

“Danny! What a nice surprise,” said Arnie kindly. The R & D director always reminded Danny of some benevolent grandfather. A 35-year-old grandfather. With a big bushy squared-off beard.

“Sorry to bug you,” Danny said, sitting down.

“Not at all! I’m sorry we haven’t had a chance to talk lately. Is everything all right? Did you wind up finding a good place to live?”

“Well, good might be stretching it. Let’s put it this way: there are fewer roaches than there were in New York.”

Arnie nodded. “So you’re saving some money then. Good idea.”

“Yeah.”

Danny couldn’t believe he was doing this, but his conscience drove him to make the attempt.

“Listen, Arnie. I had quite a scare yesterday.” He described his conversation with Michelle.

“...And for the sake of allegiance to our star programmer, I probably shouldn’t be telling you this...but I think you should know that Gam takes his hard drive home with him pretty often. That’s why I assumed he’d caught something.”

Arnie smiled. “Well, Danny, I know we must seem awfully strict to you. You must think we’re crazy; I don’t blame you. But if Gam needs some time at home to work on the Master Voice code, I think I can overlook that one security breach. Frankly, I’m more concerned that the project be finished on time.”

“No, that’s not what worries me,” Danny said, shaking his head. “He doesn’t just take it home to work; he takes it home and uses his modem. He exposes himself to every little virus and bug out there, and then he brings his drive back into the lab and connects it to our network.”

“You know this for a fact? I’d normally give Gam credit for being more careful than that.”

“It’s a fact. He brags about it, for God’s sake!”

Arnie leaned back in his high-backed chair, pondering. Danny, a quick thinker and snap decision-maker, would have sighed if he weren't trying to show some courtesy—he sometimes had trouble tolerating people whose mental wheels turned so methodically.

At last Arnie returned to the conversation. “What do you suggest we do, Danny?”

At last.

“OK; actually, I have what I think is a pretty good plan. When I was back in New York, I wrote a program—a really smart anti-virus utility, called SURvIVor. I never could get it sold, but it's done. It's debugged and stable. And it's good.”

Arnie smiled. “I always suspected you were a fine programmer.”

“So my idea is simple,” Danny went on. “Just let me install SURvIVor on Gam's hard drive. That's all I ask. Simple, quick, he'll never know. In the meantime, we can all breathe easier knowing that we're protected in case he gets himself infected.”

Bingo. Score. Bullseye.

But Arnie scowled. “I don't know, Danny...”

That drawn-out thoughtful look again. Danny nearly rolled his eyes.

“I don't think that would represent very good faith on our part, Danny; it certainly does seem like an invasion of privacy.”

Invasion of privacy? Give me a break, Danny thought. What about our sanity?

“But I'll tell you what,” Arnie continued. “Let's take this a bit more democratically. Let's install your program, by all means. But let's ask Gam for permission first.” He smiled, pleased with his Solomonic wisdom. “That way we don't step on anybody's toes.”

Man, you should be in the Guinness Book: World's Biggest Conflict-Avoider.

“Please, Arnie. You know that he'll just say no, and then for the rest of the year he'll despise me for suspecting him. Look, nobody loses with my plan: you call him out of the lab one day, I slip the protection onto his drive.”

“Danny, Gam is a very, very bright young man. He’s also a very promising programmer with a lot riding on the Master Voice project; we’re paying him a considerable sum to write it for us. I don’t think he’d be so careless as to allow his work to be at risk; I think I can give him the benefit of that doubt.”

“But—”

Arnie held up one finger with a Socratic expression. “Danny, I appreciate your concern. You’re showing excellent care for your work, and you’re certainly an asset to the team.”

Danny sensed that that was supposed to be his exit cue. He ignored it.

“Arnie, come on. The guy’s got some psychological screws loose, and we both know it. Just give me five minutes alone—”

“Danny. I think I’ve made my position plain. You’re not to put anything on Gam’s drive, is that clear?”

What’s clear is that you let Gam wipe his feet on you.

“Yes, Arnie. It’s clear.” He stood slowly and rose to leave the room.

“And Danny?”

He stopped in the doorway to see what Arnie wanted.

Arnie waved cheerfully. “Have a happy Halloween tomorrow.”

Danny left Arnie’s office and went back to the lab. Who needs Halloween? he thought. This place already gives me the creeps.

ecretary of State Henry Masso felt like a shepherd in some kind of twisted modern-day Nativity scene, standing there, motionless, for five minutes at a time. He knew he should have been used to photo ops by now, but it was still a trial. Standing on the dais, his hand firmly in that of Ukrainian President Jurenko, he kept his head turned ninety degrees to face the press. Flashbulbs blinded him over and over again, creating a starry field of blurred blue dots everywhere he looked, but he kept the tight diplomatic smile of confidence plastered on his face. Every five seconds he and Jurenko convulsively jerked their clasped hands up and down again, in the slim hopes of making the handshake photos look more spontaneous.

The diorama was for a good cause, though, he reminded himself; appearing on the front page of every daily in the country never hurt a politician. And that much coverage was assured, not just because an accord among the Commonwealth factions was nearing, nor that this third round of delicate summit talks was beginning; no, what made this set of meetings unusual was that they were taking place on American soil. If they could iron out the fine points of the agreement here at home—Jesus, Masso kept thinking, what a PR coup.

He pumped Jurenko's pudgy hand once more just to keep sane. Under the heat of the photo lamps, it was warm; Jurenko was perspiring and beginning to look miserable.

At last, the Secret Service men drifted in front of the cameras. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the press," shouted a deputy from the Press office. "We'll see you again on Thursday at two o'clock. These gentlemen have some work to do." The crowd thinned; Masso was grateful that Jurenko's was the last hand he'd have to clutch. He glanced to his left, where the honchos from Russia, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan stood, no doubt nursing their own aching necks and wrists. But today the spotlight was clearly on Jurenko: Jurenko had the nukes.

The Service staff cleared the salon and ushered the delegates into the adjoining conference room. A long, dark oak table had been carefully prepared; at each place was a stack of transcripts from the previous summit meetings, stacks of legal pads, pens and crisply-sharpened pencils, and a pitcher of water. Next to each seat was a chair with a shorter back, pulled back two feet from the table's edge; these would seat the translators.

Masso, smiling, turned and genteelly ushered President Jurenko through the double doorway. God, but these affairs were delicate; Masso remembered the first of these summits, where there was enough hostility among the participants to poison a platoon.

Masso took his seat, which had been carefully placed a third of the way along the table's edge, neither too prominent nor too artificially out-of-the-way. The others, with their translators and secretaries, were also seated; only Jurenko remained on his feet. He was rubbing his left arm, up and down, hard, shuffling toward his seat with a furrowed brow.

Hoping to alleviate the tense silence, Masso rose slightly and leaned forward. He pointed to Jurenko's arm and grinned. "Didn't squeeze too hard, did I, Vladimir?"

Jurenko was a good English speaker, but responded only by looking up from

the floor for a moment. Then, suddenly, his eyes squeezed shut, tight with pain. With a glottal grunt, he clutched at the back of the chair occupied by the Armenian ambassador, who half-rose at the incivility; for a fleeting moment, Masso was sure there was going to be a confrontation.

But Jurenko was now clawing at his collar, pinched tight around his thick, fleshy neck, and wheezing something in his own language. The translator leapt to his feet and tried to support the President by the elbow. "It's his arm," he shouted to Masso. "Something's wrong with his arm and his side!"

"Jesus, Bernie," Masso shot to his aide. "Get a medic in here." Bernie raced from the room.

Jurenko looked at him, with a glazed expression, for a long moment, still clutching the back of the chair, his speech finally slurring to a stop. The other diplomats stood, but remained where they were; the protocol for this one didn't appear in their foreign-policy manuals. "Heart attack," observed the Russian delegate loudly.

Jurenko never made it further; his wheezing stopped, his knees buckled under him and he fell, clutching his torso in pain and cracking his head on the table edge as he went. Too late, two Secret Servicemen and a bodyguard rushed forward to catch him. The room was filled with sudden commotion and expletives in five languages. The President's arm flopped across the polished shoes of the Belorussian prime minister, who now stood looking downward at it with an almost indignant expression.

"Oh, Jesus," Masso said, looking around frantically for the arrival of the medics. He wondered if Jurenko was dead.