

SOUNDRISE

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LYNN VOEDISCH

THE
STORY
PLANT

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Dedicated to my husband, Brad Blumenthal

CHAPTER ONE

Clicking echoed into the early morning, a persistent clattering of plastic bones, a death rattle of a dream. A tap dance of an unseen gremlin. Crisp, staccato clacks issued coded commands into the bowels of electronic machinery. Tap. Open a new screen. Click. De-bug. Rat-a-tat-a-tat. Compile. Beep. Execution fault.

Rhythm was all, and Derek Nilsson was in the zone, the space where concentration is pure and tensile, buzzing with neuron electricity. His hands flew so quickly across the keyboard, he had almost no conscious awareness of their movement. The fingertips were hot-wired to the brain. He punched in lines of code, read the computer's response, then tapped some more. Line by line, command by command, the program took shape with Derek only one step ahead in this elaborate tango of two minds. He clicked, and the machine pulsed patterns on the screen. He tapped, and the program fanned out in strength and breadth, surging toward completion.

Yet today, the clatter rang hollow, the taps reverberating off the apartment walls, enlarging the cavities of the room. The rattle was the sound of old ladies leaving a museum, striking a vast hardwood floor with sturdy heels and well-used canes. The chatter of dentures. The sound of nothing more to say, nothing more to see. Amid blinking lights and whirring disks, Derek felt a loneliness that threatened to swallow him whole.

Before, The Project—the all-encompassing, all-absorbing decryption effort—commanded Derek's attention into the tiny hours of the night. When he sat down at his keyboard, home after a long day of boring programming, the Project infused him with a fresh new challenge. It was a puzzle to piece together, a tantalizing tangle of encrypted code to unwind. Derek loved the challenge of looking for clues that led to a key, which then revealed the first few lines of readable code. He was often amazed

at how the process would take over, build, create a net that waited to catch the characters when the code finally broke.

Now, however, he sat at his patched-together array of two desktop computers and one laptop, toggling between windows on the screens, keeping track of multiple programs running simultaneously. One screen displayed nothing but black characters on a white screen, the nuts and bolts of Charles—a language Derek had developed specifically for encryption analysis. The cascade of letters, numbers, slashes, tildes, brackets, carets, dashes, hashes and bangs, all as familiar to Derek as a kindergarten’s ABCs, marched in presto across the screen. The parade of blinking letters reminded him of too much effort, too many hours spent in front of the screen.

Derek stopped. He listened to the silent night, turning to look at the books, papers, disk drives, printers, empty soft-drink cans, fast-food wrappers, that filled his home office. A bookshelf that had become a warehouse of skip drives and old computer parts. The analog clock on the wall counted out the seconds. Two thirty-seven a.m. An overhead light sizzled with high-pitched vibrations. Derek’s cat, Foo, dreamed on in his lap, sending up soothing, rumbling waves of contentment. Outside, a tire squealed and an engine let out a gasp of exasperation before roaring into the distance. In the midst of Chicago’s twenty-four hour whirlwind, there was emptiness, as if the night were begging Derek to fill it.

He threw his head back onto the padded leather of his desk chair, wondering if there was any sense in going to bed. At seven, he would have to rise anyway to make it to work by nine. Would four hours of sleep matter? The Project had eaten up so much of his time, he might as well surrender completely, pull an all-nighter, and stumble through his day job on autopilot. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Derek’s finger poised over the keyboard, ready to pull up the code-breaking program to see what had been accomplished lately with brute-force encryption-cracking tactics. Thousands of hackers (proud computer wizards and not the criminals derided by the press) worldwide had voluntarily signed on to Derek’s little “contest,” a gauntlet tossed on a popular website before the computer community: “See if you can break this code first and it’s the key

to something big.” Derek was astonished three months ago, when computer nerds worldwide downloaded the data and started code busting. People were bringing computer resources from everywhere, and they were all working on Derek’s puzzle.

While the machines slashed away in the dark, Derek and his partner George Esterberg guided the larger decryption enterprise. Right now, small blocks of data were readable and Derek was figuring out where they fit in the broader scheme of a coherent data set. Like Jean-Francois Champollion, the man who cracked the Egyptian hieroglyphics inscribed on the Rosetta Stone, he was looking for a cartouche, a meaningful arrangement of characters that would serve to organize the rest of the material. When Champollion found the cartouches, royal names of the pharaohs, he learned that hieroglyphics were representations of sounds. By working out the syllables and then applying them to other words, the master code breaker made a silent language begin to speak for a new age. Derek was looking to do the same thing; only he was attempting to make discarded data talk—and he wasn’t even sure what subject they would speak about.

The bit that he’d retrieved last night was tantalizing. This obviously was the work of a magician, a real master coding with signature flourishes. Derek nodded in appreciation of the mathematical elegance of it all. If he could patch together just a few more of these readable blocks of code, he might be able to feel the rest of the data fall into a pattern. It would take more late nights, intense concentration, a dollop of intuition, and spades of luck. He chorded on the keyboard, attempting to bring up his e-mail client. Time to see what George thought of the gem. Time to read missives from all those number crunchers working alone in the cyber-Outback.

“Derek,” an electronic voice announced. “I am Ra-jah. Here to help you.”

Derek’s feet shot to the floor, Foo rocketed off his lap in a flurry of fur and scrambling claws, and Derek was on his feet, staring at the screen. Where had that come from? Was there someone in the apartment? Derek spun around, checking out his tiny home office. Nothing there. No, wait, check the process list. There were only the usual programs running.

Sound files. Of course. Check for sound files. Derek clapped a shaky hand over his heart and slid inch by inch down into his seat, examining the screen for any signs of a recently downloaded file. Easy, boy. It's probably just something damned clever. Take a look.

Derek scanned the screen several times before he realized that nothing new was running. No new files. No new processes. In his mind, he replayed what just happened. He had clicked on the e-mail program and some bizarre voice popped up. A message had come in recently, maybe at the exact time he heard the voice. A quick run through the intrusion-detection routines was in order. He tapped a number of keys and set a program running. It would take a good twenty minutes. This was as good a time as any to take a break.

Ra-jah, indeed. Or was it Roger? Did he know any Rogers? Derek shrugged his shoulders and shook his head with irritation.

He shuffled off to the kitchen and found Foo hovering over her water dish, looking none the worse for wear. He stroked her silken fur, a delicious patchwork of calico patterns and felt his neck and shoulders relax. For four years, he had shared life with Foo and never needed another roommate. Through graduate school, through the summer internship with George, through the job hunt, and during his shaky first months at BitJockey.com, Foo had been a steady companion. Cats, unlike people, didn't provide commentary about Derek's irregular hours, burrito-and-delivery-pizza eating habits, towering piles of laundry, or lack of friends. As long as there was a warm lap to lie in and a fragrant bowl of tuna or cod puree twice a day, Foo was a happy companion. At night, Foo would jump on his back, lie down and give him a neck rub, purring at high decibels the entire time. No judgments and no criticism. Not everyone understood him so well.

Geek. Nerd. Misfit. Socially challenged. Derek had heard it everywhere; from the time he first programmed a little micro-processor in high school, all through college and grad school, people had been snickering at him. Childhood buddies took banking jobs, wore pricey watches, joined country clubs, and smirked if they passed Derek on the street. Girlfriends—who

never seemed to hang around longer than six weeks—found his cyber-world lifestyle initially amusing, until they began to realize that he was serious about shrugging off the real universe. His mother, Astrid, never stopped reminding him that if he didn't "get out more," he'd end up alone like her. Friends, such as Trevor Chen, the graphic artist who made BitJockey's game software shimmer with realism, would scrutinize Derek's long, gaunt frame, sunken chest, scraggly goatee, and threadbare clothes, and shake their heads.

"Get a real life," Trevor would say, his dark eyes shining. "Or your closest relationship will be with your computer."

Well, George understood. But then, George was like Derek—a computer jock, a bit boy, a true code gladiator. George knew why it was possible to forget about eating for twenty-four hours, what it was like for an evening to morph into dawn in no time at all. He understood why dating stopped being fun once women started making demands on your precious computing time. George knew that there was no kick in the world that matched the adrenaline rush of stringing together the right commands and having a mighty computer, or fifty, or five hundred, at your disposal. All those millions of bytes thinking for you, traveling the world for you, and, if need be, breaking and entering for you.

No night of drinking or drugs or sex could ever compare to a long evening of productive hacking. And not script kiddie stuff, either. None of that cruising into other machines using someone else's code and seeing how many you could tamper with and "pwn" (or own). No, Derek and George were turned onto the big game: finding hidden secrets, creating new datastreams for artificial intelligence to chew on, breaking into the most closely guarded codes in the world.

The Project was as close as Derek had ever come to pure computer opium, hacker junk, the total ride. If George and Derek could break down and make sense of the cleverly encrypted data they had stumbled onto, they most likely could retire at the tender age of twenty-five. And then think of the carefree hours they could spend playing with computers.

Foo's ears began to twist around like radar dishes and Derek turned to see what she had heard. A moment later, a beep from

his computer signaled that the intrusion scan was finished. He glanced at his well-used coffeemaker, set to start brewing at six forty-five a.m., and decided against messing with the mechanism to get a shot of caffeine and pulled a cold caffeinated Power Jolter out of the fridge. Coffee could wait.

He padded back into his office—really a tiny changing room between the bedroom and the bathroom—and leaned over his computer screen. The scan showed no break-ins. Derek stood bent over with his lower back screaming, scrutinizing the screen. If there was no sound file and no virus, what was going on?

He clicked the e-mail program again. This time there was no eerie electronic voice, just a long list of unread messages. Five of them were from George. Derek tapped the keys to open the first one, then the next. Each note was more boring than the last, automated reports detailing mundane specifics of what George's students were working on at the University of Chicago. As a doctoral student, George had a small cadre of undergraduates and masters students at his disposal, all eager to help George in his program. The trouble was that they needed constant care and feeding, a chore that Derek would rather avoid.

He stood up and gazed toward his bedroom, catching a glimpse of the full moon outdoors. Like a gaping eye, it focused on him, soaking him with an unsettling light that seeped across his body like running mercury. Derek shivered and the feeling of loneliness returned.

Okay, maybe a few hours of sleep was a decent idea after all. The day job did pay the bills. Can't be crashing and burning at the office. He crawled on the unmade bed and found the pillow with his cheek. He closed his eyes and watched a manic slide show unfold, replaying scenes from his day, images of system crashes, and overdue bills, microwaved pizza rolls for dinner, and tons of messages. He rolled over onto his stomach and tried to stop the parade of unwelcome thoughts, tried to think of nothing more than his breath, tried to forget the ringing in his ears. He felt the soft feet of Foo land on his sheets. With deft precision, she maneuvered herself onto his back and began kneading his knotted neck and shoulders with her paws. The vibrations of her purrs

sent Derek into a soft haze. And Derek's roving mind created the image of a bird.

It was a peregrine falcon, a statue that his father gave him long ago. Carved of wood and darkened with age, the bird of prey still stood in Astrid's living room. Derek hadn't thought of the bird for years, but now it stood out in his mind with astonishing clarity. Proud and erect, the bird sat on its perch, eyes trained on some unfortunate animal in the distance, wings tucked back but poised for instant unfurling, beak lifted at a cocky angle.

"One of the finest specimens on earth," Charlie had said, the day he presented the falcon to Derek. "The ancient Egyptians recognized that. They associated the bird's qualities with those of their god, Horus."

Derek was only ten and couldn't understand what his dad was trying to tell him. He'd gotten some pretty strange presents from his dad, but he'd come to expect that. Charlie, usually red-eyed and breathing alcoholic fire, ranted on and on about subjects that puzzled Derek. This fascination with birds was a new one. When Derek asked his mother what to do with the sculpture, she sighed and suggested its current home on a high shelf.

"Why couldn't he get me a PlayStation, Mom?"

"Why indeed?" she said and bit her lower lip so hard it looked as if it would swell up.

Derek burrowed his face deeper into the pillow and the bird reappeared. But now, the falcon was alive. It flew silently, its stiff wings hardly twitching, riding air gusts higher each second. Its eyes targeted on a pinpoint in the dark night. The beak, a hooked and pointed instrument of lethal possibilities, pierced the air as the feathered warrior swerved and circled its prey. An enveloping, mechanical buzzing, almost musical in its regularity, surged, then cleared.

"Derek. I am Roger. Here to help you."

The bird slipped through the crisp April air, parting the rich landscape of dreams. As pure spring sunlight prodded the trees, forcing withering frost to withdraw, exposing the sweet green buds and sprouts to a wash of emerging light, the bird rode on the singing rays of dawn. He began to spin, rotate, and whirl into something dark and deep. Derek felt unseen eyes that were mov-

ing, probing, penetrating his innermost thoughts. His brain began to howl.

“Derek. I am Roger. Here to help you.”

The bird regarded him, staring into Derek’s open eye. Unable to move, a synthetic voice bleating in his ears, caught between a dream and reality, Derek did the only thing he could. He filled his lungs with a desperate breath and screamed himself awake.