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The support of family, friends, and co-workers make this story possible. We continue to find relevant current events from the technology and global economy which fit delightfully into our series. With this volume we are again refocused on our original R-Group characters and their newest challenges. We are grateful to those who continue to help us tell our stories.

It continues to go without saying our editor, Sandy, provides valuable insights and consistency in our stories. Your time spent insures the readability, while we create the wow factor. We feel certain you enjoyed the story from start to finish.

Leveraging our character universe has allowed us to expand and further develop our heroes and our villains. This story is no exception and on our beta readers, Kaye B, was delighted with our use of one particular character of questionable morals and was delighted with our treatment of the character right up to the end.

Tyler B found it thought provoking, insightful, and a good tale to share. One of his passions is analytics and trading which we think added to his delight with this tale. Our beta readers have added their thoughts, insights and honest commentary to us, which we take seriously during the final grooming phases of the stories.

In addition to the use of characters introduced in other volumes, we also bring new characters to life in part from people who cross our paths either personal or professional. Two of the folks used for patterns in this story came from our professional past and two from personal encounters. All four of these asked to remain unnamed, but were thoroughly delighted with the consideration and treatment given in the story.

We actively seek out beta readers, and reviewers to post comments on external websites. If you or someone you know would like to support our next story, please send a note to seriesenigma@gmail.com Most of all thanks to all our readers and fans, you are appreciated. If you find you have any questions or comments our website has a place for us to track them and respond, www.enigmabookseries.com. Happy reading!

Other stories by Breakfield and Burkey in The Enigma Series:

The Enigma Factor
The Enigma Rising
The Enigma Ignite
The Enigma Wraith
The Enigma Stolen
The Enigma Always
The Enigma Gamers – A CATS Tale

Prologue – **Lost in the blink of an action** – ten years earlier

Darkness had settled over his dreary dorm room. He hadn't bothered to eat after answering the University Chancellor's endless questions. He was too stricken with the deep fear of being expelled from school and, worse, the humiliation it would bring to his family. Nothing had been threatened or decided when the conversation ended, but a promise of a disciplinary decision before the end of the weekend had been suggested.

He reviewed the consultations and joking that had led up to today. It had been one of those days with events that begged to be changed and forgotten. Choices that seemed so innocent in discussions that had turned so horrible after the fact. He had been a loner for the three years he had been in the program, with no social life. On the rare occasion that he worked with other classmates, he'd found that he had been responsible for most of the work to complete a given project. It really had not bothered him, but during this semester the poor students and laggards had been weeded out. The remaining students were all A-type personalities with an unyielding drive to succeed. He had finally felt he was with men who had equivalent capabilities in logic, reasoning, and forward thinking, even from their different disciplines.

From the beginning, he had focused on database programming, using the logic and forward views of the times to leapfrog the generally accepted thinking. The thought leadership that was coming out of the Ivy League schools or the newly emerging technology businesses were dwarfed by visions he and the few classmates he considered near equals had roughed out. The late night studies and conversations with these men had allowed him to lower his guard, as he thought about being accepted as one of them. He had honestly believed that he could step out

from his old structured world and easily move into this new one. He was confident that this world was filled with people who spoke and understood the possibilities of the digital realm.

Sadness with his choices as he reflected on the reasons caused him to shake his head in disbelief. How would he be able to honor his family name with this hanging over his head? Even though the others had laughed it off and cried ‘college prank,’ he would clearly not be able to make this excuse the focus of the upcoming discussion with his uncle. Guilt had slowed every thought, action, and response during the day.

He had not spoken to his co-conspirators at all since they had been taken away from the hospital, even though, as he passed, one of them grinned and quipped, “It will all work out. Keep a stiff upper lip, old chum, and your inscrutable face intact.”

At that moment, regardless of the punishment meted out by the university, he knew he needed to plan how he would make amends. He practically choked every time he considered how he had come to the University robed in honor but had now replaced it with unendurable shame.

As the oldest son of the oldest male in a long line of an honor bound culture, he had no excuse for tainting the family name. True, he was thousands of miles from home in a culture that usually shrugged its shoulders at college indiscretions, but he knew distance was not a safety net as it might have been before telephones, fax machines, or even telegrams. He had been given the opportunity to gain advanced education at the European university. His uncle and other family members had sacrificed to meet the costs even though he had qualified for some scholarships. Those might even be at risk after this stunt.

If he were able to complete the program, he needed to increase his course load and finish faster to save the family any additional expenses. In the forthcoming discussion with his uncle, he planned to lay this out as one in a series of steps in his path to forgiveness. He also had been

outlining for months a series of programs, a bit before their time, which could gather information in new ways and use his yet to be completed programs to make deterministic decisions.

Technology that wasn't available he could create. He had the brains, he had the dreams, and he had the tenacity to use what was available, stretching it to the limits, or create the rest. The cruel luck of this escapade was what made the focus of his next avenues become clearer.

Armed with the confidence of his plans and cash to pay for the privilege of using a semi-private telephone, he went to purchase his cellular phone. Until this time he had been confident enough to send long letters home at the end of each semester, along with his grades and class standing. Now a private conversation was needed, and to hear the voice of his uncle was critically important. Getting the device, some instructions and a plan that afforded international calling with a controllable cost element, he placed the call to his uncle's offices, which were just beginning their day. When connected to the receptionist, he formally asked to be connected to his uncle.

His uncle answered quickly with concern in his voice. "My esteemed one, are you ill or in danger?"

"No, my uncle, but I am in trouble and need your forgiveness."

With all the concern removed from his tone, he sternly replied, "Why would my ward and the son of my deceased brother need forgiveness? What have you done?"

He could feel the stern iciness in his uncle's voice but was determined to petition for a second chance. As had been outlined in his head in his dorm room, he related the activities, point by point. There was no soft-pedaling on his culpability in the matter at hand as he related the activities to his uncle and sketched his go forward plans. After thirty minutes of one-way conversation, he went silent.

As the seconds stretched into minutes, concern heightened in the young man's chest, threatening to crush his heart and stop his breathing. He finally could take no more as he begged, "Uncle, can you not speak to forgive me?"

"Silence!" his uncle demanded. "You have disgraced your family and your ancestors. There is no amount of planning you could do to rectify the steps already taken by you. You will never call here again or show your face to your former family. You are dead and gone. The funds you have in your account as of now is all you will get from me, ever. You will never amount to anything good or pure again. Do not embarrass this family again by using our name from this day forward. You chose dishonor as a life's course, so make the transition complete and answer to another name. You are a ghost in shame and will be alone for eternity."

With that last remark, his former uncle disconnected the call, as well as cast him out alone into the world. Each of the statements made by his uncle replayed in his head, growing colder and harsher each time he rewound the conversation. He made his way slowly back to his dorm room and replayed all the events that had led to his demise. As he finished packing his bags, turned out the light, and shut the door, he completely accepted that his past was now gone.

Those simple activities, coupled with the realization that his past had been stripped from him, had helped him reach a decision. As he stared into the night's darkness, a new resolve grew within him. He announced loudly and with deep-seated conviction as he strode through the darkness toward the bus stop, "I will show you all! I have the patience to endure this obstacle, but I will win back my honor even if it is only for myself! A man without a past is free to reinvent himself into the image of his choosing! I will become the ghost, not mourn the loss, and I will win for my new family of me."

Chapter 1 – Number Crunching Issues

Mike Patrick was looking at the big wall screen in his opulent office overlooking the recently expanded Suez Canal as the data was streaming. His tailored shirt strained at the buttons following his typical over-sized lunch with his cronies. As the head of ePETRO, Inc., he felt he could eat daily at a five star restaurant and never have to work out. He was too important to have anything look amiss, even though his valet was constantly letting out the seams of his tailored suits or simply buying larger sizes. An outsider might consider him powerful, rather than simply full of himself.

Mike behaved as if he was at the limits of his patience, as he ran his hand through his salt and pepper almost-well-cut hair and demanded, “How in the hell is that possible? We have agreements ... uh, I mean understandings in place that oil production quotas should not be overrun. Roslyn, are you actually telling me that world oil production is hovering well above that? Who’s violating their understood production limits?”

Roslyn had worked with Mike for several years as his number two. She had more incriminating pictures and reports than he even knew, though he was aware of some. Roslyn was a large woman and slightly taller than Mike at 1.83 meters. Her red silk suit, though quite expensive, had been sat in for way too long and looked like no amount of pressing would remove the wrinkles. Her hair was well cut, but its color of old wheat was simply not attractive against her sallow skin.

Roslyn opened her eyes wide in obvious bewilderment and, through her generous lips covered with lipstick that matched her suit, stated, “According to the report, no one, Mike. That’s what doesn’t make any sense. If this report is correct, then no oil producing country or corporation within our organization is violating the understood quotas.”

Patrick was grinding his teeth in anger as he complained, “At this price point we can’t make back the cost to drill for, let alone bring up, the damn stuff. And, Roslyn, if you try and tell me that stupid old joke about losing money on every barrel of oil but that we can make it up in volume, I will furiously box your ears!”

Before Roslyn could offer anything else, Mike practically hollered, “Get everyone on the phone! We are going to get to the bottom of this. I want to know who is violating our understood production quotas and why.”

Roslyn was hesitant and her eyes were awash in reluctance, but she finally managed to respond, as non-offensively as possible. “Uh, sir, I have been fielding calls from all of them already, asking us the same question. The last few phone calls were from people as agitated as you are, sir. I think we need to do a little more homework before we round everyone up on an encrypted video call.”

Mike was still quite cross and was aware he required more information as he asked, “So, what are you saying? You don’t believe someone is lying in this poisonous charade, courting disaster?”

Again Roslyn shifted uneasily as she sat in her chair. She blinked as she searched for the right word choice and offered, “Sir, I believe everyone is holding firm on their oil production numbers because our satellite surveillance cannot confirm the extra forty percent of oil from any of the known locations. That suggests that this increase in product has to be coming from somewhere else.

“Even if someone was sneaking out that much extra oil, my question is why and how would we not have known of additional production areas? If it is a new entrant to the market, they would be as hurt by selling prices that are lower than production prices, just as we are. Or, if

someone is bringing up oil with newer lower cost extraction technology, we would have already heard about it.”

Mike, now calmed down to a just seething level, queried, “Okay, so let’s just say, for argument’s sake, no one is fudging on their quantities. The only other possibility is ...”

Roslyn finished his sentence. “...the numbers have been tampered with.”

Mike rolled his eyes at the remark and was about to respond when his personal line rang. Not wanting to waste any effort, he answered it on the speaker phone, and his administrative assistant quickly began, “I know you told me not to disturb you, but the Chairman of the Board is on the line with what is most probably the rest of the board as well. She was not taking no for an answer and did not provide her usual jovial greeting to me. When I complete the connection, I suspect you will be on with all the board of directors, sir.”

Mike didn’t get a breath to respond before he was on live with the chairman and likely the entire board. Using the speaker phone and trying to buy a little time to realign his thought process, in his cheeriest voice, he offered, “Good day, Madam Chairman, and of course to all the other conference call attendees. I rarely get a social call from the board since I know you all to be quite busy.

“I am confident that I didn’t miss a regularly scheduled meeting, so I am wondering ...”

Marge, the chairman, promptly broke into the monolog. “Cut the crap, Mike! I called this emergency meeting and with the rest of the directors on the conference bridge, because I want some answers. To be on this board of directors you have to own stock in this company, and right now all the market players are heading for the exits and dumping our stock like it was radioactive.

‘Now, when I see my investments heading south in this nuclear winter without a heads-up from the president of our company, it makes me think he’s asleep at the wheel. I expect you to immediately tell me who has gone rogue on our oil production agreements. I also want to know the plan and timeline to get them back in line for oil at our agreed fair and profitable price point so our stock price will stop screaming *Dive, Dive, Dive*, like it was a U-Boat commander under attack!’

Mike muted the speaker phone. With a sour look on his face, Mike turned to Roslyn and flatly stated, “Marge the Barge on a rampage again. Glad I’m not there to see her 140 kilos of body mass fighting to overwhelm the buttons on her tent dress.”

Roslyn struggled to suppress her laughter at the vulgar but humorous description as he took the phone off of mute.

Mike put forth his most diplomatic, well-practiced voice as he offered, “Madam Chairman, we understand the gravity of the situation. I am rapidly evaluating all of our informational resources to quickly get to the bottom of the situation. I propose ...”

Again Marge barged into Mike’s oily speech. “Am I hearing you don’t have a frosty, fricking clue as to how this situation arose? We hired you to have timely answers for our pointed questions. All I’m seeing is a soon to be ex-oil company president with no pointed answers but clearly a stupid pointed head. I don’t pay you so I can be uninformed about something as dramatic as this. If you don’t want to be earning a living back rough-necking out in west fencepost Texas, pull your head out of your backside and give me answers now. I don’t want a bit of the mealy-mouth double talk you give to the reporters!”

Mike had to mute the phone again to bring his breathing back under control. He shot a stern look at Roslyn and pointedly asked, “Are you going to let her talk to me that way?”

Roslyn, now completely on the spot and with a puzzled look, responded as naïvely and sincerely as possible. “Uh...what way, sir?”

Now seething at the dressing down he was getting and more that was about to come, Mike unmuted the phone and evenly stated, “In looking at all our data, documentation, and numbers of all partners, rivals, and peers that produce oil, no one can be accused of over-production. Our shipping to market, our insider information, and our satellite imagery all point to the same piece of information. No one is over-producing, Madam Chairman.”

Marge sputtered for a second then boomed, “What? Are you insane? At forty percent over-capacity production, prices on the commodity markets are dropping to fire-sale pricing, and you claim no one is flooding the supply chain.

“Mike, you aren’t stupid enough to think I would believe the entire planet is lying about its production numbers just to make us look bad. You think the joke is on us? Since you truly have nothing else better to do, why don’t you find out who or what is playing this little joke on us, hmm?”

Mike could feel the ice from Marge coming through the phone with her last comment. Marge was a thoroughly unpleasant woman, but with her enormous bulk and intimidating manners she usually got her way. Her management style was a combination of coercion, threats, and psychological beatings until she got the answers she wanted. Marge the Barge was a formidable opponent in the business world, and it was better to stay clear of her. You couldn’t really call her cruel because that would have meant that she enjoyed her brutal effect on others. She cared for nothing, not pets, not family, not her community, and probably not even her life. Her rise to the top had cost her all of her human emotions, save one. She had to win at all the global business games she wanted to play in. Nothing else mattered. And, like any psychological

addiction, the momentary rush didn't last long enough before a new rush was required. She was a very sad excuse for a human being from every angle.

Mike, now calm again, realized that she would have her way. If it meant that he was out of the way, then so be it. He smiled at the corporate combat barrage that was being shoved at him, so he countered, "Madam Chairman, we are working this issue with all due haste. If that is an unsatisfactory answer to you and the board, I shall, of course, tender my resignation. Will that make the situation more palatable for the board?"

Without the benefit of a video to observe the impact of his statement, Mike was sure that all the board members were staring at Marge and waiting for her answer.

After a long pause, of just a few seconds, she finally conveyed, "You are one of the few people who can get me to reel in my temper when it gets a little out of line. I will not accept your resignation but will charge you to get to the bottom of this mess. I want order restored in the marketplace as rapidly as possible. To do that, I am prepared to offer additional resources to make sure you are successful. Do we understand one another, Mike?"

Mike muted the phone and retorted to Roslyn. "Oh good, we aren't going to reenact the Jonah and the Whale story." Roslyn smirked slightly.

Mike unmuted his phone and stated, "As usual, Madam Chairman, you have not understated your position. I understand completely. Allow me to disengage from this call so that I can return to my analysis. Good day."

After he disconnected from the call, Mike studied Roslyn for a moment then questioned, "How is it that all the markets have different production figures than the producers of a raw material?"

Roslyn added, “And, expertly use that to drive an entire market into a tail spin? We know who all the players are and within three to five percent of how much they can pull from the ground. I am working to discover how and who could be distorting those numbers.”

Mike asked, “Why can’t we just publish our numbers to the markets? That should be enough to make this go away and get oil back to where it should be priced.”

Roslyn then offered, “Our word against the commodity traders and brokers that make this economy go round and round? Their numbers are usually quite close to ours. At this point, our figures would mean a huge jump in oil futures and probably lots of angry people decrying the big bad oil producers of rigging the supply figures to raise the price. I’m sure we would be painted as self-serving opportunists trying to squeeze the average consumer. How big of a private army would we need to surround ourselves with to survive?”

Mike clucked his tongue and said, “Yeah, I can see that as a classic *run for your life moment*. I don’t think that amount of help is the resources we could call on, suggested by Marge the Barge.

“This is just great. We can’t tell the world their numbers are wrong for fear of starting a firestorm, but if we don’t we will be out of business selling our product for less than what it costs to bring it to market. Let’s run the numbers one more time to see if we missed anything. If it comes up the same, then try to set up a full video conference with the others to discuss the potential solutions.”

Roslyn nodded her head and said, “Yes, sir.”

Chapter 2 – Board Games

The office was suitable to a man who had been ensconced in it for several years. Old European styling of the desk and chair was tastefully offset with a tile floor and an area rug that displayed woodland creatures and birds. A high definition screen was mounted on the wall, and a simple keyboard was accessible on the desktop. The papers were neatly stacked with a clearly determined order of priority. A matching filing cabinet was modest in size due to most information being maintained digitally in the secure data center adjacent to this office. Quiet music was playing lightly in the background with infrequent interruption by the chimes of the antique wall clock.

Otto lifted his head from the documents he was reviewing and smiled broadly as he noted the incoming caller ID on his fruit phone. He warmly greeted the caller. “Thiago, my good man. How nice to hear from you again. I know we haven’t had a chance to simply chat, but I had noticed on my calendar that our semi-annual business call is coming up next month. I wouldn’t want you to think that I am remiss in our discussions. I trust you are well, and that delightful daughter of yours, Lara, is prospering with her fashion endeavor.

“How can I be of assistance, kind sir?”

A sullen Thiago asked, “Otto, do you remember those 13th and 14th century maps of the world where Europe was thought to be the center of the universe? The fear of the times was if one sailed a ship too far in any one direction, one would fall off the world into the abyss.”

Somewhat taken aback by the tone of Thiago and his comment, Otto cautiously confirmed, “Yes, I recall pictures of those maps, as well as the associated fear of the times.

“Tell me, is there a subtle parallel to ancient but wrong impressions of the world, and your present state of affairs?”

Thiago then lamented, “It feels, Otto, like my business world is sailing off into the abyss. Do you have a few minutes to visit? I know I sort of sprang this call on you, but I feel I need to talk to someone if for no other reason than just to hear it stated out loud.”

Otto responded, “My friend, I actually do have other activities scheduled, but let me move a few things while you hold for a moment, so I can visit for a while.” Otto put the phone down and quickly rescheduled a few things on his calendar and then stated, “Okay, I moved a few things, but can you net this out for me so we don’t have to revisit the last six hundred years of history to get to your issues?”

Thiago chuckled slightly and allowed, “Point taken, Otto. How well you know me. Where to begin?”

“For years we, in Brazil, have tried to build a business portfolio that operated on the different cycles of commodities, up or down. Our energy holdings, mining operations, and, of course, shipping businesses have come close to being an ideal model until recently. We were about to sink several offshore oil wells here in Brazil, when we watched the floor pricing buckle under the oil oversupply problem. We were also planning to sign a deal with the Chilean government to launch a new copper mine, when that commodity’s price began to flat-line as well.

“With no raw materials or oil to ship, I now have so much excess shipping capacity that I am going to have to do layoffs and idle my shipping fleet.”

Otto listened sympathetically to Thiago and offered, “My friend, we both know that business cycles come and go. I’m sure you are not overstating your position, but in every business there are ebbs and flows for products, whether finished or raw materials. I am confident

that we can provide some useful guidance on how to weather this business storm, as well as be properly positioned during the next upturn.”

Thiago countered, “Otto, I was fairly sure that this would be your position on the matter. Before calling, I and my staff played a little game of *let’s pretend to be Otto* so we can see what our options are. Now what we found as a result of that exercise is really what I’m calling about.”

Otto, somewhat perplexed, responded, “Please, Thiago, go ahead. I’m decidedly interested in hearing how the Otto Game went.”

A slight grin blossomed, transforming Thiago’s initial scowl. He explained, “We began digging into our numbers, trying to understand how we missed the oversupply issue of both oil and copper, when we discovered something I can’t explain.

“In each commodity area where we were planning to invest, we had diligently analyzed each of our competitive producers. We came up with a figure that simply doesn’t match what is being stated on the world markets. We even discovered that production figures from my organization are being advertised as well, even though none of what is being attributed to us is in fact accurate.”

Otto did a double take and had an astonished look as he asked, “Thiago, how is that possible? You seem to be suggesting that your intended commodity production values are being input into the world commodity markets, but you in fact did not physically have the materials up for sale.

“Hold on there! If your materials were being listed in the commodity markets and a sale was transacted, then it stands to reason that you had revenue coming in but no corresponding out-flow of goods. Wouldn’t that show up on your corporate books?”

Thiago grinned a little more and continued, “Ah good, we are tracking to how the pretend Otto would think. We reasoned that as well, but, alas, no free money. I come to you with this issue to see if you can make any sense of it.

“I’m not out anything, except my future. I’ve plenty on my plate to worry about. I’m hoping you and your team can look at this anomaly to see what can be done about it. Because, right now, it appears from the outside looking in that we are selling commodities onto the world market, yet not recording the income. If the government saw this they would accuse us of income tax evasion and become most unpleasant. At least more than usual anyway. If we found it, then someone else is bound to find it and start pointing fingers. I need your help sleuthing out an answer, my friend.”

Otto thought for a moment and then queried, “Do you think we can turn your exercise into a board game? We could name it *Being Otto*. A board game of strategy that does combat against intrigue, with financial digital crime. I bet we can make an online subscription version, as well.

“I know you thought of it, but since I’m Otto, I want a 70/30 split for the revenue. My favor of course.”

Thiago clucked his tongue and replied, “You’re right, I shouldn’t have teased you about being Otto. But the rest of the story is true. Can you and your team work this for me, please?”

Otto chuckled slightly and admitted, “Yes, of course, old friend. But, in the meantime I need you to design some swell board pieces that can be used by the players as they roll for play then move to the next square. Don’t tell Lara, though, as she’ll want a share of the royalties. Maybe one of the pieces could be a commodity trader getting ready to jump out of the window.

Or maybe one of your oil tankers loading up an order of tennis shoes. Oh and hey, how about turning one of your offshore oil drilling platforms into a water park slide?”

Thiago chortled and stated, “Now I remember why we only visit twice a year and do lunch. Good day, Otto.”

Chapter 3 – May I have this dance?

The dark walls of the room were made more somber by the minimal amber lighting that circled the edge of the ceiling and the candlelit sconces at wide but equal distances along the walls. Floor and ceiling were covered in mahogany with darker stains pooled along the floor. No carpets muffled the sounds of the heavy chairs as they moved with the occupants sitting and shifting. Table lighting fanned out from the leader's position of power which minimized the view of his features.

The meeting leader and organizer gave a slight smile as everyone took their respective seats and waited quietly for him to begin. No idle conversation or whispers came from the attendees. Before they were all seated, a large black female enforcer-type individual approached the leader and quietly whispered, "The room has been swept. No unauthorized electronics are present."

She then took up her post behind the leader and stood at attention, aware of every movement made by everyone in the room. She looked quite menacing though she was as still as granite.

The leader seemed tall even while seated. His dark, straight, thick stock of hair was well groomed, if a little long. His eyes appeared black as coal with the muted light not reflecting in them at all. His hands were sculpted, with long fingers. No jewelry adorned his hands or neck. His dark suit nearly blended with the color of the massive armed leather chair. He watched the group as they gathered and sat.

After a few moments, he finally offered, "I appreciate everyone breaking free from their daily routine to attend this meeting. I know you find travel to this monthly meeting tedious. I

simply do not trust the importance of our meeting content to encrypted voice/video tunneling, controlled by the very people we seek to, uh ..., re-orient.

“I wanted to advise you that monies from our standard business practices are being funneled into our newest project. We need to have clear milestones at the computer-projected intersect points, so that our goals can be achieved while we remain an anonymous entity. Let’s go around the table, and give me short, crisp bullets of each of your assigned projects.”

Before the third report could be offered by that attendee, the leader interrupted, “Moncrieff, can you explain your failure to the group? Your actions in the copper commodity area were picked up by a most dangerous adversary who has been scanning for other examples which could potentially expose our carefully orchestrated plan.”

Moncrieff tried to swallow, but his dry mouth simply would not cooperate. After several deep breaths, he managed to regain control as he haltingly offered, “I, um ..., saw an opportunity, rather that is, a trading anomaly which would let us, um..., I accelerated our earnings with that trade. I thought that ...”

The leader simply raised his hand to gain the silence he wanted. Moncrieff struggled to keep his terror under control as the leader then stated, “We have very simple rules in this organization. That way, when someone doesn’t comply with them, we have very simple solutions.”

The leader cut his eyes over to his other large black enforcer who, in an instant, was behind Moncrieff. The enforcer’s bulk had pinned Moncrieff between the chair and the massive mahogany table. His large, powerful arms quickly wrapped themselves around Moncrieff’s head and abruptly twisted it 180 degrees, producing a sickening crack loud enough for all to hear. The large black man then dispassionately stepped back to let Moncrieff’s body slump to the floor.

The leader, moderately pleased with the demonstration, stated, “For the group’s consideration, I need someone in this role who can be trusted to follow instructions succinctly. As you all are aware, we want to discourage independent thinking that deviates from our plan or risks our detection. If there are no objections, I would like to appoint LJ to immediately step into the role and responsibilities so recently vacated.”

No one dared to do anything except nod their heads in agreement. LJ, the large black enforcer, smiled broadly, revealing several gold encrusted teeth, and then promptly took the seat at the table which Moncrieff had occupied. LJ’s head to shoulders had no clear neck delineation. He too had no jewelry, and his black leather slacks and black satin long-sleeved shirt completed the look of the enforcer turned player. The other black enforcer kept her smile in check, even as she gave a barely perceptible congratulatory nod to her associate.

The leader added, “LJ, you have a week to determine the extent of the possible breach into identifying our team. All of the resources available transfer immediately to you, including the housing and vehicle arrangements.”

LJ nodded agreement. He recognized time was of the essence in his complying with that task. He would use all his own computer resources to make certain the breach was obliterated. He thought back to those he had worked with as he considered the best way to make the data shifts remain untraceable. All his work had been to achieve this point of power, and one misstep would end more than just his career. If his faith had ever been real, he might have prayed. Prayers would not keep him alive or on top of this crowd.