus pulled out a small disk. He pushed a small button on the top of it and flung it at the side of the helicopter. It stuck to the side of the chopper with a clank that could hardly be heard over the roar of the turbine and the rotor blades. As it pulled up and away, Bitchgoddess opened fire. The bullets hit the back of the chopper causing some sparks, but seemed to have little effect.

Tin Sloth and Monju came running from the far corner outside the building, but slowed down as they could see the futility of their efforts.

“Joshy!” Rufus yelled as he tried to catch his breath. “Has your target moved yet?”

“No, it hasn’t budged an inch. What happened?”

“Go open it up and tell me what you find.”

“Open it? Are you sure?” Joshy asked uneasily.

“Yes! Open the damn thing!” Rufus shouted back, as he watched the helicopter climb away. “EOD... I managed to get a GPS tracker onto a chopper that just took off.”

“I’ll try and get a fix on it. The airport control tower is freaking about a helicopter that just took off without authorization,” EOD answered.

“Jimbo! Go disable that helicopter you found!” Rufus called.

“Acknowledged,” Jumbo answered. He was already running for the waiting helicopter. Before he could reach it a door burst open and a guy came charging out with a heavy case in one hand. Jimbo quickened his pace, but he was still more than a football field length away. Laura emerged from the door following the guy, firing at the helicopter as its engine began spooling up to speed. The blast of wind coming from the rotor pushed her back. Jimbo got close enough to hurl a GPS tracker at the side of the chopper, but it lifted off before he could get close enough to do much else.

As it pulled away Laura called to Rufus over the radio. “Rufus... I’m sorry... I found a door that had been broken open, but the guy got the drop on me before I could stop him.”

Rufus’ face knotted up in disgust as he spun around, raising his computer over his head. He started to throw it down, but stopped as he regained his trademark composure. Bitchgoddess took the computer from him saying, “Here... I’ll do it.” She slammed the computer to the ground and it exploded into a hundred pieces.

“Thanks,” Rufus said to her calmly. “Joshy? The package?”

“We got it open... I donno how to tell you this, but it’s empty. There’s some wood blocking that would have held it in place, but nothing else. How could he have gotten it out of the box here without us knowing?” Joshy asked.

Rufus’ expression didn’t change as he answered. “He didn’t... They swapped it in Texas.”

“They did who with the what now?”

“They switched the device into one of the nearby empty boxes before Weis got there,” Rufus said calmly.

“What do we do now?” Joshy asked as the situation started to sink in.

“The cars...” Rufus answered, as he started running through the building towards the parking area. “EOD, have you got a fix on those choppers?”

“Mostly... With the GPS antenna on the side, any time they bank to that side, the signal disappears. They’re heading West towards Manhattan... This is getting out of control... The control tower is on the horn to the Air National Guard now.”

“Do what you can. We’re going to try to track them on the road.”

Rufus nearly ran down the Security manager as he ran passed the office on the way out. As he charged out the door he could see Joshy roar away in one of the agency cars. Rufus jumped into the remaining car with Zippy and Bitchgoddess close on his heels. The car snarled to life and Rufus dropped it into gear. Zippy was pitched against the rear seat as the car lurched forward. He had barely sat down and hadn’t belted himself in.

“Staring Goldfish, this is Rufus. I need you to clear the traffic leaving the airport. We need a fast route out.”

“Acknowledged,” Staring Goldfish answered back. “There’s a bunch of FBI cars and vans pulling up to the security gate right now. What do you want me to do?”

“Stall them as long as you can. If they get involved we’ll never catch up to those choppers.”

The engine roared as Rufus buried the accelerator. He knifed between a fuel truck and a meal service vehicle. Bitchgoddess started to look worried as she cinched her seatbelt down tighter. In the back seat, Zippy had only just made it back into the seat and reached for the belt, before a hard right turn tossed him across the seat and down to the floor.

Up ahead a dust cloud was just visible as Joshy charged for the exit to get out of the airport ramp and onto the public access roads. The gate was already open and traffic had been halted. Joshy passed through the gate already accelerating past 75 miles per hour.

Within a few seconds, Rufus charged by as well. As they hit the access roads, Rufus switched on the blue and white emergency strobes to warn other traffic.

“I’m coming up to the airport exit, which way do I need to go EOD?” Joshy called.

“Go west on 875.” EOD answered quickly. “The choppers look like their going low and between the buildings to get under radar.”

As Joshy charged out of the airport and up the on-ramp for the highway he passed a stream of marked and unmarked FBI vehicles. They were sitting at the gate and two men were having a very animated discussion with the guards at the gate. A few agents got out of their cars to get a better look as Joshy disappeared up the ramp. They had to quickly jump back out of the road as Rufus roared at them. He gave two sharp blasts from the siren to get them off the road.

As Rufus blew by, he thought he saw a familiar face sticking out of one of the cars. Vetus pulled his head back in after Rufus passed. “Those bastards!” he complained to Bill. With a quick look around, he cranked the wheel hard and pulled his car out of the line. With a howl from the tires, he spun the car around and charged after Rufus.

Up on the highway, Rufus and Joshy picked up speed in the early morning traffic. The light traffic and wide paved shoulders allowed both cars to accelerate to triple digit speeds. In the back seat, Zippy had finally managed to belt himself in. Rufus was far too focused on his driving to notice the growing look of terror on his face as the speeds built.

“EOD, the highway is coming to an end... Which way do I go, left or right?” Joshy called.

“The choppers are working their way through Southern Queens. Bear to the right on Conduit.”

“EOD, intersections and traffic is going to be a problem as we get closer to Manhattan. See what you can do about that,” Rufus called.

“I’ll tap into the New York City’s signal computer and see if I can clear a path.”

“He can do that?” Zippy asked from the back seat, momentarily forgetting his discomfort. Rufus only shrugged in response.

Joshy charged down the street as fast as he dare. The emergency flashers gave many drivers enough warning to pull out of the way, but the extreme speeds didn’t give most people enough time to react. As he approached a major intersection he could see the signals were red and a growing block of traffic waited. “EOD?” he called as he approached.

“I’ve got the signals red in all directions,” EOD answered back.

Joshy buried the accelerator as he pulled into the opposing lanes. Midnightsquirrel was strapped into the front seat and DLack braced himself nervously in the back seat. Joshy deftly braked into the corner and drifted through the intersection as he continued West towards Manhattan. “Hey Rufus... Are you keeping up back there?” he called sarcastically.

“Don’t get too cocky up there... I’m catching you.” Rufus answered back.

In his rearview he saw Rufus drift through the intersection in his wheel tracks. “Not today,” Joshy said, with a sly smile.

“Ok, Joshy... next right and then an immediate left onto Brunswick. It’s tight.” EOD called.

Ahead he could see the intersection. Again, the signals were all red and all the traffic seemed to be at a standstill. He pulled into the opposing lanes, charged around the corner and then snaked around a left turn within inches of the curbs. Again the speedometer quickly climbed past 50 miles per hour as he accelerated out of the tight corner. He ran up through the gears using the shift paddles on the steering wheel.

He kept an eye on his rearview but Rufus didn’t come around the corner. “Rufus?” he called on the radio, growing concerned.

“Don’t worry about me, just drive... I’ll wait for you when I get there.”

“Bastard,” Joshy muttered under his breath as he stomped on the gas with determination.

He flashed through two more intersections and EOD again started feeding him more directions. “Next intersection, go left and then an immediate right. Both turns are less than 90 degrees.”

Joshy tried to use the entire road, without tangling with the other cars. He knifed through the first left turn carrying as much speed as he could and then set up for the right. Almost at the intersection, he saw Rufus flash by. “Bastard,” he muttered again. He missed the curb by inches as he accelerated through the corner.

“The choppers are just reaching the East River” EOD reported. “I’ve tapped into the air controller’s communications. They’ve scrambled a pair of F-22s.”

“Can he do that?” Midnightsquirrel asked. Joshy shrugged silently as he chased after Rufus.

“I’m clearing a path across the Williamsberg Bridge... You’ll need to take the next right followed by a left. That’ll get you to the ramp for the 278.”

“Acknowledged,” Rufus answered as he lined up the next corner. Joshy was nearly on his bumper as the two cars carved through the traffic. They snaked through the intersections leading to the bridge in lockstep. Zippy was growing pale in the back seat, as he resisted the urge to throw up. Bitchgoddess sat in stone silence and her thinly veiled look of terror hadn’t changed since they left the airport. As they reached the bridge they found one of the lanes leading onto the island had been closed. The two cars again reached triple digit speeds across the bridge in the empty lane.

As soon as they crossed, EOD pointed them uptown towards where the choppers had crossed over from Queens. “Rufus, it looks like we’ve drawn the attention of the New York Police. I’m going to try to use them. I’m into the dispatch system and I’ll send instructions to the in-car terminals and get them to block off traffic in front of you.”

Bitchgoddess finally broker her silence to ask, “Can he do that?” Rufus only responded with another shrug.

“The choppers have split in the city. They’re down between the buildings, so it’s giving the GPS a hard time” EOD called. “It looks like they’ve turned south... One is running down Fifth Ave. The other is on Second.”

“Alright... we’re getting off and turning back South,” said Rufus.

“Acknowledged... You can go left just before UN headquarters... Second Ave. will be the third left.”

As the two cars reached UN Headquarters a New York City cop stood in the intersection holding the opposing traffic. He watched, somewhat dumbfounded, as the two cars carved through the corner. Again, as they reached Second Avenue two more police cars blocked the traffic. Taking advantage of the now empty street, Joshy kept his line tight and tried to pull along side Rufus. Several blocks down a helicopter flew ahead of them; skimming along at less than 80 feet above the street.

“I’ve got a visual on the Second Ave. chopper” Rufus called as he squinted to see the aircraft. “What’s the status on those F-22 Raptors?”

“They’re five minutes out, but the air controller is having trouble vectoring them on the choppers. They can’t see them on their radar.”

“These guys can’t do anything until they can get the device together with the plutonium. They have to set down somewhere. Where can you land two helicopters in close proximity in lower Manhattan?” Rufus asked.

“I know where you’re going.” EOD answered back. “I’m looking at the maps, but I’m not seeing anything. Any of the pads on top of the buildings are not big enough to land two choppers at the same time.”

“What about green spaces?”

“City Hall Park?” EOD offered

“Maybe... There isn't much open space there.”

“Well... That leaves Battery Park.”

“Alright... Send Joshy to City Hall and I'll take Battery Park.”

The two cars raced towards lower Manhattan. As they passed intersections blocked by Police, the cops jumped into the car and tried to give chase to the pair, but the Police cars were outmatched by the powerful agency cars. As they reached the heart of Chinatown the two cars split up. Joshy headed for into the Financial District for City Hall Park and Rufus raced for Battery Park. EOD kept a close watch on the GPS signals moving over the map, as they flashed on and off.

Before Rufus could reach the park EOD called him again. “The signals look like they've slowed down... Wait... Battery Park... Looks like they've landed near the shore at Battery Park.”

“Get Joshy headed towards there... I'm less than a minute away.” Rufus called anxiously.

Rufus knifed through a few more intersections as he neared the park. It was still early and there were few people on the streets. As he reached the park he blasted over the curb and across the grass. He ground to a halt near a fence and all three of them piled out of the car, breaking out into a full run towards the sound of the choppers.

They didn't have to run far, before they could see the two choppers sitting in an open grassy area overlooking the water. Two figures struggled to drag the large box out of one of the choppers. As they ran, the two figures became recognizable. KRat and Bleh tore the top off of the box together and Bleh leaned in.

As Rufus, Bitchgoddess and Zippy stopped about 100 feet away. Rufus yelled to the two, “Give it up! There's no way you can set that thing off and get out of here in time!”

“TWINK!” Bleh yelled in response. “You think you owned Bleh! I don't think so! Bleh owns you and in about ten minutes we're going to own lower Manhattan!”

KRat produced a small sphere from another box sitting nearby and lowered it into the device. Bleh leaned in and threw a switch inside the box and yelled again... “HA! It's done... New York City is about to be flattened by Bleh! Trademark Flat!” He sneered at Rufus.

“There’s no way we’re going to let you guys take off... There’s no way out before that thing goes off!”

KRat smiled back at Rufus, “Oh I think you’re mistaken... Our ride will be arriving any second. We should be well outside the blast radius in ten, when this thing goes off.”

The morning quiet was slowly broken by the growing thump of helicopter rotor blades. Out of the corner of his eye Rufus saw Joshy come to a screeching halt in the on the grass nearby, but he focused his attention on the growing beat in the air.

Bitchgoddess’ eyes narrowed as she slowly stepped back and then took off running towards a nearby line of trees ringing the area. As she disappeared a helicopter revealed itself, charging down the Hudson River a few feet off the water and then arcing up into the air over the park. It began bearing down on KRat and Bleh. The distinctive AH-64 Apache thundered down towards the clearing. A quick burst from its cannon hit Joshy’s car and it immediately burst into flames. Joshy, Midnightsquirrel and DLack all dove for cover behind some trees. It set down near Bleh and KRat and they ran for the chopper. The large glass side door opened up for the two to fumble their way into the front cockpit.

Over his ear-piece a familiar voice called to Rufus. “Sorry, there Rufus... Guess you guy’s loose this time.”

“Xclusive!” Rufus yelled in sickening realization.

“Yeah, sorry... These two idiots pay better than the agency, and it’s all about the bling... Catch ya in the funny pages.”

With that, the Apache lifted off and turned South out over the water. As he turned, Bitchgoddess emerged from a thicket of bushes behind him and hurled a small object at the aircraft. As soon as he began accelerating away, Bitchgoddess called to EOD on the radio. “EOD... Are those F-22s still in the area?”

“Yeah, they’re still circling”

“Can you get them to target one of our GPS trackers?”

“Give me a minute... I’ll forward the tracker signal to the air controller. He can upload it to the Raptor’s computer.”

Rufus began running for the bomb, sitting at the base of the tower near the abandoned helicopters. Joshy jumped to his feet again (having ducked for cover when his car exploded). The two reached the bomb and peered into the box. The device sat there ominously counting down. “EOD, I’m looking at the device... I’ve got a clock counting down from ten minutes, a keypad and a five character display.” Rufus said as calmly as he could muster.

“I studied the scan you sent me from Los Angeles. It’s a fairly standard design.” EOD called back. “There will be a sequence of characters and numbers that will abort the clock.”

“Can’t we just cut the red wire or something?” Joshy asked as he looked down.

“No.” EOD answered. “Any tampering will cause the device to detonate immediately. You might prevent the thing from going nuclear, but the trigger charge will make a pretty big crater and spread a radioactive cloud across lower Manhattan.”

Joshy thought for a second. “That may be better than leveling lower Manhattan with a nuclear explosion” he said.

“No, wait,” Rufus interrupted. “EOD... A five character sequence to disarm the weapon... What do you think?”

EOD thought for a second. “You don’t think he would be that obvious do you?”

“This is Bleh we’re talking about.”

After a few seconds of silence EOD said hesitantly, “I vote we try it.”

“I do to,” Rufus said as he reached into the box. Taping away on the keypad the characters T W I N K appeared on the display. He hit the enter key and the letters flashed a few times and the counter stopped. Joshy and Rufus looked at the bomb for a couple seconds in disbelief. Zippy, DLack and Midnightsquirrel’s heads all appeared over the box to look as well. Both Rufus and Joshy broke into roaring laughter.

Looking up into the sky, Bitchgoddess watched as a pair of F-22 Raptors streaked by overhead. A missile launched from the lead aircraft and tracked down towards the Apache, now skimming along the water. Flares and bursts of chaff burst from the chopper and it banked hard, but the missile turned to intercept. It struck the chopper and it broke up into fiery pieces, hitting the water.

Bitchgoddess began jumping up and down yelling, “YEAH!! Suck that down BITCH!” The group got up from the bomb and began walking towards where Rufus had left his car. As they neared the car Vetis and Bill came charging up the street and squealed to a stop. The two agents leapt from the car.

“Alright, Rufus, God damnit. Now what the hell is going on! We’re taking this shit over before you guys totally screw it up. The case is ours now!”

Rufus and Joshy looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Postscript:

EOD sat quietly in front of the terminals. All the monitoring scripts had been shit down and he'd backed out of more than a dozen systems that he's gotten his nose into. He sat there, not sure whether to be happy or sad. He pulled a small picture out of his shirt pocket and set it down on the keyboard in front of it. Magicgoo's face smiled back at him from the photo. He smiled back for the first time in three years.

Behind him, Sara crept up and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You did a good job today," She whispered to him with a smile. "She would be proud... Proud like I am."

EOD reached up and touched her hand on his shoulder. "I got it right. I wasn't too late" he said softly.

"It's time to go home," Sara whispered to him as she bent down to eye level with him. He turned to look at her.

"Home?"

"Yeah... Let's go home."