

Isis Crisis

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September 2005

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NewsNet: Obituaries

Connor H Wentworth
born 7th January 2082, Ohio
died Saturday 24th March 2191 in uncertain circumstances

Connor Wentworth was the incomparable founder and chairman of the global financial powerhouse Isis Investments who have interests in areas including space exploration, banking and telecommunications.

Wentworth was famous for his attention to detail and continued insistence on personally signing all Isis contracts with paper on pen...

Monday 19th March 2191

11:22:09 UTC Geneva

The antique pen scratched over paper, dark ink flowing smoothly off the metal tip into the lines that formed Connor Wentworth's signature. A signature worth more than any other's, so distinguished and powerful that the magnate continued to apply the pre-revolution customs of paper contracts.

11:22:12 UTC Boston

Thin globules of ink slowly pulled towards another page, capillary action sucking in the remaining fluid. A lawyer stood back to admire the signature... Connor H Wentworth was elegantly scripted across fine parchment paper.

11:22:23 UTC London

The executives rose from their seats, some with relief others with joy and heartily began shaking hands. Beyond the melee was the man who'd just signed the

leveraged debenture deal, Isis Investments' founder, primary shareholder, chairman and chief executive officer... Mr Connor Wentworth.

11:22:46 UTC Isis Investments Asia HQ, Tokyo

Jerry Gordon had arrived just late enough for the biggest deal of his life to get him sweating. Massaging his moist hands into his trousers, he'd waited nervously outside the absurdly sumptuous executive suite of his client. It wasn't long before a ludicrously clean-cut male assistant was navigating Jerry into the inner sanctum.

Jerry was out of his element, this was business aristocracy whilst he was just a trader. Wentworth was going to finalise Jerry's deal personally, on paper. It was every teenage trader's wet dream, happening for real. With the archaic bits of paper fluttering in one hand he introduced himself to the legendary Mr Wentworth.

Before anyone at Isis Investments had spent any time on Jerry he'd had to make it past various complex bids, convincing algorithms he could deliver sterile, long-life food pods for Isis's space activities. The rest of the deal had been negotiated with functionaries but only Wentworth could make the final authorisation. Jerry respected that, keeping a close eye on your business deals, you never know who would try and take their cut.

After a few pleasantries and the obligatory handshake Wentworth sat to quietly read the papers with an intimidating level of silent concentration. Jerry shifted uneasily in his chair, failing to appreciate the lustre and incredible softness of its leather. Until the deal was closed he had an uncomfortable amount of money owed to various people and some rather large options in hydroponics that would be painful to complete without Wentworth's famous signature.

Jerry looked up to see that Wentworth had finished reading but seemed paused somewhere between putting the papers down and beginning to speak. Wentworth's eyes unfocussed and refocused into emptiness, his body rigid. Nervous endorphins flooded into Jerry's blood as doubts filled his mind, *was this deal gonna happen?* He remembered to breath again only when he saw Mr Wentworth shake his head and nod to Jerry before picking up an old fountain pen to sign the documents.

14:31 UTC Tokyo-London scramjet

Pressed into his shockfoam seat Jerry was doing what he loved, business. His hands were playing out a manic rhythm on his datapad as he shot packets of contractor orders and option completions across the Net to his makeshift network of suppliers. Just as he'd planned vitamins began to be synthesised, fibre bowls were spun and his hydroponic farms started their surreal agriculture. He couldn't absorb the enormity of his deal, he could only make it happen.

15:55 UTC Ramada Hotel, Heathrow

He should have figured that he wouldn't want to work after closing a deal with Wentworth. But he'd booked to close some deals in London after touchdown. They seemed so pointless after he'd seen Wentworth sign away (on paper!) over 400 thou

credits to him, for at least four years. Still, simulated shrimp manufacture did have a good feel, it couldn't hurt to diversify a little more.

Coming off the morning's deal-induced adrenalin Jerry sidled into the gloriously uninspiring hotel bar and commandeered a large table. Whilst broadcasting his best "serve me a drink now" vibe he noted his location on his meeting planner, letting his Thai fake shrimp entrepreneurs know where to find him.

It wasn't long before he was monitoring his nascent food manufacturing efforts on his datapad whilst swirling a Singapore Sling around a glass. Picking at the complimentary pineapple slice he glanced lazily around the effortlessly identical bar. A few clusters of overworked, puffy executives were gesticulating at figures on datapads or hustling sales over voluminous quantities of coffee. Misted glass and strange little semi-walls divided the area into what the designers might have thought were cosy corners whilst disguising the harsh concrete reality of Heathrow.

Looking out for his shrimp guys, Jerry glanced over to where the frosted glass opened into the entrance lobby. A dark haired man, dressed in the nondescript but sharp manner of an executive, nonchalantly walked into the bar area. In a blink he flicked his wrist, turned and began to stride easily back through the lobby.

It wasn't as if Jerry consciously processed and reacted to what he saw the man do. But some fundamental, yet deeply subconscious, part of him made him duck into the corner of the nearest dividing semi-walls. Moments later his body jerked off the ground and his stomach was rammed into his lungs as the microgrenade detonated. Pellets of frosted safety glass rained over Jerry as a chemical smoke began to burn his nose. As his brain overloaded with noise he lay sprawled, face down in the Ramada logo carpet, unable to perceive the chimes and sirens of the hotel's safety systems.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

Sucking on the plastic fumes, Jerry turned onto his back to see ribbons of ceiling tile hanging with tatters of ducts and cabling. His ear drums reverberating he staggered up to see his datapad fritzed in a puddle of cocktail scattered with pebbles of shattered glass.

Looking quickly around Jerry decided he needed to get away from the carnage, fast. Otherwise he'd be locked down by anti-terrorist goons for days as they checked everything over. He had a deal to deliver for Isis Investments, his crowning glory, his baby. Slowly regaining his senses he stumbled into the kitchens.

The kitchens were empty, evacuation procedures were clearly already in full swing. Jerry tried to brush debris from his hair as he headed for a door that looked promising. Through a few twists of corridor and he was picking up speed down a staircase into the hotel basement. A plan was crystallising in his mind, he would head for the hotel opposite and hire a limo from there. They would just think he was a guest leaving on business, no questions and no problems.

He liked his plan. He began to trot through service corridors heading in what he thought was the general direction of the neighbouring hotel. Walking down a corridor that he hoped led to the loading bay Jerry noticed a strange buzzing grow in his ears. It was getting louder, was it some kind of damage caused by the grenade? He rubbed his ears but found no blood on his fingers. Then suddenly the buzzing stopped. Jerry stopped and rubbed his head. Was he ok? The buzzing started again but as Jerry continued walking it got quieter. It wasn't his ears.

Retracing his steps Jerry tried to get closer to the source of the noise. As he approached it became less of a buzz and more of a raw sound. Pushing open a door plastered with voltage warnings he found the source.

A small woman in overalls with dirty blonde hair sat cross-legged on the concrete floor screaming her lungs out. Jerry apprehensively peered into the small room packed with blinking machinery and ropes of cable. Jerry stepped in and the screaming stopped. The woman sucked in a massive gulp of air and then continued. Gently poking her leg with his foot he prompted a pause.

"Erm, excuse me but you ok?"

"No. Does it look like I'm ok?"

"No," replied Jerry slightly taken aback that she could even speak after all that screaming. "Still that's a lot of screaming you're doing there."

"Well my therapist told me to try it when I felt overwhelmed. Normally I just do screaming in our sessions. But for extreme situations we both felt it would be ok to go for it. It really helps."

"I see. Listen we should get out of here."

"You think I'm crazy, admit it. You do, don't you?"

"I don't know what to think, I just managed to avoid being blown up."

"So it was a bomb. You who they were trying to purée?"

Jerry tensed, his jaw muscles clenching painfully.

"Me?"

"Yeah, were you the target?" she replied before taking huge breaths which Jerry took as a sign of imminent screaming.

"Hold on a second. What do you mean am I the target? Why did you say that?"

Interrupting her scream build-up, she looked up at him like the explosion had voided his skull of intelligence. "Well you're covered in broken ceiling tile and dust, you're stumbling around a staff-only area and you're speaking REALLY LOUD. So I reckon

you were very close to the explosion and you're trying to get away from any follow-ups to make sure the job was done."

"But why would anyone want to do that to me?"

"You tell me. Listen I need to keep screaming, I'm feeling very anxious."

"Wait, we need to get out of here. Can't you hear the alarms?"

"Yeah, just like I heard the explosion, but I'm ok so what's the point of evacuating?"

"Well I don't want to be gassed when the counter-terrorism heavies show up."

"Ok, that's a good answer. But I don't want to leave with a target next to me."

"I'm not a target! There's no reason anyone would want to blow me up. A few tricky deals here and there, but nothing underworld. It can't have been me."

"Oh yeah?"

"Listen to me, any outfit willing to send someone to chuck a grenade has got to be a serious organisation. They wouldn't miss and they certainly wouldn't want me, I'm not involved with anything heavy – I'm small time."

"Sure. Whatever you say."

The screaming resumed.

Jerry didn't have time for this nut. He left her and continued his search for an exit.

As the shell-shocked man stumbled away, Turing resumed her screams. She didn't want the trauma of the bomb resurfacing in years to come. She had to expel all the shock and fear immediately. Cleanse herself of the emotion.

It didn't take many more toe-curling screams before she felt emptied. Pulling her hands through her hair Turing gathered her thoughts. A small, boyish woman she had delicate features and straight hair cut short. Her usual dark blue overalls that could only be described as the exact opposite of pressed, overwhelmed her slight body, hiding any signs of womanly curves. Getting up she checked the numerous systems beeping at her from the racks lining the small room's walls. Nothing critical, just a few power surges that had tripped backup power systems. She activated her large systems datapad to run a few more checks.

Turing's hotel management systems looked after a lot of money. Not just Ramada's but each guest had a live bank link on their room account. This made minibars, room service and porn movies easy impulse buys. It also made Turing's systems responsible for a hell of lot of financial and delicate personal information. A quick

check of the primary logs was a sensible precaution she thought. Piping the logs from the servers through some neural filters she checked for anomalies. A few hits floated up her screen, but they were just the power systems reporting the surges. Nothing to worry about.

Just before the check ended a final borderline hit appeared, rising onto her screen in an uncertain shade of orange. The filters thought they might have a distributed denial of service attack logged coming through the wireless channels. Turing tapped the orange bubble, expanding it to show which logs were referenced and a few sample lines from the logs.

Someone's personal id number had been location paged excessively. Looking more closely Turing saw that a number of sources had been repeatedly making silent requests for the location of someone's datapad. Only the paranoid would prevent silent requests from tracking down their datapad. Scrolling down the logs Turing saw that there had been attempts to locate this person made through the hotel's wireless network, regional cellular and satellite networks as well as the usual mesh network.

To get a robust cheap connection most people chose to share. They used mesh networks to connect to other datapad users nearby, only grabbing bandwidth from commercial networks when necessary. Few people would both paying for a location search across all networks, a mesh search alone would usually locate someone within 20 seconds if they were anywhere even slightly populated.

Turing discounted the neural network's diagnosis of attack. None of the hotel's systems had been targets. Still, she kept digging, something odd had been happening as a quick filter on the target id number showed that it had actually been performing a meeting broadcast to help somebody find the owner for a rendezvous. Why search for someone with silent requests when they're broadcasting their location?

Settling down with her datapad Turing began pulling up individual log files. She was going to check this the old fashioned way. She was so engrossed in this intriguing little problem that she didn't even notice that the counter-terrorism squads hadn't shown up yet.

18:17 UTC Hove Pier, Brighton

Jerry leant against a dining room chair, tense and unsettled. Nipping back to what was notionally his home in Brighton had been a mistake. Rachel was being unpleasant. Jerry's failure to communicate with her, his nonchalance and general lack of commitment had burst another pustule of her cold fury.

He wasn't blameless, but every time he spoke she just picked a choice word and turned it against him. It was an extraordinary talent, like a magician pulling infinite rabbits out of a hat. No matter what he said, it was bounced back like a harpoon.

An uneasy truce settled on the flat as she went to answer a vidcall.

He couldn't cope with this now. Whatever was going to happen with Rachel would have to wait. He quickly grabbed an old datapad, a few clothes and slipped out.

His energy low Jerry ambled up the walkway off his flat's floating pier. Wandering along the sea front he powered up the spare datapad and entered his id. A few seconds later he had a message from Rachel: *Walking away like you always do. You're a coward.*

Jerry kept walking.

Wednesday 21st March 2191

10:43 UTC London-Vancouver scramjet

It had taken Jerry two days to settle his suppliers and soothe his shrimp guys. Moving Isis Investment's down payment to all the right accounts had been incredibly time consuming. He'd never figured moving electronic money could be hard work.

He was on his way to see the first food packs come off a production line in Vancouver. The food was an extremely cost effective and nutritious combination of farmed algae and soy proteins. Not that tasty, but you couldn't have everything, there was always a compromise somewhere.

Jerry was coming to the conclusion that the grenade attack in London had been just one of those things. He'd been an unlucky bystander. Producing food for space travel just wasn't controversial.

A high priority message beeped on his datapad as the scramjet cruised over Hudson Bay. A certain Giovanni Ciffolili from Isis's European operations wanted to know when the pulse regulator chips would be delivered. Strange, Jerry was certain he was only contracted to make food items. He despatched a polite reply to that effect and settled in for landing.

12:12 UTC Smaczego Hydroponics, Vancouver

The soya-algae was formed into little cutlets, packed and boxed into little meal packs with fibre bowls of pre-cooked rice. His contract was finally real. Not just numbers and blinks on a datapad. This was better than Wentworth signing a bit of paper, how ridiculous! This moment in this plant was where Jerry could finally believe that the deal was on. Little decals were rolled onto each meal pack sporting an Isis logo, best before date, ingredients and in tiny print down a side of the label 'Produced and packed for Isis by Jerry Gordon Enterprises'. He was a tycoon now, a man with his name on labels.

Extremely satisfied and pleased with himself Jerry left the Polish algae farmers to get on with their work. Not ready to choose a hotel just yet he strolled the streets of Vancouver, each looking glorious no matter how mundane the oriental food stalls or hybrid-hydro buses he passed. Twisting aimlessly up and down alleys Jerry revelled in his success. Years of 'nearly' had finally become worthwhile.

A presence made itself known in the corner of Jerry's eye. He continued his ambling but began to perceive the presence ever more regularly as he turned to look at a Chinese lantern tilting in a gust, or as he paused to watch a girl pet a man's dog. He was being followed.

Jerry's only instincts for this sort of thing came from the films he'd watched. But somehow that was enough for him to be sure that somebody was tracking his movements. He tensed, quickening his pace. Would it matter if his follower realised that Jerry knew of their presence? He didn't care. Diving into the entrance of an indoor market Jerry set about losing himself and hopefully his tail in the process.

Jerry weaved madly through market stalls, searching for a clever way out. Spotting a staircase to another level he leapt up the stairs. Seeing a fire escape he burst through on impulse, slamming the door noisily shut behind him. He tore down the metal steps into the back alley and hit the ground running. He crossed into another building's service area and glanced back. The fire escape's door was opening cautiously. Jerry pushed on, into an underground car park up through the entrance ramp and into a busy street. A few metres away a bus was nearly ready to depart. Jerry pushed himself through the throng clogging the sidewalk and onto the bus just as the doors began their slide shut. His datapad paid the fare as he snuck to a seat obscured by as many surrounding passengers as possible.

Rain began to splash down as the bus left Vancouver's centre and headed for some downtrodden suburbs. Jerry began to relax, sweat drying under the expensive suit he'd bought for his big day at the plant. An edge of fear settled in with the thrill of his escape.

The bus appeared to be losing its will to continue the further it roamed from Vancouver's electric heart. As the number of passengers around Jerry dwindled, so did his spirits. He was left to look out the rain spattered window as brutal shopping precincts scrolled by.

Approaching a park, Jerry decided the bus had done all it could for him. He stepped off, cautiously walking into the park, hoping that no one else would be leaving the bus. With a huff of pneumatics the bus pulled away, Jerry the only passenger to have left.

Relieved he plonked himself onto a bench, ignoring the rain that was softly but surely pattering around him.

What was going on? Who was following him? He had his datapad set to private so it only connected the Net when he told it to. Following him electronically would be tricky, he could drop off the Net for days. Whoever cared about Jerry Gordon's actions was not taking any chances, they'd got a warm body to track his movements. So whoever they were had money, but why follow him?

Pondering his fugitive status Jerry watched an unshaven oriental man stumbling about the park carrying a large black plastic bag. Improbably dressed in a plaid shirt, tweed jacket and flat cap the man kept stopping and doing something. As the man approached, with his curiosity piqued Jerry watched the man stopping to speak to

nobody in an odd language before moving on. Plastic music rustled as the wind flowed over the park.

Resolving that he wouldn't be solving anything from the bench Jerry decided to find himself a hotel.

Jerry stormed into the first chain hotel he could find, he wasn't in the mood for surprises. Through the empty lobby, over a desert of carpet, he came to the check-in desk.

"I need a double room, breakfast included."

"Of course, sir" responded a middle-aged, white man staffing the desk.

"I won't be using a datapad to pay."

"How will you be paying sir?"

"Credit chip." He wanted to stay anonymous, he wasn't sure who or what was looking for him, but he didn't want to be found until he figured things out. He always had a chip or two handy, just in case he wanted to pay for something untraceably.

"Not a problem sir."

Having dealt with the rigmarole of being a non-datapad customer Jerry was soon relaxing in the homogenised comfort of his hotel room. He happily absorbed the corporate logo embroidered into the sheets, towels and bathrobe, reassured by its familiarity. Even the soap was branded, as were the curtains and carpet, Jerry loved it. Soothed by the brand uniformity, and some of the mini bar's finest whisky, Jerry was soon drifting into sleep.

He awoke to receive his breakfast and a lawyer. Nothing was making much sense as he tried to pour desperately needed coffee into a cup while attempting to grasp how the suit had found him.

"I'm sorry to disturb your breakfast Mr Gordon," the lawyer said most insincerely. "But I am here to represent the interests of what we are, for the moment, calling Mr Connor Wentworth Five."

"What? How did you find me?" He'd only got one sip of scalding, burnt coffee and he had a mid-Atlantic legal-eagle spewing weird shit at him.

"Hold it," Jerry said rather louder than he was planning to. "I'm afraid I do not accept legal representations directly for obvious liability reasons." He was thinking on his feet but was pleased to see the suit pause in a manner that indicated a willingness to hear the rest of the excuse. "We are currently in the midst of changing our west coast people, so er, I'll inform you in the next few days of our new arrangements."

“I’m sorry sir but our interest cannot risk waiting that long,” began the lawyer, rolling his shoulders back in preparation for firing another round of arguments at Jerry. He cut in before it was too late.

“Do you not understand that I will not accept your representation for my own legal protection? You either deal with my people or nobody.”

The legal mouth opened but no sound left it. The mouth shut and there was a slightly confused look down at the shoes. Resolve returned, a button was pressed and the lawyer had given Jerry his details.

“I look forward to hearing from your legal team very soon sir. Good day.” And the lawyer was gone, leaving Jerry to contemplate an extremely strange past 24 hours along with his still scalding coffee and scrambled eggs.

Having devoured everything that looked edible Jerry settled back onto the bed with his datapad. The top window on its display was a calling card from his legal visitor:

22.03.2191

Richard B Smithson
Attorney-at-Law

Thomas, Smithson and Partners

Called to see
Mr Jerry Gordon
Regarding our client
Mr Connor H Wentworth Five

Connor Wentworth? Five? Connor H Wentworth Five? What the hell did that mean? Did they mean the fifth? Whichever Wentworth it was shouldn’t Isis be dealing with it? And how could there be a problem, he hadn’t even delivered his first batch of space food yet... Jerry’s business consciousness felt deeply unsettled.

Thursday 22nd March 2191

11:23 UTC Hove Pier, Brighton

Jerry slunk back into the flat, half hoping to find Rachel, half wanting her to be nowhere near or at least asleep. He needed more credit chips from his stash inside the casing of an antique hard drive.

“Jerry, do you know why Connor Wentworth would vidcall me?”

Jerry tried not to jump. “Hi honey, aren’t you gonna give me a kiss?”

“Didn’t you hear me? Connor Wentworth vidcalled me this morning, THE Connor Wentworth as in Mr Isis I’m-a-trillionaire Wentworth.”

Jerry froze as the cogs in his brain finally engaged. “Wha.. how... why?”

“That’s what I just asked.”

“Listen Rachel, I don’t know what’s going on but I signed that big deal I wanted so bad.”

“With Isis for the space food?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my God! That’s amazing Jerry, I’m so proud of you.”

Now she gets sweet. Women. “Listen it hasn’t worked out so simple. Some weird shit is happening. I’ve been followed, I’ve had legal representations, strange messages from Isis Europe and there’s a slim possibility that someone tried to have me killed.”

“Killed? What do you mean?”

“It’s a slim possibility, I don’t really know. I mean if the killers were serious I wouldn’t be here so it could have been a coincidence. The other stuff I’m sure about though.”

“Because of the Isis deal?”

“Well the heat only began once I had Wentworth’s autograph.”

“Hmmm. So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, I’ll figure something out. Let me think.”

“You could ask for my help...” her voice tailed off.

Why this was a problem for Jerry, he wasn’t sure, but asking for help wasn’t something he was good at.

“So what time did Wentworth call?” Jerry replied, studiously ignoring Rachel’s look.

“Around 9.15, I’ve got the call archived if you want?”

Jerry knelt beside Rachel as the call came up on her main screen. She sat, crossed-legged in her chair, left foot jiggling with nervous energy as she activated the archived file.

“Hello?”

“Good morning. Is that Rachel Giddens?”

“Yes it is, how can I help?”

“My name is Connor Wentworth and I’d like you to work for me.”

There was a pause as Rachel digested what was going on. “Doing what?” she finally uttered.

“Data analysis, consultancy and project-specific work. You’d be paid handsomely, I’d offer you double your current daily rate paid in whatever currency you like.”

“What sorts of projects are we talking about? I only do interface design and usability analysis.”

“I would rather not discuss our business any further through this medium. However rest assured that your resume perfectly matches our requirements.”

“Ok. Well how long would this engagement be for and when do you need me to say yes?”

“Your contract with us would be indefinite, until the job is done. I expect to hear from you today. My private number is in your inbox now. Good day.”

As the archived call faded from the screen Jerry turned Rachel’s chair to face him.

“That’s a lot of money for you but something tells me this is about me.”

“Same here.”

Taking over the controls Jerry pulled up Wentworth’s private number and dialled.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Why not? He’s my client.”

An agent-based receptionist answered and took Jerry’s details. The beautifully computer-generated receptionist slid off the main screen as Wentworth’s perfectly groomed features came into focus.

“Mr Gordon, what a pleasant surprise.”

“I just thought I’d give you a progress report on our contract.”

“You have no rights to Brasilia spaceport. Nothing was ever signed and you don’t stand a chance of securing access. Our dominance of the space market will continue.”

“Excuse me, what?”

Wentworth's voice picked up. "I'm surprised you had the nerve to call. Do you really think I'm going to cut a deal with you after what you've done?"

"I'm sorry but there must be some kind of mistake here. I'm Jerry Gordon, contracted to supply you with sterile food pods for your space activities."

"Why are you denying it now? My food supply agent is John Pilt. I wish nothing to do with people who do business like you."

"This makes no sense."

"Good day to you sir."

"Hang on a second. Why are you trying to hire Rachel Giddens?"

"That is none of your concern."

"It is, she works for me."

"Not for much longer." And that was it, Wentworth terminated the call.

"I need your help Rachel."

Thursday 22nd March 2191

15:49 UTC Ramada Hotel, Heathrow

Jerry and Rachel were approaching the rear entrance to the Ramada Hotel. They'd loaded up on credit chips and clothes before making a rapid retreat from Hove Pier.

Jerry had explained to Rachel his experience with the grenade as they sat on the train to Heathrow. Staring out the huge window, coffees steaming on the little table between them Rachel had expressed doubts about his plan.

"So why are we going back there?" Rachel had asked.

"One, I don't think whoever is after me would expect me there."

"Ok, that makes sense."

"Two, I'm expecting a large delivery from my suppliers in Vancouver to arrive at Heathrow soon. I want to check on it."

"Wouldn't Wentworth expect that?"

"No, because the shipment is actually destined for Switzerland, I've only just redirected it. I want to see if anyone comes to screw with my stock."

"You think maybe sabotage?"

“Maybe. I’m supposed to deliver this stuff to the Isis space centre in Ukraine. But my contract states that before the final packaging I will present all my production for inspection in Switzerland.”

“All your production? That’s a lot.”

“Yeah, I know. Still what I don’t understand is why we couldn’t do the inspection at the space centre in Ukraine.”

“It is a bit weird. Perhaps it’s hard to get good inspectors in Ukraine?”

“Maybe, but if Isis really needed them there they could pay enough. I don’t know why they inspect in Switzerland but I just have a feeling that’s where we need to be.”

“Are you sure?” Rachel had sounded decidedly unconvinced. “Why don’t you go back to Tokyo to talk to Wentworth in his office. Or just got to the Isis office in London?”

“Because I have a lawyer from Wentworth after me,” Jerry’s voice had begun to pick up, “I’ve been followed around the world, possibly had an attempt on my goddam life and if you don’t quite remember this morning Wentworth denied I even worked for him!” As he finished Jerry had realised he’d spoken rather louder than he’d wanted to, heads were starting to turn. He had lowered his head across the small table and said quietly “I’m sorry Rachel. This is a lot for me to take in, one minute I had the deal of my life, now I’m on the run.”

Jerry had felt a comforting warmth as Rachel nodded her head in understanding and had leant forward to hold his hand. “You’re right honey, we can’t go to Isis.”

So what do we do? Jerry had let the motion of the train and Rachel’s gentle grip on his hand ease his worries until they got to Heathrow. *She’s calling me honey again...*

Now they were deep in the airport’s concrete geography. Hand in hand Jerry and Rachel came to the Ramada Hotel’s service entrance. Jerry wasn’t quite sure what to do but he thought he somehow needed to know more about the attack. He looked over at Rachel, gorgeous in tight black jeans and a dark sweater clingy in just the right places. He re-focussed his attention on getting into the hotel.

Somebody had helpfully left a wedge of paper between the door and it’s frame letting Jerry and Rachel walk right into the working heart of the Ramada. Walking slowly down the corridor Jerry tried to remember the path he’d taken to escape the hotel after his narrow escape from the grenade. He’d been shaken, but more lucid than that screaming woman.

That screaming woman!

“I’ve got an idea,” Jerry said excitedly, pulling Rachel behind him. Through a little trial and error Jerry got them back to where he thought he had first heard the

screams of the little woman. Rachel was wearing a patient and accepting face but he wasn't sure how long it would last.

"Ok, we need to find a smallish woman. She has short blondish hair and screams."

"What?"

"She's into shouting or something. She has a therapist who told her to do it."

"I'm not going to ask why we need her but I think you mean primal screams."

"Screams for sure. Let's look."

They began opening doors and banging on the locked ones. As a man in overalls dwarfed by his trolley of laundry wheeled by they ducked into an empty room.

"There's no one here," said Rachel.

"We've got to keep looking, she's my only inside link here."

As the squeaks of the laundry trolley receded they continued trying doors. Jerry was racking his brain trying to think of anything else that could help them find the woman... a name, a room, anything.

"You!"

Jerry's heart jumped as the little woman stared at him in disbelief.

"What are you doing back here?" she demanded.

"erm, hi," Jerry started uncertainly. "Listen, I'm Jerry and I was wondering if you could help me."

"Help you and get a grenade for the pleasure? No thanks."

"We don't know I was the target."

"We don't know? We don't know!" she nearly screamed. "Everyone else in the bar was killed. The counter-terrorism squads didn't show up for twenty-five minutes giving somebody enough time to cover their tracks."

Thrown by the volume of this small woman's voice, Jerry paused before asking "What do you mean?"

"I mean that when I checked my systems I found an input from a damaged camera. It showed some people looking like police removing a datapad and shreds of clothing from near the back of the room. An area where someone might have escaped the blast, a place close to the kitchen doors which would have led you down into the service corridors."

“So?”

“The people removing your busted datapad were there only ten minutes after the blast, fifteen minutes before the real police showed. They were a clean-up crew for the assassin. When the cops finally showed up they quickly decided that there had been no survivors. There was no datapad to examine, no way to know you might have been the target.”

Jerry turned to look at Rachel. He had been the target, no doubt about it.

What an incredible colour your eyes are. Jerry thought as he looked for support in Rachel’s green eyes.

“Hang on a second...”

Jerry and Rachel turned to watch the woman whip a huge datapad out of her utility bag.

Looking up from her datapad, a glint in her eye, the woman asked Jerry a question which would confirm everything. Not that he knew. “Is your PID four three two two dot zero six eight one dot zero zero seven two dot nine four nine eight?”

“Why... How... Yes. How can you know that? I’ve locked my PID down...”

“It was a guess.”

“A guess?” Rachel wasn’t convinced. “You can’t guess a PID, there’s trillions of possible numbers there.”

“I didn’t guess the number. I had the PID, I just guessed it was his.”

“So?” Jerry demanded impatiently.

“So I know who is after you. First things first though. I’m Turing Smith, Senior Systems Engineer here and you are?”

Without even thinking Jerry clicked into business networking mode. “I’m Jerry Gordon, this is my partner Rachel Giddens. High quality food production is my line of work and Rachel...”

“Ok, ok, ok. Step into my office.” Turing turned and led them to the systems closet and shut the door behind them. “I’m afraid not much to offer you here except a floor to sit on.”

“That’s fine, just tell us who’s after Jerry,” asked Rachel as she plonked herself down cross-legged on the concrete floor.

“Well it was a bit of a puzzle. I was checking the systems for anomalies after the grenade attack and something popped up. My filters thought it was a distributed

denial of service attack but it wasn't. A number of entities with basically unlimited resources were attempting to find something through all available network nodes."

"Find what?" Jerry asked nervously.

"Your datapad. Which was strange as you were actually in meeting broadcast mode."

"I had a thai fake shrimp meeting."

"A what?" Rachel asked looking rather unimpressed.

"Nevermind. So why were people trying to find me if I was in broadcast?"

Turing looked from Rachel to Jerry, intrigued by the couple's dynamics. Glancing back down at her datapad she continued. "I'm not really sure but I think the people after you wanted to make very sure they weren't going to lose you. They were sending so many location requests that my filters nearly thought it was an attack. A *distributed* denial of service attack."

Turing paused ominously. Rachel and Jerry looked blankly back at her.

"Distributed means that the attack was coming from multiple locations simultaneously. But this was no attack, none of the source locations had tried to hide their identities. They were all making valid requests for data, most attacks just send rubbish to overload the systems. They really wanted to know where you were."

"Who's they?" Jerry probed nervously.

"I've done a number of traces and tried a few little tricks to confirm this and I'm certain I'm right. 'They' are Isis Investments."

Jerry just shook his head.

"There's more though," Turing added somewhat cheerfully. "The multiple locations were all different centres for Isis: Tokyo, Rome, London, Seattle, Kiev and so on. All these locations kept searching for you throughout the attack apart from one. Rome was sending search requests until about twelve seconds *before* the grenade detonated. Rome's location requests only started again when the cleanup crew arrived."

"So whoever was doing the location search from Rome was in on the attack?" said Jerry.

"This makes no sense," said Rachel. "Why would one part of Isis try to kill you and others just be looking for you?"

"Why would Wentworth deny that I just signed a huge contract with him? Why would his lawyer want me? Why would anybody want me killed?" Jerry moaned, throwing his hands up in despair.

“It is pretty weird,” agreed Turing. “I got pretty curious over this. I couldn’t find out whose personal number they were tracking but I could look up the other way.”

“What do you mean?” said Rachel.

“Well,” began Turing with pride. “I decided to take a look at Isis. There’s not always too much to do at the hotel so I had some time to whip a few searches together. I mean you always hear about Wentworth and his gazillions of credits from Isis, why not do a little digging? So I sent some realtime searches out and a few background ones too. I didn’t get much on the background, just the usual stuff about Wentworth still using paper, self-made man etc. The realtime stuff, was how shall I put it... bizarre. Take a look.”

Turing turned her datapad’s screen to Rachel and Jerry. An incredible visual search result interface showed various bubbles and sparklines bobbing to the global flow of data. The names of major Isis divisions labelled a number of the larger shapes, lines of money flashing between them. Occasional bursts of red between the bubbles, obliterated the smaller animated interactions.

“Sweet interface. I dig.” Nodded Rachel appreciatively as Turing flashed a proud smile. “What are the flashes?”

“Yeah that’s one of the weirdest bits. They’re major legal actions by one Isis group against another. Most of the money moving between the groups is settlements for the legal actions. When I zoomed out to show suppliers and subsidiaries to the main groups I found Isis groups suing suppliers to their fellow groups, subsidiaries switching ownership between groups and loads of transactions that just don’t make sense. For example the Isis catering group buying space stuff and the Isis defence group getting into financial services.”

“It makes no sense,” muttered Jerry dropping his head into his hands.

Rachel and Turing stared, mesmerised by the hypnotic movements of the datapad’s search results. Huge amounts of money speared between the glowing figures. Legal bombs detonated red, stalling other activities. Stock from suppliers stuttered up to their customers in blue lines. Numbers shots up one side of the screen, desperately trying to show the scale of what was unfolding.

Trying to pull himself together, Jerry turned to Turing. “Thank you for your help.”

“No problem, it saved me quite a boring afternoon.”

“Rachel, we need to track down my shipment,” Jerry said as he rose from the floor.

“Uh-huh,” Rachel muttered staring into the datapad.

“Listen,” Turing said nervously. “Could you guys use some more help? It’s just that I kind of want to see this Isis thing through now I’ve found so much weird stuff.”

Rachel looked up and replied in a snap "Sure, welcome aboard."

So much for joint decisions thought Jerry.

19:20 UTC FedEx European Logistics Node, Heathrow Airport

Nestled in a drainage ditch Jerry, Rachel and Turing were nervously watching their datapads. Sixty metres away, past a barbed wire fence, through a warehouse wall and a generous helping of alarm sensors lay the first four tons of Jerry's space food, just in from Vancouver. All around Jerry's cargo palletes hundreds of snails were crawling.

It turned out that Turing had a rather unusual hobby in engineering snails. Whilst brainstorming how to catch any intruders Jerry and Rachel had been stunned to hear Turing offer her snails as an option. But in fact the snails had made an extraordinary amount of sense once she had explained. In less than ninety minutes Turing had gone home to retrofit hundreds of her little friends with enhanced sensor software. Genetically engineered with hyperactive nervous systems particularly suited to interfacing with silicon, Turing's snails were slimy little sensors which could pass any alarm system undisturbed. Rachel had been right to accept Turing's help.

A quick upgrade to Jerry's account with FedEx allowed him to watch a video clip of his shipment arriving and being stored for the night. From this Turing calculated a local grid and set the snails on their merry way. Mesh networked and battery enhanced the snails were narrowcasting continuously to their datapads. Rachel had an eerie electro-magnetic visual of the area while Turing had sonar and Jerry had the pheromone readout. Like a digital aurora borealis background noise wafted in purple, turquoise and blues across their displays.

"So who's trying to get your stuff?" asked Turing.

"I don't know. Nothing may happen or someone may try and sabotage, destroy or rob my stuff. Who knows the way things are going," Jerry replied his eyes glued to his datapad.

"This is the only lead we've got. Either we see what happens to Jerry's stock or we're looking at investigating the whole of Isis Investments," Rachel added.

"Yeah, Isis is a big bit to handle. Well you can bet your ass that if anyone tries anything with your stuff my snails will spot them," said Turing.

"But then what?" asked Rachel sneaking a look at Jerry.

Lit by the submarine colours of his display Jerry's face took an otherworldly appearance. His sharp nose and narrow cheeks softened by the gentle light, Rachel remembered the attraction she felt when they had first met at a midnight concert on Brighton beach. He'd been dancing to the bongo rhythm with an energy she'd never seen before. Spotting her watching him Jerry had grabbed her and pulled her into the mad swirl of dancers. The rest was history, as they say. She had found herself

discovering a new warmth for Jerry in the past hours. Looking from his lips to his eyes she realised he was frowning.

“What’s wrong honey?”

“You’ve got a point. What do we do if we actually do spot someone?” said Jerry.

Finally catching Jerry’s eyes, Rachel reassured as best she could. “We’ll cross that bridge if it comes.”

Feeling more positive about her relationship with Jerry than she had in years, Rachel turned back to her screen. She blinked, shook her head of romantic thoughts and took a second long hard look. “I think I’ve got something.”

“What?”

“Let me confirm.” Rachel quickly zoomed in on a rhythmic flutter of weak electromagnetic fields. Running a few filters she confirmed her suspicions. The fields were changing too regularly to be background noise. With a few taps she passed the grid location to the others who immediately began zooming and running their own filters.

“I’ve got nothing,” said Jerry.

“Hang on,” said Turing tapping her screen furiously. “Confirmed, I’ve got faint sonic pulses.”

“Still no pheromones,” Jerry said, watching Rachel’s highlighted area move across his screen.

“Whatever it is, this isn’t a person,” said Turing.

“It’s getting closer to the palettes,” Rachel reported.

“Goddam. I want to see this thing,” Jerry whispered furiously. Giving up on his datapad he peered at the other two as their contact moved to the centre of the grid where his food pods lay helpless.

“I thought visuals might be useful so I took the liberty of borrowing these fellas from my neighbour,” said Turing pulling a large white plastic box from her bag. Inside two shadowy shapes began zooming around their plastic prison.

Jerry and Rachel stared in disbelief as Turing pulled out two giant cockroaches. Without batting an eyelid she plugged tiny cameras into sockets protruding from each cockroach’s carapace. After programming in the location of their mysterious intruder she let her insect friends go. Antennae fluttering the cockroaches shuttled off after a non-existent scent trail injected electronically into their brains.

“Some neighbours you must have,” Jerry gasped.

"I admit, they're not as cuddly as snails. But they're bigger and faster. Still we couldn't afford to cover the whole area with them, you don't want to know how much these engineered giant ones cost." Turing said turning back to her readout.

"Well they better be quick as that thing is nearly at Jerry's palettes," motioned Rachel pointing to the new coordinates of the invader.

"Sheeeeit," Jerry exclaimed. Giving up on the snails' pheromone sensors Jerry accessed the cockroaches' video feeds. They were streaming from the microserver Turing had stowed in a case along with a snail sensor pickup she had connected to the wire fence. Flicking on low-light enhancements Jerry anxiously watched a split screen display. "Where is it?" he asked impatiently.

"Just got to the palettes. It's stopped moving," answered Rachel.

"I can't see it on the video feeds."

"We need to tilt the cameras. It's above the cockroaches. I'm pulling them back now," said Turing.

Jerry peered at the video as his camera-insects scuttled into their new positions.

"What the...?" Jerry turned his datapad to the others. A sort of robotic hummingbird without wings was hovering by a palette of Jerry's food. Its narrow beak was pushing through the outer wrapping of the shipment.

"They're injecting something into your food Jerry," Rachel whispered sharply.

"Any chance we can track the source of that robot thing?" Jerry asked Turing.

"One sec, let me see."

As Turing's hands became a blur on her datapad Jerry and Rachel watched the robotic saboteur methodically injecting as many pods on each palette as possible.

"My food," moaned Jerry.

"Don't worry," said Rachel. "It can't get to more than the outer pods for each palette. We'll track down whoever's controlling it and give them payback"

"Ok well I don't know exactly where the controller is but they can't be far," said Turing confidently. "There's no cellular or satellite link to the bird. Could be local wireless but my sniffer isn't picking up anything unusual and I doubt FedEx would leave their nodes open for piggybacking."

"So?" asked Jerry, baffled by the jargon stew.

"So I think it's being controlled by a local radio controller on frequency hop. The range can't be more than a few hundred metres, tops."

“That’s the lucky break I need,” said Jerry. “Turing you stay here, clean up your zoo. Rachel and I are going to find our new friend.”

Scurrying along the ditch in a running crouch, Jerry scoured the area for potential spots where a robot controller might hide. With the logistics complex brightly lit on their left and a wasteland on their right Jerry looked ahead to the next compound. It looked equally secure and well lit so they turned left around the edge of the FedEx complex. They hurried down the narrow patch of land between the compounds, dodging massive clumps of weeds.

Heart thumping in his throat Jerry pounded to the front of the industrial complexes. He ducked behind a scraggly bush at the edge of a car park hedge. Rachel pulled up behind him, barely out of breath. Unlike Jerry she actually used her gym membership, he ruefully admitted to himself.

“Where could it be?” she asked.

Jerry looked over the road at the TNT shipping centre, the odd truck reversing for loading in the orange haze of sodium lights. He looked up and down the arterial road connecting the complexes to their mothership, the airport whose distant roar they could still make out over the grunts of fork lifts and HGVs.

Irregularly lit the road connected to a huge roundabout one hundred metres to their right. To their left it continued into the dark, the odd spark of light hinting at its direction.

“Not the roundabout,” Jerry said. “Either they’re inside a compound, and we can forget about it, or they’re somewhere off this road.” *Or Turing is wrong and we’re screwed* Jerry didn’t add.

“Let’s go.” Rachel sprang forward effortlessly speeding towards the first patch of shadow on the road to their left. With a puff Jerry followed her.

They jogged down the road twice as far they thought they needed to. Turing messaged them that the robot was injecting the last few palettes.

“Nothing,” Jerry panted. “We won’t be able to track the robot as soon as it leaves our grid. It could fly all the way to New York for all we know.”

“Not likely. We’ve still got time. Let’s head back slowly, maybe we’ll spot something.”

“What else can we do?” said Jerry despondently.

They walked back towards the FedEx centre, past shuttered and derelict warehouses. Jerry couldn’t believe that three days ago he had signed the biggest deal of his life. Now he was walking through a Heathrow industrial estate in the middle of the night trying to understand why it had all gone so wrong. Still, it was pleasantly reassuring to have Rachel with him. He stared blankly at a small food services building, closed for the night, thinking how he would take Rachel to their favourite restaurant in Brighton, if he had any credits left after all this.

Something didn't fit. He gave the building a second look. Holy... that must be it. He ducked quickly and discretely called Rachel.

"I think we've found it."

"Where?"

"Do you see that van?" Jerry pointed to a black, low slung hybrid-hydro van in the loading bay.

"Yeah, so?"

"Their vans are bright green, I saw them load my scramjet on the way to Tokyo."

"Wow." Rachel was quietly impressed with Jerry's sharpness. "What are we going to..."

"Follow me." Jerry ran towards the gates, pushing them open as he noticed a burnt-out lock. *30 seconds until the robot is done* messaged Turing as they crept towards the van. Parked nose out of the bay, the van sat unsuspectingly as Jerry and Rachel approached. Slipping quietly to the van's rear doors they paused to listen. Pressing his ear to the door Jerry could just about make out some terrible electronic music and even worse singing.

"Ready?" he asked, grabbing the door handles.

Rachel nodded and Jerry heaved the doors open.

An obese man surrounded by screens sat on a stool looking slack jawed at Jerry and Rachel.

"Good evening, I'm Jerry Gordon and you're screwing with my stock."

The man's three chins worked up and down noiselessly. Beef jerky wrappers formed a confetti around his enormous chair. He looked from his main screen to Jerry and back again, joystick lying still in his hands.

"This... this never happens," he finally managed to utter.

"Well I guess today's your lucky day," said Rachel.

Jerry looked around the van's compartment. Apart from boxes of beef jerky, a smoothie blender and a few racks of computers Jerry noticed a second bird robot lying on a small workbench.

"Well fancy that, you've got another one right here." Jerry pulled out his datapad and began replaying the video the cockroaches had captured. "I think we've got you pretty well strung up, wouldn't you say?"

A look of confusion spread across the man's immense face. His technical curiosity got the better of him. "How could you possibly have got that?" he asked in a big, throaty voice.

Jerry glanced at the man's screens and saw that the robot was hovering a few metres from the last palette of his stock.

"How you got caught is your problem but sometimes it pays to look out for the little people," Jerry said deviously.

"Down to business," Rachel said menacingly. In different circumstances Jerry would have found her tone more than a little enticing. "What are you doing to the stock?"

The robot's controller sat motionless.

"Tell me, now," Rachel barked making both Jerry and the controller jump.

"Adding benzene," the man replied without delay.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Rachel teased. "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"No, no. I don't know why, honestly, I don't."

"Who are you?"

The man gulped uneasily, his hands twitching on the joystick. "Sam the Robot Man."

"Nice. So why does Sam the Robot Man want to inject anything into our food pods?"

"I don't know."

Jerry decided to twist the screws. He stepped into the van and crouched in front of the man in his chair. "Listen Sam, we don't want anything to happen but you need to help us out here. If you hold back she'll get mad and I won't be able to control her. Do you understand?"

Jerry looked meaningfully from Rachel, who was holding an impressively icy glare, back to the man's distressed face. *Just like in the films* Jerry thought to himself.

"You don't know or you don't want to say?" Rachel asked pointedly.

"I really don't know," the man pleaded as Rachel took a step up into the van. "I swear I don't know. I was hired to do this job. I was just told to inject benzene into food pods in a particular FedEx shipment."

"And you feel good about what you do, Sam?" Jerry asked in mock disgust.

"I, I.... I.... I don't." Sweat beaded on Sam's face as he sat pathetically amid his food and robots.

"Who hired you?" Rachel snarled.

She's good Jerry thought, seeing a new side of his partner.

"I won't say, I won't say, I won't," Sam said, more as a way of convincing himself than Rachel or Jerry.

"Oh you won't?" Rachel glared.

Jerry shook his head at Sam. "Bad idea Sam. Not smart. Not smart at all."

Rachel whipped a frightening tool out from under her sweater and took another step towards Sam who began squirming.

"Tell me now."

"Connor Wentworth the Third."

"The Third? Are you sure?" demanded Jerry.

"Well it was all a bit weird, I didn't think Wentworth would expose himself in grey operations like this but I got an authenticated vidcall from him. The caller id was for C Wentworth 3 so I figured he must be the third."

"I could have sworn there's only ever been one Connor Wentworth," Jerry said.

"You telling us the truth Sammy?" Rachel teased.

"Yes, I promise, I swear."

Jerry pulled out his datapad and retrieved the calling card the lawyers had left him in Vancouver. "Connor H Wentworth Five," Jerry read out.

"What do you think?" Rachel asked, holding her stare on Sam.

"I'm not sure but something very strange is going on. Isis divisions are attacking each other, we're getting numbered Wentworths..." Jerry searched through his previous communications with Isis as he was negotiating the food production deal. "I never communicated with Wentworth until I signed the deal. Still I've got no mention of anything but plain Connor H Wentworth until the lawyers in Vancouver. Let's get back to Turing and see if she can find out anything more."

"First we need to decide what to do with Sam," said Rachel.

"Of course. What do you think Sam?" Jerry asked.

“I won’t say anything, I won’t do anything, I’ll do nothing. Don’t hurt me.”

Jerry looked at Rachel and she made a show of regretfully putting her weapon away.

“Wait there,” said Jerry ducking out of the van. He returned a minute later to an appreciative smile from Rachel. Holding the van’s catalyst socket, essential to its power, in his hands Jerry grinned to a groan from Sam. “Sam, I’m afraid you’re going to be walking home tonight.”

Friday 23rd March 2191

04:12 UTC Heathrow Village

High on the success of their plan Jerry, Rachel and Turing had quickly packed up and made the short drive to Turing’s tiny home.

Buried under a hump of grass, Turing’s house hid from the aircraft noise and seemed like the obvious place for a snail fanatic to live. Stepping down to the front door, they ducked into the curved main room. A cosy vault decorated in earth tones, half the room was given to glass tanks filled with snails. Jerry peered at the snails, their slick antennae waving helplessly against the glass walls of their prison.

“Tea or coffee?” Turing asked from through an archway.

“Tea for both of us,” Rachel answered as she settled into the one couch in the room.

“Where on earth did you get that weapon?” Jerry asked quietly as he snuggled in next to Rachel.

“I borrowed it from Turing, I thought it might prove useful.” Rachel grinned.

“Turing has weapons?” Jerry said incredulously.

“No, it’s just a tool for inserting new chips into her snails’ shells. Harmless, but it looks good wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m glad you’re here, babe,” Jerry said softly; before he got a chance to think too much. He looked at Rachel, her soft auburn hair, her green eyes and the smile that was playing across her perfect lips.

“Here you go,” Turing said cheerfully handing them two snail shaped mugs. Pulling out an old plastic crate she flipped it over and plonked down on it opposite Rachel and Jerry.

“So what’s next?” she asked blowing steam from her mug.

“I’m not sure,” said Jerry.

“Well let’s look at what we know,” suggested Rachel.

“Ok, good idea. First, I’ve got benzene in some of my food pods,” said Jerry.

“Benzene? That’s not good.” Turing said.

“I didn’t think it would be. What’s bad about it?”

“It’s very carcinogenic,” Turing said. “You hear about it as an industrial pollutant. I think it can kill you if you breathe in the fumes.”

“Ok. So Wentworth Three wanted my food to be contaminated with something bad. Why?” Jerry pondered. “Did he want some space jocks to get ill?”

“No. He wanted you out.” Rachel said with a hard certainty in her voice. “He must of known that the shipment was on its way for inspection. If the Isis inspectors had found an industrial pollutant in your food pods they would have surely terminated your contract.”

“It kind of makes sense,” Jerry said, sipping on his tea. “Ah, ah hot.”

“Your idea would fit, Rachel” Turing added. “My searches showed Isis fighting with their suppliers, this could be the kind of thing they’re up to.”

“Still it doesn’t explain why Connor Wentworth is adding numbers to his name.” Rachel said.

Everyone fell silent pondering Wentworth’s changing name, cupping their snail-shaped mugs.

“Turing, can I see that Isis search on your datapad again?” Jerry asked.

“Sure, no problem.” Turing opened one of her bags and handed Jerry her huge datapad. She then began returning her snails to their homes, shovelling them with her hands from the plastic transport crates. Rachel watched, slightly revolted by the mass of slimy flesh plopping into the tanks.

Jerry was instantly engrossed by the pulsing movements of money and cherry blasts of legal actions. His eyes sucked in the massive extent of Isis’ operations. How we wished he could have an empire like Wentworth’s. He worked hard, he played the game, why did his first really big deal have to flop? It just wasn’t fair. How had Wentworth put together his financial mammoth?

“Why would Isis being attacking itself?” Rachel asked, watching Jerry getting pulled in by the datapad’s visuals.

“Maybe this is some kind of highly elaborate tax avoidance scam,” said Jerry thinking aloud.

“Aren’t you giving Wentworth a bit too much credit?” said Rachel sceptically. “I know he’s your hero but come on...”

“What if all these numbers after his name is some kind of trick,” Jerry’s voice picked up as he warmed to his own idea. “What if he’s created multiple identities to shield himself from legal or tax liabilities? It would be a brilliant move. Think about it – he’s himself but with a number after his name, not the same person legally at all.”

Turing and Rachel weren’t buying it.

“It might be a stretch but what else explains all this?” Jerry said, waving the datapad at them.

Turing shrugged and stared into her tea.

“Jerry, do we need to explain everything? Let’s focus on your deal. Can we save it?” Rachel said, laying her head onto his shoulder. Jerry couldn’t help taking a deep sniff of the perfume that gently wafted up from her hair. He let out a tiny sigh.

“Ok, let’s focus.” The energy of the night was leaving him. “I have my first shipment with about a third of the pods contaminated. It’s due to leave for Switzerland tomorrow. I don’t know if anybody at Isis wants my food and I have several versions of Wentworth after me in one way or another. What else...”

Jerry risked a quick network connection to see if he had any messages. He did.

“Here’s the news,” Jerry began. “My guys in Vancouver say some Isis subsidiary tried to impound my assets there for breach of contract. There’s been a five day stay of the order but they don’t think there’s any more tricks to hold the Isis thugs off after that. In other news Isis Rome say that I will suffer grave consequences if I reveal their trade secrets about the weapons I was formerly contracted to build.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Rachel said.

“No, it doesn’t. It looks like not only will I probably not get paid but I may get my assets stolen if some insane weapons guys don’t top me.” Jerry grouched. “I can’t dodge all this, I can’t handle it all. There’s got to be some way...”

“What about the others?” Turing asked suddenly.

“The others!” exclaimed Jerry as he shot out of his seat.

“Other what?” Rachel demanded.

“Of course! You’re a genius Turing, absolute genius.... the others,” Jerry cried as he began pacing ineffectively in the tiny space between the snail tanks.

“What, what, what?” Rachel asked pulling Jerry to look at her.

“The other suppliers. I can’t be the only guy getting screwed by this situation at Isis,” Jerry said excitedly, his energy levels picking up again. “We can use that.”

“How?” Turing asked, pleased to have had her contribution welcomed so warmly.

“Hang on, let me think,” Jerry said, plonking back into his seat digging out his datapad to work out a few ideas. With a few dramatic taps he looked up. “I’ve got an idea. Are you ready?”

“Go on,” Rachel answered.

“Ok. Look at Turing’s search results,” Jerry said, waving the huge datapad at them. “If we zoom out from just the main Isis divisions we see the answer.”

“The answer?” asked Rachel.

“Sure. We see all the suppliers, like me, who thought they had hit the big time but are losing out. They’re all bleeding money. I can’t cancel my options once they activate and they can’t cancel production commitments. We’re all in this together.”

“So how does that help?” Turing asked.

“Well it’s like the ants attacking a huge animal or something. Each one of us can’t hurt Isis, in fact Isis can squash us real good. But if we all bite at the same time…”

Rachel’s face transformed as she finally understood where Jerry was going. “We could paralyse Isis,” she gasped.

“Exactly,” said Jerry excitedly. “If we can get enough suppliers to issue legal writs for damages, lost business and so on we could stop Isis in their tracks. We would all stop production and ask the courts to freeze sufficient Isis assets in case we win…”

“So Isis would have no cash and no supplies – they’d be dead in the water,” Turing said.

“You guys with me?” Jerry asked. “We’ve got a lot of work to do before we head to Switzerland.”

They all dove into programming their datapads, setting up contacts, downloading diy legal templates and generally building a nest of ants.

11:48 UTC Bexley Trading, Slough

As soon as they had got the first responses from their ant-plan, they had known that they would need more cycles. If they were to get anything like the response they needed for the plan to work, Turing had explained, then they were going to have to get some serious processing power to co-ordinate everything.

Which was why they were climbing the stairs of some ancient, ugly office block in the heart of Slough. They had come to see the best cycle trader Jerry knew, Hamilton Bexley. Jerry hoped Hamilton would be able to option them enough processing cycles to last them until the situation was resolved, one way or another.

Finally reaching the seventh floor they made their way past the doors of assorted small businesses, 'Rainbow Textiles', 'Slough Sex Services', 'Vita Underwriting' before finally they came before a door emblazoned with a shiny brass plaque stating 'Bexley Trading, since 2149'. Jerry couldn't afford to let Bexley bully him into an expensive deal, they didn't have the credits for it. But without these cycles their plan didn't stand a chance.

"Come on Jerry, let's do this," whispered Rachel in his ear.

Steeling himself, Jerry knocked on the door and received a booming "Enter!" in return.

Creaking the door open they entered a small, dim room packed with ageing network nodes. At the back, by the only window, the substantial bulk of Hamilton Bexley was parked at his desk.

"Gordon, Jerry Gordon good to see you!" barked Bexley as he punched two of the many screens piled before him. "How can I help? Who are your friends? How's business?"

Cutting in before the bombardment of questions could continue, Jerry cut to the point. "Hi Hamilton. This is Rachel and this is Turing. We've had something come up and we need options on a large number of cycles."

"Cycles, eh!" bellowed Bexley, making Rachel jump ever so slightly. "What the hell for? How did that Isis deal go?"

"Isis is why I need the cycles, Hamilton. It's better for you that I don't tell you any more."

"Oh, it's like that is it then. I see," he said more quietly, jowls quivering with curiosity. "Well what type do you need and how many? I'll want a fifty-percent payment now."

"A full five-o Ham? I think thirty-five is fair considering how much business we're going to be bringing your way."

"How much?" he asked, eyes suddenly twinkling expectantly as he lifted his big round face to look at them properly.

"Turing, how many cycles do you think we'll need?" Jerry said theatrically.

"Gosh, well erm I'd say at least seventy if not eighty gigas over the next few days. Datapad compliant, but they can be regionalised as we won't be leaving Europe."

Bexley's eyes bulged. Fiddling with a button on his pristine dress shirt he shifted in his seat, relishing his anticipation for the deal.

"Let's go for eighty please Hamilton," said Jerry.

“That’s a lot of power to plug in on short notice,” Bexley began sonorously, building for his deal-making preamble.

“Ham, I don’t have time for this game today. I know it’s a lot, but I also know that you can do it. So I’ll put thirty-five percent down now at our usual price and I’ll see you in a few days, ok?”

Bexley couldn’t believe he was going to miss out on the to and froing of negotiating the deal. He loved it, he was good at it, it made business fun. But Jerry knew the money was more important and that his offer, if a little cheap, was something Bexley would swallow happily.

“Very well, give me an hour to get the cycles lined up,” said a very resigned sounding Bexley. “I’ll tie to all your PIDs or just Jerry’s?”

“All, please,” said Turing.

As Bexley began tapping cycle requests out to his suppliers, Jerry piled a terrifying large proportion of their remaining credit chips onto the desk.

“Thanks Ham,” said Jerry as they turned to leave.

“You’re welcome, but next time I expect more manners Jerry,” scolded Bexley as he waved them off. “Good day.”

“I don’t care if he sulks, just as long as we get those cycles,” muttered Jerry to the others as he closed Bexley’s door.

17:35 UTC Zurich Airport, Switzerland

The flight to Zurich had been a painful reminder of life without money. They’d taken the cheapest seats possible in a mega-jumbo stuffed with budget skiers. It hadn’t been hard to persuade Turing to join them, she had seemed desperate to avoid returning to the grind of her work. Rachel and Jerry both had raised eyebrows when she changed from her work overalls to baggy beige combat trousers and an incredibly tight long-sleeve blue top. Her uniform had belied the fact that underneath she was a woman with a curvaceous little body and a pleasantly proportioned chest.

Rachel still wore her tight black jeans and clingy dark sweater. Jerry had the usual creased linen suit and a burgundy shirt. Saving on their meagre supply of holoplastic credit chips they had booked a last minute ticket on the mega-jumbo.

Throughout the flight their datapads had chirped with new messages from Isis suppliers around the world. Hundreds of small businesses were sending Me toos, relieved that they weren’t alone in their troubles with Isis. It wasn’t hard to persuade them to join in the action against Isis. Still Jerry had worried that they weren’t going to recruit as many as they needed. If they didn’t reach critical mass then Isis would just brush their legal actions and supply shortages aside.

“Don’t worry, Jerry” Rachel had reassured. “We’ll get more suppliers than we need.”

“How can you possibly know?” Jerry had snapped, the stress throwing his emotions off balance. He’d regretted it immediately as he saw Rachel turn away quietly. He hated himself when he did things like that. He knew he was hurting Rachel but somehow he just couldn’t stop himself saying those things until it was too late.

By the time they had landed, their subtle initial inquiries had turned into nearly three thousand suppliers firmly supporting their plan. The suppliers all agreed it was better to risk losing their contracts than be caught in the middle of warring Isis divisions.

They were out of the airport in no time, having just their datapads and a bag of Turing’s gadgets.

“We’ve got about two hours before the shipment shows up at the inspection centre. I’ve got the address now through my FedEx tracking,” said Jerry as they descended into the airport’s subterranean train station. “Somehow or another we’ve got to see if we can learn any more about Isis through this inspection centre.”

“We need to be careful though,” said Turing, glancing over her shoulder. “We’ve been discreet but still our communications and the security checks at the airport may have given our location away. I don’t want to catch a grenade...”

“But we used credit chips, I thought we couldn’t be traced?” Rachel said.

“Sure, that helped. And we’re running Jerry’s datapad in a very quiet mode. Still if anyone can track us down, Isis can – they could afford to buy a tunnel into airport security system if they wanted,” said Turing as she activated three train tickets from her datapad.

“Hang on a second, I’m starving” said Jerry as he plugged a credit chip into a vending machine. “Anybody else want one?” The others shook their heads as Jerry watched his meat patty grill through a greasy window. As the flames died back sauce squirted onto the burger and the two halves of a bun were pressed around it by neat little suction pads. Five seconds later Jerry pulled the burger from the delivery slot and had his mouth wrapped round it.

“I don’t know how you can eat that crap,” said Rachel in disgust as they climbed onto the train. Jerry looked back cheerfully with a shrug, greedily chewing.

By the time they had arrived in the Zurich suburb where Jerry’s shipment was due for inspection they had turned all their datapads to silent. The noise of suppliers adding their support had become unbearable. They had over eight thousand signed up. Still Turing’s search reckoned that there were over a hundred thousand suppliers to all arms of Isis. They had a long way to go...

The Isis inspection centre was a short walk from the small unmanned train station they’d stopped at. Walking at a leisurely pace they scoped the desolate area out. Warehouses jostled with joyless blocks of flats along busy arterial roads. Dominating

a section of road was the centre where a steady stream of vehicles were shuttling to and from its main entrance.

“It’s pretty busy,” commented Rachel.

“Yeah. I think they check pretty much everything they can get up here,” said Jerry.

Three huge warehouses with discreet Isis logos housed the inspection facilities. Trucks and vans whizzed through imposing gatehouses wrapped in black glass. Clearly highly dependent on automation, workers were few and far between as tons of cargo were shifted from trucks to intelligent trolleys who would put them in the right place at the right time.

“Let’s walk around and find a place to watch things,” said Jerry, setting off down the side of the centre. Rachel and Turing followed close behind.

“Just imagine if our plan works,” Turing said trotting behind Jerry. “They won’t have any supplies to inspect. It will be dead here.”

Jerry smiled at the thought. He was slowly moving from a feeling of awe towards Isis Investments and Connor Wentworth to being more than a little pissed off with the way they’d treated him. It still wasn’t making sense, the deal had been closed so smoothly. His gut told him they were missing a piece of the puzzle.

Rachel was still being slightly cold to Jerry after his snap at her on the flight. He hoped it didn’t last as he had been feeling a renewed hope for their relationship. Somehow or another he was finding he could be a better partner to Rachel, if he didn’t get a bullet in his head from some Isis-sponsored hardcase.

Stiffening at the thought that he was still in danger, Jerry hurried towards the inspection centre.

Half-way round they found a second entrance to the complex. Rich with ornamental hedges and flower beds it wasn’t designed for freight vehicles.

“Looks like some kind of offices,” Turing said.

Jerry looked up at a building separate from the warehouses. Neo-classical with columns and a gentle staircase pulling the eye up to the entrance, this was no quickbuild office block.

“Bit fancy, isn’t it,” Rachel noted.

Jerry nodded in agreement. He counted five floors of beautiful big windows with the top floor sporting even larger stretches of glass. He was going to get some answers. Jerry looked around and spotted a café a few blocks away.

“Let’s get something to eat at that café. We’ll be able to see the office block and it’s a little more discrete than standing here,” Jerry said.

The idea of food seemed a boost to morale and soon they were all sat on an outside table hungrily munching croque madames. As they digested over bowls of café au lait they watched the elegant Isis office wing. Absolutely nothing was happening. Nobody came or went, no deliveries, nothing.

The sun slid down off the sky as they finished their second bowls of coffee.

“What do we do?” asked Turing, breaking the brooding silence.

Jerry took a deep breath and held it. Finally he burst, “I don’t know.”

“Well I don’t think there’s any point going in after your shipment,” said Rachel.

“Why not?” asked Jerry.

“All you’re going to find is an inspector or two. You know you’re food pods will fail so what will we gain?” Rachel answered.

“I agree,” Turing chipped in.

Suddenly an alarming squawk started sounding from Turing’s datapad.

“Uh-oh,” Turing said as she punched for more information. “They’re fighting back. Some Isis divisions have got wind of our supplier network. They’re trying to spoof us to stop more people signing up.”

“Dammit.” Jerry smashed his hands down onto the table.

“I think they may also be trying to crawl something nasty up to those who already signed up,” Turing added.

“What can we do?” Rachel asked as she pulled out her datapad.

“I don’t know how good their people are but I packed a few goodies from the Hive. I’ll need to run it on your ‘pads,” Turing answered, settling in for a long session.

“The Hive?” Rachel turned to Turing.

“It’s a bunch of hackers who build anti-cracking software. I mostly lurk, I’m no head honcho there but I’ve got enough karma to access the downloads. We need to do this now.” Turing looked up with a serious look. “Rachel, your pad is going to run the honey trap – it should keep their attack busy. Jerry, I need some processor power to improve our anti-spoof defences.”

Turing muttered and grumbled under her breath as she wrestled with whoever the splintered Isis divisions had sent to annihilate their supplier network. Jerry ordered a bottle of wine to keep the café owner off their case. Satisfied that they wanted to spend more money with him, the patron came to light a tiny candle on their table.

“Only the top floor of the offices is lit,” noted Jerry.

“You’re right,” said Rachel looking up from her datapad. “It’s a bit late for management to be in the office. It’s nearly nine thirty...”

“Hmmm. Well someone is there, I think I can make out movement.” Jerry squinted at the vast windows lining the building’s top floor. “How’s it going Turing?”

“Ok. They’re still in the honey trap and I think about 90% of traffic is getting past the spoof.” Turing reported. “It could change at any minute but so far so good.”

“Right. I’m going to investigate this office then,” Jerry said suddenly.

“What, just like that?” Rachel asked.

“Sure. Something’s going on there. In a few hours all I’ll have are a hacked network and food which fails inspection. What else can I do?” Jerry replied as he stood to leave.

“No, you’re right. But you’re not going alone.” Rachel rose from her seat. “Turing, you’ll be ok here?”

“Sure, I’ll need to hang onto your datapad though.”

Jerry felt pleased that Rachel wanted to come. No matter what he thought he knew he couldn’t dissuade her anyway. “Let’s go. I’m going to try and slip behind the building to look for a fire exit.”

They walked in quiet companionship the three blocks from the café to the Isis Investment office’s entrance. They quickly crossed the road to the gravel driveway leading up to the building’s grand entrance. Sneaking behind a hedge which tried and failed to hide the monstrous inspection warehouses they scurried parallel to the drive.

The building was surrounded by gravel, like a crunchy brown moat. A thin strip of grass connected the end of the hedge to a garden at the rear of the offices. Jerry and Rachel scurried down the grass, pulling up in the shadow of the building’s rear corner. Squatting on the grass they peered around the side wall’s edge to see an old-fashioned iron fire escape.

“Perfect,” whispered Jerry.

“But we’ll have to walk on the gravel to get there, be careful,” answered Rachel quietly.

Imagining every spy film he had ever watched, Jerry slowly reached forward with his left foot. Gently rolling his shoe onto the gravel he applied his weight and began to move forward. A slow scrunch of shifting gravel followed. He winced and stopped, mid-step.

“Keep going,” Rachel whispered. “It can’t be helped.”

Jerry quietly crunched his way to the base of the escape and waited for Rachel to join him. Jerry admired her lithe legs as she crossed with half the sound Jerry had managed.

“Here goes nothing.” Jerry started climbing the small metal steps.

As he reached the top of the first flight of steps he came up close to a window. Peering in he thought he could make out traditionally appointed offices in the feeble light. He padded on upwards, Rachel not far behind. Somehow he felt he was going to find answers here.

As he turned to climb to the fourth floor, he heard a click from behind.

“Don’t move, not even a hair,” an accented voice spoke.

Jerry tensed. *Where’s Rachel?* He thought desperately.

“I have a lethal weapon which I won’t hesitate to use. If you understand me say only yes,” the voice continued.

“Yes.”

“Good. Now very very slowly put your hands on your head.”

Jerry complied, his brain screaming to understand what was happening.

“Excellent. You will continue walking up to the fifth floor. But very slowly, you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Now go.”

Jerry started moving. He strained his ears to hear any kind of clue as to where Rachel could be. A stumble behind him told him all he needed to know. She was still there. Just as Jerry felt relieved to feel her presence his relief was overcome with fear. He’d brought Rachel into danger because of his deal, because of his inability to get a proper job.

Jerry was angry and afraid as he reached the end of the fire escape’s steps.

“You will slowly open the door. You will then step inside, remembering that I have a lethal weapon. Once inside you will get on your knees before lying face down on the floor. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

Jerry couldn't see any alternatives. He had nothing but his datapad and some credit chips. Resentfully he followed the instructions from the man behind him. He lay down, face pressed into the plush office carpet he'd every experienced.

"Very good," the man said as Jerry felt plastic cuffs tightening around his wrists. "Now you lie down too."

Tilting his head slightly he saw Rachel lie down next to him, her dark hair ruffled around her. Jerry wrenched his wrists against their bonds, furious that he could be so easily caught. Rachel lay quietly next to him, unwilling to catch their captor's attention. Jerry squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead into the carpet in despair.

"Excuse me Mr Wentworth, I've got the intruders in the corridor here."

Jerry looked up. *Mr Wentworth? Did he hear right... it couldn't be, could it?* Jerry turned to Rachel who shook her hair away to give him a curious look.

"Thank you, Jeremy," said the unmistakably refined voice of Connor H Wentworth. "So what do you want? Which one sent you?"

"Nobody sent us," began Jerry as a dishevelled, aged Wentworth stepped into view.

"It's come to this has it? Sneaking in the night to get me?" Wentworth's voice picked up in anger.

"No, no. Mr Wentworth, if you'll allow me to speak," Jerry said firmly.

"Go on."

"Mr Wentworth, my name is Jerry Gordon and this is my partner Rachel Giddens." Jerry tried his best to maintain a business-like tone while trussed up like a turkey on the floor. "I'm your contracted supplier to provide pods of food to your space operations."

"And?"

"We're not here to get you. We didn't even know you were here. We were trying to find out what the hell is going on."

"I see. You've been affected too, then?" Wentworth asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

Jerry told Wentworth of the grenade attack, the legal actions and the food poisoning all apparently from Wentworth. By the time Jerry finished Wentworth, already looking worn, deflated further.

"This has got out of control. Let them go Jeremy," ordered Wentworth as he sank into one of several luxurious chairs lining the corridor they were being held in.

“Are you certain, sir?” came the polite reply. “It is possible that they are not being entirely frank with you sir.”

“Just do as I say and let them go,” answered Wentworth crossly. “Bring them to my office.” He heaved himself from the chair and padded down to the corridor. Once he had gone, Jeremy bent down and meaningfully showed them his compact needle gun.

“You may have convinced Mr Wentworth, but I’m keeping a close watch on you,” Jeremy threatened. Having seen Jeremy’s weedy form, Jerry felt considerably less worried about the threat.

“Just let us go,” Jerry said firmly, waving his wrists up as much as he could. Jeremy complied and they walked down the richly decorated corridor into Wentworth’s enormous office. Taking up half of the top floor, windows stretched around three sides of the massive space. Despite the obvious opulence of the fittings, Jerry noted a dishevelled air to the room.

Teetering piles of paper weighed down tables pulled in from other offices. Wentworth’s own desk was virtually hidden under reams of antique paper, old fashioned files and dirty porcelain coffee cups. Wentworth stood looking out a window over a buzzing side entrance to his inspection centre. Jeremy took a discrete position by the door, gun in hand.

“I’m terribly sorry about all this,” he began. “I never dreamed anything like this would have happened.”

Rachel pulled up an office chair and sat by Wentworth’s desk as Jerry peered at the piles of paper.

“Why are you treating your suppliers in this insane way?” Jerry asked as he ran his hand over the papers. Tokyo, Dublin, New York, Buenos Aires, Delhi there were thousands of contracts Wentworth had signed laid out around the office.

“I’m not.”

Rachel and Jerry looked at each other in confusion.

“Excuse me, sir?” Jerry answered, somehow finding manners he didn’t know he had in the luxurious surroundings.

Wentworth turned and came to sit at his desk. By the light of a small desk lamp Jerry saw a tired, old but elegant face framed by greying hair. Somehow Wentworth seemed older than when they’d closed the deal in Tokyo. Taking a deep breath Wentworth continued his explanation.

“As you can see around you, I’m trying to discover exactly what has happened. Jeremy and a few of my close personal aides have been helping but it’s difficult to know who to trust at this juncture.”

“But we’ve had calls with you, messages from your lawyers, you must know,” said Rachel.

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” came the reply from Wentworth. Leaning back in his chair Wentworth smiled oddly and continued. “You see there’s more than one of me.”

“er what?” Jerry interrupted.

“Please, let me continue.”

Jerry waved an apology and sat next to Rachel.

“I have been very fortunate in my life. I have been successful in business beyond my wildest dreams. I can do as I please, meet whom I want and generally enjoy my money. But as you know I have some idiosyncrasies. I insist on paper contracts and so I always close deals in person. This image helped to build people’s trust in our attention to detail at Isis, much of which is really due to our inspection team here in Zurich.”

Jerry nodded, desperately curious – his mind ran in a hundred directions trying to see where Wentworth was headed.

“As I got older, something my money could only do so much to prevent, I found the travel increasingly tiring. Isis was getting so big I had to be everywhere to close our deals. Even with scramjets I felt like I was spending my life on the go. Ok so I was in the best hotels, the best everything but it just wore me out. I knew it couldn’t continue so I got our best thinkers, you know out of the box kind of guys, to look at the problem. I told them I wasn’t ready to give up paper contracts as they were important to our image. Anyway I really don’t trust these electronic signatures, how can a load of electrons be a deal? Well one thing led to another and I ended up getting a presentation from one of our advanced bioengineering labs. I couldn’t believe what they were proposing was possible, but they convinced me it was. I decided that despite the cost and the extraordinary nature of the plan, if it worked it would help Isis grow beyond any analyst projection. So I said yes.”

Wentworth lent forward on his desk, looking down at Jerry and Rachel who sat riveted in their seats.

“I told my lab to go and implement their plan to create five clones of me.”

Jerry’s mind exploded as he absorbed what Wentworth said. *Clones?*

“That’s not even possible, let alone legal,” shot Rachel.

“I’m afraid that it is possible with the right resources and it is legal in the micronation where our lab was situated. It was a wonderful idea... the clones would carry a small electronic component at the base of their skull which would ensure all their decisions were synchronised and formed a coherent strategy for Isis.”

“Holy crap,” Jerry uttered.

Wentworth continued, oblivious. "Once the clones had matured we had to make sure that they really believed themselves to be me and acted like me. Technicians took all sorts of recordings and readings from me. God, those were boring days! Still, when they were done my clones went out and did business. I retired to being silent chairman and took up residence in my discrete home not far from here. All was well."

"Until..." Rachel asked.

"Until this Monday," said Wentworth regretfully. "As far as we can tell around 11.30am on the 19th the synchronisation electronics went wrong. Jeremy, could you explain, technology isn't my thing."

Jeremy's prim form stepped forward towards the pool of light around Wentworth's desk. "Despite relying on multiple redundant forms of communication the synchronisation signal broke down. While problematic we could have recovered from this if the implants in the clones hadn't also failed. We don't know if the electronics failed because of the signal problems or whether the signal problems were due to the electronics failing. What we do know is that in some way these failures didn't just disconnect the clones, it scrambled the minds slightly."

"Scrambled? What do you mean?" Jerry asked.

"We can't be sure but from the reports we've collected and I'm sure your experiences will verify my view, the clones are thinking clearly and correctly but their memories have been rearranged somehow. The result is that they are confusing customers and suppliers, competitors and partners."

"And because of my persona and perceived power," Wentworth said gravely. "Few have been willing to argue with my clones. I saw the dangers of power and I surrounded myself with people like Jeremy. As you saw earlier, Jeremy feels able to challenge me. I neglected to ensure that my clones had similar people around them."

"But this is insane. Surely the paper contracts show what's what?" Rachel said sharply.

Wentworth nodded deeply. He took a big breath and then slowly waved his hand around his office. Rachel and Jerry looked at the huge windows with faint light slipping through, they saw the huge desk and then they turned to the piles of paper. They understood.

"All the paper contracts are here, with me," Wentworth said almost apologetically. "I thought I could control the clones this way. But I can't without revealing myself."

"You've trapped yourself," said Rachel.

"Enough is enough!" roared Wentworth suddenly as Rachel and Jerry jumped in their seats. "I need to wipe this all out. Every lick of evidence. Everything."

Jerry shifted uneasily.

“Jeremy, get me Pierrot, immediately.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Jerry carefully as Jeremy quickly left the office.

“Something I should have done a long time ago,” said Wentworth in a steely voice.

Jeremy returned and whispered in Wentworth’s ear. With a quick nod Wentworth turned to face Rachel and Jerry.

“Pierrot will be here shortly, I’m just going to go and freshen up. Jeremy will get you anything you need.”

As Wentworth left the room and Rachel asked Jeremy for a tea, Jerry slipped his datapad out of a pocket. Activating a cunning script Turing had put together for him he told his datapad to discreetly check for any incoming messages. Turing had messaged to proudly note that their systems were still safe from the attacks. Curious, Jerry accessed information on how their Isis supplier recruitment was going.

“Holy shit!” Jerry yelled. Jeremy turned, reaching for his holster.

“What?” Rachel asked.

“We’ve got over eighteen thousand suppliers on our side!” Jerry yodelled in joy.

“Oh my God.” Rachel was astonished.

“What’s this about?” Jeremy inquired, curiosity getting the better of his discretion.

“Putting the boot on the other foot,” Rachel said with a smirk.

“Which means?” Jeremy asked with faux patience.

“Which means that we realised that we couldn’t be the only supplier having trouble with Isis. Trouble with the clones we now know. So we decided to try and balance things out,” Jerry explained. “We are recruiting Isis suppliers to withhold their production and file injunctions against Isis for breach of contract, loss of revenue and whatever else they can think of.”

“And you have eighteen thousand suppliers doing this?” gasped Jeremy in shock.

Jerry glanced down at his datapad. “Eighteen thousand, four hundred and twenty two, no one more just joined, twenty three.”

“This is a disaster.”

“Maybe. But what choice did we have? We figured if enough of us small fry clubbed together we could perhaps get the courts to freeze your assets and put this to an

end,” Jerry said. “What else could we have done? Even if we knew it was clones with fried brains, what can we do about it?”

“I see your point,” Jeremy sighed quietly as he resumed removing dirty cups from Wentworth’s desk.

A few minutes later, as Rachel sipped her tea, Wentworth returned. Jerry froze in his seat. Behind Wentworth was a man with dark hair and a sharp, ad executive type of suit. He nonchalantly followed Wentworth into the vast office.

Rachel sensed Jerry’s discomfort instantly. “What is it?”

Fear clenched Jerry’s gut as he kept his eyes on the man.

“May I introduce Pierrot,” Wentworth said, oblivious.

“You tried to kill me,” Jerry spluttered.

“Ah pardon. It is true, I am sorry,” came the response lightly coated in a French accent. “What was it... ah Gordon?”

“That’s my name,” said Jerry fiercely. “What the hell is your problem?”

Pierrot gave a rather embarrassed look to Wentworth.

“You escaped Pierrot?” Wentworth asked incredulously. “Pierrot is the best in his field.”

“His field?” Rachel asked.

“Assassination, madame. I cannot understand how this man escaped me.”

Jerry didn’t like this. He didn’t like it at all. *He’s here to kill us, to eliminate the evidence.*

Jerry began looking at his options, they didn’t look good. Jeremy was armed, though he didn’t seem that comfortable with his gun. Pierrot was a serious operator and there was only one exit to the room. *Shit*

“I assure you Monsieur Wentworth, this is very unusual.”

“It’s ok Pierrot, you can redeem yourself. I have something that I need you to do for me.”

Jerry gulped.

Wentworth turned and took a long hard look at Jerry. Bolt upright in his seat, Jerry looked back, pulling every fibre of his soul into returning Wentworth’s stare. He wouldn’t look away, eyes searching for something... *Don’t kill me, don’t kill me, don’t kill me* Jerry urged Wentworth through his eyeballs, straining with the effort.

A sharp thwack shattered the moment. As if in slow motion Jerry watched Pierrot swivel towards Jeremy whose legs were collapsing from under him. Rolling and pulling a sleek pistol from his jacket, Pierrot knocked Wentworth down behind the cover of his immense teak desk.

As needles of glass blew out of window panes, Jerry finally overcame his shock to push Rachel out of danger. Wrenching her arm he flipped her heavy chair and pulled her behind its bulk. Flecks of carpet and leather rained around them as their attackers filled the air with needle gun fire. Curled together behind the chair Rachel and Jerry prayed the chair could stand up to the abuse.

Over Rachel's shoulder Jerry watched Pierrot pulling surveillance data down onto an elegant titanium battle datapad. Certain of the situation, the Gallic assassin calmly configured his weapon. As the firing lulled, Pierrot smoothly rose and began squeezing off shots. Explosive thuds rang outside as Pierrot kept shooting. "Get out, now – there'll be a follow-up team," shouted the Frenchman.

Jerry didn't need to be asked twice, pulling Rachel with him he rushed for the door, slowing only slightly when he noticed Jeremy's corpse surrounded by pooling blood. Wentworth was right behind them as they stormed down the corridor towards the back of the building.

"Incoming..." screamed Pierrot as he raced behind them towards the main staircase.

A flash of light burst an instant before a blast of scorching air threw them down the stairs. Landing hard on the marble steps, Jerry's body screamed in agony. He rolled on his side to check Rachel was ok as debris trickled down over them.

Connor Wentworth One slipped out of the conference room. He was losing control, his suppliers were rebelling. His competitors were fighting harder than ever. He took a deep breath and flung open a door into a tiny garden at the centre of the office complex.

He wanted to stop thinking business for just a minute, somehow rest his mind. Loosening his tie Wentworth One sat on a large rock by the Japanese water feature. As the warm touch of the rock eased his tension, he leant back into a glorious stretch.

Pierrot watched the clone relaxing to the meditative trickles of water. He'd been careless with the grenade attack, he wasn't taking any more chances. Pierrot pulled up the sleeves of his suit and went to work.

Twenty minutes later a personal assistant found a silk tie floating in the Japanese meditation pool. It didn't take long for her to spot Wentworth's blue face gaping up from under the water.

Pierrot sat filing his nails, staring out onto a sun-drenched Rome from his hotel. A beep from his datapad told him the waiting was over. Carefully putting his nail kit away, he reached down and opened a military crate. With a few clicks he assembled a micro-launcher and shouldered it.

A large black hybrid-hydro slid into view and halted in front of an elegant hotel opposite Pierrot's own. The doors of the car opened and Wentworth Two stepped out. Pierrot counted to three and squeezed the trigger. He was already taking the launcher apart as Wentworth disintegrated with a thud.

It hadn't been too hard getting some fresh Blowfish to London. He'd needed to spend rather more on bribes than expected but he was now happily slicing salmon sashimi at the hotel sushi bar. It wasn't quite the gourmet cuisine he'd grown up on but Pierrot still had a taste for sushi. Even better was preparing sushi, all those sharp knives were a drug to him.

As Wentworth Three and his entourage filled the private room, Pierrot quickly retrieved California rolls from the fridge. With a wet knife he sliced the rolls and laid them on wooden blocks. He tapped the counter and a waiter quickly delivered the Blowfish to Wentworth's room.

Pierrot knew he wouldn't be taking any more orders when the drinks waiter came back ashen-faced.

No matter how many luxury hotels he'd stayed in Pierrot still found bathroom attendants an odd thing to have. But they were proving useful to him now, as he stood stiffly in a burgundy uniform, handing towels to men in suits.

It was only a matter of time before Wentworth Four would need to pay him a visit. Pierrot was in the only place Wentworth could piss on the whole floor. As expected, it wasn't long before nature took its course and Wentworth was passing Pierrot on his way to a urinal. A heartbeat later Pierrot followed and quickly thrust a stiletto knife into Wentworth's spine.

As he touched down in Boston Pierrot couldn't recall taking so many scramjet flights in such a short time. He couldn't complain, he was banking a high fee even by his standards. Warmed by the nearing completion of his contract, Pierrot prepared himself to terminate Wentworth Five.

He mounted his needle rifle and sighted Wentworth Five in his Isis USA office. Huge windows gave Pierrot plenty of room to plan his shot. He programmed in a scatter of hardened needles to shatter the glass followed by the single one for Wentworth. The target was at his desk, papers in hand, ready for another contract signing.

Pierrot double-checked his setup, he admired the needle rifle's elegance but it's complexity did risk mistakes. Satisfied with the configuration he shouldered it and aimed. With barely a whistle Wentworth Five dropped dead, a needle embedded in his skull.

Jerry had left Turing to contact all the suppliers they'd signed up. The real Connor Wentworth had decided to let Isis Investments collapse, they were basically insolvent and shattered by the clones' warfare. Jerry's big deal was over and he was going to have some explaining to do to his suppliers.

Wentworth had given Jerry a few thousand to make up for all the shit he'd been through. It softened the blow, but still, he was back to small deals again. Clearly torn between self-interest and guilt Wentworth had booked them all into a swish hotel until they wanted to go home.

Staying in a hotel was too much like work for Turing. She'd muttered something about authenticity before settling down in a nearby park with her datapad.

Jerry and Rachel had been more than happy to find themselves in an enormous suite, replete with fruit bowls, jacuzzi and balcony.

"This is the life," Jerry said as he threw open the doors to the balcony.

"Sure is. I could get used to this," Rachel chuckled as she flung herself backwards onto the bed. "This bed is massive. We could get lost on it!"

Jerry turned back to smile at Rachel. Something had gelled in the last few days. All those arguments, all those disconnects just were the past now. He didn't understand it but everything seemed to fit again. He felt a new warmth and responsibility for Rachel, a sense of partnership. She beamed back at him.

"Well I don't know what you think, but how about we go into the space food business?" Jerry asked as he sat next to Rachel on the bed.

Rachel giggled. "I thought the deal with Isis was over."

"It is. But I know these guys in Thailand who make fake shrimp, I think we could be onto a winner."

"Ok. Next stop Thailand." Rachel wrapped an arm around Jerry. "But let's enjoy this place first."

Jerry felt a surge of happiness like he'd never felt before. "I saw they do massages here, let's get one on Wentworth."

"You go honey. I'll slip into something more comfortable and wait for you here."

“You sure?”

“Of course. You come back up here limber for me,” Rachel said winking cheekily.

“Ok. I won’t be long.”

Jerry changed into a hotel gown and went downstairs to the hotel’s fitness and spa centre. In no time he was in a beautifully appointed room lying on a table as a masseuse worked his shoulders. He felt all the tension in his body begin to slip away as his muscles were pounded this way and that.

Jerry was virtually oblivious as the masseuse took a quick break to get more oil. When she returned he felt the towel covering his modesty slipped off and warm oil rubbed onto his buttocks.

These Europeans have no shame, he thought fuzzily. Wow, who would have thought a bum massage would feel so good, he pondered a moment later.

Without thinking he turned over when asked. He soon felt oiled hands vigorously working his chest. Unsure what to do he decided it was best to keep his eyes shut and enjoy his massage. The haze in his mind cleared when he felt oil drip onto his groin.

“What the...” he spluttered as he opened his eyes.

“Hi baby,” Rachel purred wearing a massive grin. She undid her gown and pulled Jerry towards her for a deep kiss.

“Now partner, let’s do some business.”