

Pierre Béhel

**Cyber-games
with friends**

Novel

Cyber-games with friends

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Cyber-games with friends

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Cyber-games with friends

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All the characters and all the situations presented in this novel are pure invention. Any resemblance to facts or persons existing or having existed is purely coincidental.

However, all presented hacking techniques are realistic. Real cases have often already been reported.

Cyber-games with friends

Cyber-games with friends

1

They descended one after the other from the cable car. In this season, when autumn was well underway, there were significantly fewer tourists in San Francisco although, of course, the city was never the sole property of its permanent inhabitants. And then it was early, too early for the normal tourists who were still having their breakfast at best, too late for the night revelers who had already gone to bed.

She took the hand of the man she had just spent the night with. He smiled at her. They walked at the same pace towards the tram. They could have finished on foot, but because a tram was coming... They did not separate when they boarded. And the vehicle started off almost immediately.

Skyscrapers lined both sides of the avenue. As the capital of many alternative and protest movements, San Francisco remained a large American city and its center was thus populated by towers almost as tall as that of Babel. The inhabitants were no more surprised than the millions of Parisians passing next to the Eiffel Tower every day, the Chinese crossing the Tian'anmen Square by brushing the Forbidden City or the Londoners crossing the Tower Bridge.

Once they arrived at the Harbor Station, on

Cyber-games with friends

the edge of the Bay, the woman and the man got off the tram and walked, still hand in hand, on the wide sidewalk that followed the “piers”, the pontoons where the huge ships take shelter in the Bay before crossing the pass under the Golden Gate to enter the Pacific Ocean.

Today, utility ships were becoming rare in this part of town. The real port was further away. There were mainly passenger boats, especially those intended for the visit of the old prison of Alcatraz, on the rock in the middle of the Bay.

And the old sheds, for the most part, had become souvenir shops or restaurants. The neighborhood of the ferry terminal, The Embarcadero, had become a trendy place, one where people came to party with friends but in a bourgeois way. Other types of parties had other dedicated quarters.

When the woman glanced enamored at the man, he was already looking at her, his gaze filled with desire. She liked that. Yes, she liked that. Perhaps, at last, she would have found the right one, the one who would be her husband, the father of her children. Even though she should not jump to conclusions too quickly.

Suddenly, black pigeons flew out onto the lawn, chased out of an abandoned pack of fast-food fries by the landing of a seagull four or five times their size. They passed right under the woman’s nose. By reflex, she pulled back, closing

Cyber-games with friends

her eyes and letting out a small cry.

When she opened her eyes, she realized that she had taken refuge with the man, that he was covering her with his arms. He kissed her on the forehead. She laughed. She had been stupid to be afraid of a few pigeons.

They started walking again, just holding hands. The “piers” were fading away to their right, across the boulevard. The numbers followed one another and increased as the couple went north, towards the Golden Gate. But they didn’t go that far.

The man looked at the woman. Yes, he had had a good night. Accompanying her to the office, like this, in the morning, along the bay, brought a romantic conclusion to a torrid sequence of events. It had taken a long time to get her to agree to open her bed to him. Too much time. He had been this close to letting go and looking for someone else or another course of action. He smiled at her when she gave him her cat eyes. Good god is she stupid! A hot body and a decent fucker but stupid.

Her apartment, where they had spent the night after a dinner at the restaurant he had offered her, the last chance dinner, was small. She owned it, with a loan that would last for a number of years. But, of course, as soon as she got married, she would sell it. It was necessary to provide a small house, with at least three bedrooms, for the

Cyber-games with friends

parents and children. Two children, a boy, a girl. And a dog. And a fireplace for knitting in front of it, during winter evenings. Not too far from a church, either, to be able to go there with the family, by foot, all holding hands. This was the life this woman dreamed of.

Sleeping with the boys who flirted with her always left her with a taste of regret. Amanda Zimmer was not yet thirty years old, but already she feared that she had missed her life. This one, who accompanied her this morning, she had slept with last night. He was a computer scientist. A promising choice hinting at a bright future..

They had gone out together. And then, one evening, she had agreed to be kissed and caressed on the porch of her building, while he was walking her home. She felt good in those arms. So last night, while he was still caressing her, with one hand venturing up her skirt, she had asked him to go upstairs. He had immediately agreed.

This morning, while walking, she held his hand. She was smiling. But she hesitated. She did not feel ready to love this man. Something held her back, a feminine instinct of protection. She had adored when they had made love. He had wanted to put a little variety in the positions, but she preferred the classic things. He complied with her request without complaining.

No matter how much she examined the

Cyber-games with friends

information at her disposal, she could only tell herself that this man was the right one. He had a good job. He was kind, caring. She had never been to his house. Maybe that was what she missed to know him well. He had never offered. No doubt, like many single men, his home was a bit messy and not spotlessly clean. After all, he was just a man. But even a man has his pride. It would be necessary to suggest to him, this next weekend, that he take her to his home. That would leave him a few days to get the place ready.

Amanda Zimmer pulled her chestnut hair out from under her collar. She suddenly felt liberated. Her smile grew sharper as her hair, instead of falling nicely over her shoulders as usual, blew in the wind gushing in from San Francisco Bay.

It was the first time they had slept together. And so it was the first time that they were together in the morning and that he accompanied her to work. They were a little early. No doubt he then had to go further, to his own work. Suddenly, Amanda realized she didn't know what company he worked for.

He was a computer scientist, yes. But where? He always walked around with at least one laptop. He had repaired his own computer which had a problem accessing the Internet. But the fact remained that he had never told her... She would have to ask him directly to avoid any dodging.

They were arriving at the Blue Tower, across

Cyber-games with friends

from the restaurants on Pier 23. Too late for questions. And no way colleagues should see her with a man holding her hand. It would lead to gossip.

“Wait, Igor, leave me here”, she told him.

“Whatever you want.”

He took her in his arms, plunging his face into her hair before kissing her briefly on the lips in an almost chaste manner. She smiled at him. He released her from his arms and she started to walk away saying, “see you later”.

Suddenly, he blocked her by putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Oh, excuse me, I almost forgot...”

“Yes?”

“Could you do me a little favor? My printer is broken and I need to have some resumes on paper. Could you get me a dozen copies from your office and give them to me tonight when I take you out to dinner?”

This was a good opportunity to learn more about him. It was almost too good to be true.

“Yes, of course”, she said.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a thumb drive, and handed it to Amanda. She took it.

“Thank you”, he said simply.

Then he watched her walk away from him. Amanda Zimmer strode briskly across the forecourt between the boulevard and the entrance to the Blue Tower. Everyone called it that way in

Cyber-games with friends

San Francisco. She entered and went directly to her office, to Bioxem's accounting department. The name of the firm appeared at the top of the tower, in large blue letters.

The company had been called Bioxem for a few years. Even if everyone still only remembered its centuries-old activity, table salt. In San Francisco, on all the tables, there was Blue Ocean salt.

But Blue Ocean had diversified well. First, almost a century ago, there were bath salts, when it became fashionable. A less refined product than table salt, which was voluntarily polluted by crushing algae which, otherwise, had to be removed, and, above all, a product which was sold at a much higher price than table salt.

Then, during the era of great economic growth, Blue Ocean had diversified into nitrate and potash salts for agriculture and various industries. And then the current boss of this large family company had led the diversification in biochemistry and the recycling of agricultural or aquaculture waste. The name change had been imposed with the reorganization of the group and its listing on the stock exchange. Blue Ocean had become Bioxem, with only table salt retaining the historical name "Blue Ocean". The installation of the headquarters in the new tower, instead of the old buildings in Monterey, had followed. Located further south, towards Los Angeles, the old town

Cyber-games with friends

of sardine fishermen and other seafarers was no more than a tourist city, not very practical for the headquarters of a growing society. And, San Francisco was considered to be one end of Silicon Valley.

The man stopped looking at the Blue Tower. His mistress had entered it. In a few moments, she would turn on her computer and slip the USB key into it. He was going to have to find another girl to warm him up at night. She had nice breasts but was kind of frozen in bed. Her reactions were very predictable. Luckily, she did not usually go to the same places he did. He had had to track her before surreptitiously approaching her, with the gentleness necessary to seduce this kind of girl.

Turning around, the man shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and headed for where he had parked his car, further north. He was smiling, lowering his eyes to avoid the wind. Igor Wlamywacz was a pretty twisted pseudonym. He himself had had trouble pronouncing it well and writing it flawlessly. He smiled inwardly. This girl hadn't even dared to ask him to repeat his name. She had probably written it with many mistakes.

Igor continued to walk north. The pier numbers continued to grow. He had to continue around the hill. The girl lived in an old red brick building on Russian Hill. To get there, he had parked his car at the bottom of the hill, near Fort Mason. He had nothing better to do than walk

Cyber-games with friends

while the process started. So he walked along the bay. He glanced from time to time towards the “piers”. The first tourists began to invade them.

Departures to Alcatraz were about to begin. Igor Wlamywacz paused for a moment, a smile on the corner of his lips. He could see in the distance, long past the end of the pier he was standing in front of, the sinister rock, with its buildings that would make even the most hardened of gangsters shudder. For decades now, the place had only welcomed tourists. Too expensive for a prison. And, ultimately, not so secure since three inmates had finally managed to escape. They had never been found. Perhaps they had drowned in the bay. This was the official version of the story.

The man shrugged. It really didn't matter.

If these three guys had pulled it off, good for them. Otherwise, their fate was preferable to rotting in the small cells until the end of their miserable days. The pier numbers resumed their growth as the man walked. Moving away from the quay, Igor Wlamywacz entered Beach Street. His ordinary car was parked there, a few hundred meters away. In fact, after a few minutes, he found it. He got behind the wheel and then took out his smartphone. Amanda had been quick. The virus had sent him an email to warn him that it was installed on the accountant's computer.

The man dialed a number. There was only one ring before the caller picked up.

Cyber-games with friends

“It’s Igor. The thing is done.”

“I got the technical message too. Please proceed as agreed and we will meet in two hours at the scheduled location.”

Communication was cut off. Igor texted Amanda and drove off, satisfied. It was sunny. The day started well. Yes, the man could be satisfied. His mission would be quickly completed and he hoped to cash in on a nice bundle of dough. It was a beautiful fall day. And, if there was anything certain, it was that Igor Wlamywacz would never go to Alcatraz other than as a tourist.

Cyber-games with friends

2

Fortunately, Amanda Zimmer almost had a desk, being in a corner of the open space, not far from the printer. As she was the first to arrive, she had decided that it would be better to avoid questions by printing out Igor's resume right away.

It was still a funny name, Igor Wlamywacz. When she added him to her email address book, she copied and pasted the sender address from one of his messages. Otherwise, she would have made at least three or four mistakes.

Her computer barely turned on, she had inserted the USB key. The contents of the medium were immediately displayed on the screen. But there were no office files she could have printed. There were only videos. And the filenames started with "preteen" followed by a number that looked like a child's age, because of the "years" right after it. Finally, there was a sort of four-digit increment number. Sometimes a foreign first name.

Amanda Zimmer wondered what those videos were. She hesitated. It was weird. Igor had said that she had to print a resume saved on the USB key. Finally, she double-clicked on one of the videos.

Fortunately, at this hour, she was alone in the office. Amanda Zimmer screamed in horror as she pressed her hand forcefully over her mouth. Then

Cyber-games with friends

she cried. She couldn't stop staring at these horrors. There was at least a minute of horrible, revolting images.

Then she finally had the strength to close the video player. Then to disconnect the key. She tossed it angrily into the trash can. She was nauseous.

Staggering, she got up and headed for the bathroom. She wanted to dispense cold water on her face. But, upon arriving, she rushed into a cabin and vomited. She had slept with the guy who had a flash drive with... She threw up again.

She rinsed her mouth, splashed cool water on her face, and went to the coffee machine.

When she returned to her office, a colleague greeted her.

“Hey, you are already here?”

“Yes, since about ten minutes. I slept badly and went to get myself a coffee.”

“Indeed, you look pale. Are you sure you're not sick?”

“No, no, it's OK.”

Amanda forced herself back to her seat, opening the usual software she was working on. The numbers appeared. But Amanda didn't know what to do anymore. She couldn't understand what was on the screen.

Obsessed with the horror visions, she forced herself to look for the USB key in the trash. She put it back in her bag. She had to give him up to

Cyber-games with friends

the police. But give up who? She didn't know anything about him. His name, his mobile phone number, his email address. It was very little. And she had slept with him. Amanda Zimmer felt dirty, dirty inside. No, she would throw the key away from the office. The cleaning teams should not be given the surprise of finding a USB key in a trash can. And she had to forget. Amanda Zimmer was at this stage in her thinking process when her cell phone beeped. She took it and saw that Igor had texted her.

“Please, don't use what I gave you. I got the wrong key.”

Her nausea turned to rage.

“You won't see your shitty key again. And neither will you see me, you bastard. Don't call me anymore. Don't come near me. I never want to hear from you again. Get out of my life or I'll call the police.”

She sent her message and felt better. There was no response. He knew she had already unlocked his key. And he knew what she had seen there. She forced herself to return to her work. Her colleagues arrived one after the other. No one should know what had happened. She took a sip of coffee. All of a sudden, she realized that her network access was cut off. Her software crashed and closed. There was an alert popping up in a window with a red background.

“Quarantined infected computer. Please take

Cyber-games with friends

it to IT immediately.”

She thought to herself that she really couldn't catch herself a break. She turned off her computer, unplugged the external screen and keyboard, then took her computer – a handy laptop for going to meetings – as requested. She greeted her colleagues by grumbling against these pesky computer scientists incapable of protecting the computers effectively.

“Shit!”, yelled the man in his car.

Everything had gone well, though. The virus had quietly infected the accountant's computer. But something had blocked its progress towards the servers using the line-of-business software connections. Now he couldn't access Bioxem's machines, not even Amanda's workstation.

And with the official breakup with her, it was impossible to get a second chance. He had just lost a month of work. What was he going to tell his boss?

Cyber-games with friends

3

The ordinary car parked in the designated place, in a remote area of the port. Igor, pale, came out. He headed for the black van parked a little further, in an abandoned shed, probably destined for demolition. The warehouse doors were all open or missing. All the windows were broken. There was glass on the floor, on the concrete floor so old that it was cracked.

The van just passed under a series of beams, which were all that remained of a kind of mezzanine where offices must once have been, in a corner of the shed. The nose of the vehicle was turned towards the main door, ready to leave quickly.

The closer Igor approached the vehicle with the smoked windows, the more it slowed down. He felt nausea overwhelm him. He had failed. He was going to have to admit it. He hesitated. Shouldn't he rather turn around and only come back with good news? Or give up? He had a bad feeling about this, when he thought about it, even if a lot of money was at stake.

But a tall, very athletic guy, like a boxing and bodybuilding champion, with a face streaked with scars, got out of the van. He was the driver. He had on black pants, made up of a sort of twine . And a hoodie of the same color. The long sleeves

Cyber-games with friends

of the sweatshirt concealed the arms but its tight fit to the body revealed some strong muscles. No doubt the arms were also covered with scars. Or mysterious tattoos. Or both. The hood was undone, resting casually on the man's back, revealing blond hair cropped so short against very white skin that, from a distance, the driver appeared bald.

He had an unreadable, neutral expression. Did he have the ability to think? Did he have a soul? Or was he just a robot? Something about him was frightening. Perhaps the lack of emotion.

He looked at Igor as he walked around the van. Then he came to stand next to the sliding rear door. He looked Igor in the eye and waited.

If Igor turned around, this guy would have caught him in seconds. The hacker was not athletic. He no longer had a choice. He had to go make his report and admit his failure.

He walked like a condemned man going to his ordeal. When Igor was less than two meters from the van, the driver slid the rear door without taking his eyes off Igor. He simply said, "Mr. Leprechaun is waiting for you." The voice was neutral, expressionless, serious, almost mechanical, even if it hinted at a suppressed Slavic accent. This guy was not human.

Igor entered the van and sat down on the seat just behind the door, a sort of folding seat. It was facing rearward, opposite the direction of the vehicle's travel, and its backrest was right against

Cyber-games with friends

the front seats. The driver gently closed the sliding door but firmly enough that the click of its automatic lock was clearly heard.

Facing him, Igor found, sitting on the very comfortable back seat, Martin Leprechaun. He smiled in a fatherly manner. His apparent kindness seemed hypocritical. Igor knew it. A guy who used the services of people like this driver or even Igor couldn't be a saint anyway. Sixty years old, strong, close-cropped white hair, Martin Leprechaun looked like an old retired commando officer.

"Hello, Igor", Martin Leprechaun said simply, without putting any excessive warmth into his greeting but without animosity either.

"Hello Sir."

Behind him, Igor heard the driver settle back into his seat and wait silently.

"First of all, Igor, I wanted to give you a present. You are part of the family now."

Martin Leprechaun handed him a package, a simple plastic bag whose soft contents bent under the effect of the weight. Igor took it without hiding his surprise.

"Thank you sir."

"Well, open the package."

Igor complied. He ripped open the plastic wrapper and pulled out a hoodie that looked exactly like the driver's.

"It's kind of a uniform, if you will. I'd be happy if you put it on before we continue our

Cyber-games with friends

conversation.”

Igor took off his jacket and put on the hoodie. It was the right size. He arranged the hood so that it fell well behind his back. He wondered what this unexpected and curious gift meant. Why make him look like his driver? Or like a skinny version of his driver, to be more precise.

Martin Leprechaun waited until the young man in front of him was well settled before speaking again.

“Well, let’s get to the important stuff now, my dear Igor. Anyway, now that you’re part of the family, I can probably call you Kevin. It is true that Kevin Bellig is a less glamorous name than your hacker nickname.”

Kevin shuddered. His boss knew his real name. Holy shit. He felt a bead of cold sweat running down his back. Yet Martin Leprechaun retained his calm, kind, fatherly tone.

“My dear Kevin, so this morning you managed to send your intermediary, an accountant from Bioxem, the charming Amanda Zimmer, a USB key which was to infect their information system and allow us to carry out the desired operations. The infection of her workstation has indeed taken place. But the stump of the virus was very standard and security kicked in. Your virus was neutralized in a few moments. In short, you failed. Absolutely speaking, it wouldn’t be such a big deal in itself. It was a first attempt and using a

Cyber-games with friends

basic tool first could be reasonable. Where you have not been reasonable is that you have placed child pornography files on this key. Why did you make this choice?”

“My relationship with Amanda no longer had any reason to be. This allowed me to break up immediately.”

“So you burned your boats before you were sure you were successful. You have failed by immense levity and misplaced pride. You have disappointed me, my dear Kevin. Much disappointed me.”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again, sir. I’m going to reinitiate a penetration by...”

“You disappointed me, Kevin. When I recruited you, you bragged about successfully penetrating corporate systems to steal data or install ransomware for substantial ransoms. However, since then, I have become better informed. You’re just a... How do you say it again? Ah, yes, a script kiddy. A beginner, not an authentic professional. Your previous victims were small companies without any IT services, often less well protected than ordinary individuals. I won’t be mistaken again. Computer science is still a new field for me. But, all my life, I have tried to learn from my mistakes. So thank you for allowing me to make progress. But you will understand, my dear Kevin, that our relationship ends here and that, of course, you will not be paid.”

Cyber-games with friends

Kevin was chilled by the neutral and cold tone used by his client. But he was relieved by the turn of events. He bit off more than he could chew, but that wouldn't have any consequences.

“I understand, sir. So I will leave you. And I want to renew my apologies.”

Martin Leprechaun did not answer Kevin and spoke directly to his driver.

“Sergei, do the necessary for Kevin.”

The so-called Igor suddenly felt his throat encircled by a metal cable. Instinctively, his fingers tried to grab hold of the binding that was strangling him, but they had no hold.

Neck compressed, Kevin Bellig felt the pain invade him. Then, deprived of oxygen, the brain plunged into a coma. The cable continued its work for long minutes.

Cyber-games with friends

4

The sun was about to set soon. Luke Watford walked quickly out of San Francisco police headquarters. He was hungry, and when his shift was over, he wanted to get home quickly to eat.

“Good evening, Lieutenant”, the orderly smiled at him.

“Thank you, Jack. You too.”

Police Chief Luigi Confiti, whom everyone from thugs to police officers called Confetti, passed Luke Watford on the steps. He was going back up to his office. Short and chubby, with hair that was no longer black at all and was even beginning to forgo gray for white, the police chief remained nervous. Apart from elementary courtesies, he was rarely seen smiling.

“Sir, I wish you a good evening...”

“Good evening, Luke.”

Luigi Confiti had always been a cop. He wanted to appear jaded. He had seen all sorts of crimes, from basic villainy to things more heinous than ordinary mortals were prepared to believe. He had always been a cop and even a good cop. Cold, efficient, relentless. Many thugs owed him a long stay in the shadows. But he became a bureaucrat. In fact, rather than jaded, perhaps Confiti was simply bored now.

Luke was too young to be already jaded and

Cyber-games with friends

too busy to be bored. The only thing he cared about was that his bosses were good cops. And, of course, he wanted to have a private life worthy of a young man who was clearly heterosexual and did not hesitate to come out about it.

Skinny, short-haired, athletic, Luke considered himself more of a good-looking guy. He didn't need to push his luck when he went out to clubs. He got girls quite easily.

Despite everything, he liked to keep some girlfriends to spend a few more tender and less superficial evenings. These girls were both his mistresses and his confidantes. Some knew each other. The jealous and the possessive didn't fit into the harem, just passing through Luke's life as conquests for a night or two. The others, well, had good evenings with Luke from time to time. Sometimes more than two. Sometimes with good bottles and good food. It never hurts to have fun. One day, perhaps, he would agree to choose just one. Or not.

Luke started his car and, leaving the parking lot of the police station, he quickly took the expressway with his back to the Oakland Bay Bridge. He didn't live very far, in the Mission District neighborhood. He was home in minutes.

It was a building for the middle classes, with three levels, where employees and young executives were housed. Everyone dreamed of buying a house one day. Why not a dog or a cat, a

Cyber-games with friends

fireplace? Luke wasn't thinking about that. A house, yes, but full of naked girls with heavy breasts and narrow hips. The rest was for old people.

Entering his apartment, Luke casually tossed his jacket on his couch. He took off his shoes and put on his slippers, his only concession to petty-bourgeois manners. He walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Was he supposed to go out tonight? Could he invite a girl? There was a little fish left over from the night before. No, it would be a quiet evening. There were zucchinis and tomatoes in the vegetable drawer. To accompany the fish, a small stir-fry...

Ring. Who could ring the doorbell like this? Luke closed the refrigerator. A little angry at having been disturbed, he went to open it.

"Hi, Luke."

Mary Hayward was one of the prettiest girls in the harem. But usually, she warned before coming. Maybe an imperious and unforeseen need to fuck tonight... Luke smiled at her and opened the door wide before stepping aside to let her in.

With her brown bowl cut and her bourgeois outfit of a well-educated wise little girl who had grown too quickly, making her look like uncooked asparagus, no one was suspicious of her. But Luke knew that this woman, as old as he was, even though she looked younger, was not only whimsical but a hell of a hit in bed. And their

Cyber-games with friends

initial meeting was surprising, to say the least, since it was in police custody. She had been caught for a story of hacking into a computer of one of her former boyfriends. Bad luck for her, he was as much a computer scientist as she was. And he had spotted the spyware.

Officially, she was a videographer, special effects artist and editor in a communication agency. She also worked a little on her own to create small websites. But, in some circles, she was known by the pseudonym of Nikita. A nice hacker who sometimes gave Luke a little discreet and out-of-procedure helping hand. And who was paid in kind, like a good bottle and an evening of intensive sex. This saved the taxpayer money.

But Mary Hayward seemed nervous tonight. Or strange. Well, more strange than usual. Luke Watford closed the door.

The young woman had just put her eternal rollerblades against the wall, next to the door. She did not own a car and generally used this only means of getting around. In an old backpack, she kept her sneakers, which she put on as soon as the rollerblades were no longer needed. Which was the case at that time.

While turning after having closed the door, Luke saw that Mary Hayward had not left immediately to slump on the couch as usual. There she was, standing, almost leaning against the white kitchen wall. She was looking at Luke with a

Cyber-games with friends

strange expression.

She had even kept her jacket on. And she had both of her hands stuck in his pockets.

“Well, Mary, what’s going on? You are all strange. I’m glad to see you but you could have warned. What do you want to eat? I have tomatoes and zucchini to make a vegetable stir-fry. I have a little leftover fish already cooked but I have more in the freezer. I can also take out frozen duck. As dessert...”

Luke Watford had delivered his statement first in a quick and enthusiastic tone. And then slower and slower. And his last sentence remained unfinished.

Mary Hayward had simply turned her head from side to side several times. Silently. Her mouth was slightly open, her eyes staring into the distance, past Luke, as if the apartment door were a vast, enchanting landscape instead of blocking the view.

Suddenly she pointed a gun at Luke, the muzzle pointed between his eyes. She had taken it out of her jacket pocket.

“Tell me you loved me.”

Luke made the first move to disarm her. He was a policeman. He was trained to react in such cases, even if he was surprised.

She didn’t give him time to disarm her. She placed the barrel under her jaw, against his own throat. Luke’s hand only encountered emptiness.

Cyber-games with friends

Boom.

The white wall turned red.

Cyber-games with friends

5

The patrol stopped its car in front of the old abandoned shed. The flashing lights continued to spin, illuminating the walls, tearing the night apart. A policeman stayed behind the wheel. The other two ran out, each lighting a flashlight.

A walker had called them. He hadn't stayed on the scene. But finding him would be easy for his deposition, if necessary. Maybe he thought anonymous cell phone calls were actually anonymous to the police. Nobody wants to spend the evening with the cops, especially when they have made a macabre discovery.

Voilà. One could see it well. He had placed himself a few meters from the door, barely out of step with the opening. Anyone looking into the shed couldn't miss it.

A kind of stepladder was overturned on the floor. And the guy was hanging from the end of his rope, tied to a half-rusted beam of what must have been an office mezzanine before the site was abandoned.

Apart from the corpse, there was no one. Homeless people don't like to sleep in places where the police go. They had probably fled instead of sleeping here.

The first policeman pulled up one trouser leg and took hold of the ankle with both hands,

Cyber-games with friends

lowering the sock.

“No need to rush or pick him up ourselves. He is cold.”

“A suicide?”

“Obviously. Look at the stepladder. It remains to be seen why and above all who it is. We will wait for the scientific police before touching everything. He must have papers on him.”

“Yeah, a pretty shitty night coming up. If he has a family, we’ll just ruin the evening for them.”

“Are you staying here? I’m going for a walk. There must be a car somewhere. He didn’t come on foot with the stepladder and the rope, that would surprise me.”

As his colleague disappeared, the remaining policeman looked at the corpse. He wore a dark hoodie and classic denim pants. About twenty-five years old. A skinny little blonde man. He must have been dumped by his girlfriend.

Stupid whippersnapper. As if suicide were a solution. “You could have found yourself another girl, kid”, the policeman told him aloud in a half-paternal half-mocking tone. Suicides happen quite regularly. It’s neither interesting nor fun. Just annoying.

Cyber-games with friends

6

“Fuck off, Mary, with your bullshit.”

“Oh, Mr. Police Lieutenant is being rude tonight.”

Mary Hayward was on her knees in the bathroom washing her head in the shower. Luke Watford stared at his red-stained white wall.

“I’m going to have to repaint my wall.”

“No, it’s a mixture of gouache and soap. You pass a damp sponge and it goes away on its own in a few seconds. I did some tests at home, to check that it exploded well, that the texture was believable, all that. Do not put too much water otherwise it will run and foam. It would be harder to clean. I can take care of it, if you want.”

“Fortunately, I don’t have a heart condition... But how does your thing work?”

“It’s easy. The gas canister was stuck in my hair, along with the fake blood capsule. It exploded by action of the blue-tooth remote control connected to the trigger of the air-soft revolver. Well imitated, by the way, don’t you think?”

“Can you imagine if I had my gun on me? I could have killed you. Self-defense.”

“Let’s say I trust you enough that you can disarm me without playing hardball if I’m not fast enough. And I loved your face.”

A towel wrapped around her hair, she came

Cyber-games with friends

to take the policeman in her arms.

“Stop grumbling.”

“I’ll stop grumbling anytime I want.”

Mary placed her lips on her lover’s. Kissing was complicated when you were laughing. And the policeman’s mouth wouldn’t let in his mistress’s tongue. Finally, she resisted. Only after seemingly unending minutes did not allow herself to be convinced. Or seconds. Well, in short, as soon as Mary’s hand succeeded in verifying that the volume of the contents of the policeman’s pants had increased sufficiently.

“And I especially want to fuck, rather than eat like you suggested”, she said, pulling her face a little away from the man’s.

“With your hair wet in bed?”

“Who’s talking about a bed?”

She left her lover there and came to get on all fours on the couch, lifting her short leather skirt. She had no tights but stockings. And no panties. And an ass tracing eights in space.

Cyber-games with friends

7

The Blue Tower dominated the port. Bioxem was successful. Its headquarters were now in San Francisco; leaving Monterey to tourists and old businesses that had not embraced the transformation of the world. Its activities now took place all over the world. Blue Ocean salt was almost anecdotal, today, in the composition of its revenue.

In his office on the top floor of the Blue Tower, John Fieldpatrick was reviewing the latest progress report on the flagship project of the moment. A promising diversification, a growth relay for the group, and perhaps an industrial revolution. Tomorrow, the current activities of Bioxem would perhaps be as anecdotal in its turnover as Blue Ocean salt could be today.

At 70, John Fieldpatrick thought it was time to hand over the management of the family empire to his son Frank. He had been associated with the general management for almost ten years. The Patriarch would remain the Chairman of the Blue Ocean Foundation. It held 40% of Bioxem, the balance being in the hands of banks and on the stock exchange. This arrangement made it possible to pass the family share from generation to generation without any inheritance problems. And by assigning the presidency of the Foundation to

Cyber-games with friends

the most suitable, not necessarily the eldest, nor always in direct line. If Frank's children were not up to the task, the management would go to other hands. But Blue Ocean would go on. In addition, the foundation invested its profits in fundamental research. And this is how it was able to assign some patents to Bioxem.

Running his hand through his thick white hair, the patriarch stood up. He came to the window to look at the port. His tall build was straight. He hadn't begun to slouch forward yet, but he knew it wouldn't be long. Likewise, he often had to put on glasses to read. He had to hand over. During the public announcement of the project, for example. It shouldn't take long.

On his desk, a window popped up on his computer screen with a small beep, covering the report he was reading. John Fieldpatrick sat down again. Angela Watkins, his assistant, informed him that Stephen Whiteman wanted to see him and that he was there. It wasn't often that the director of security showed up unexpectedly. The patriarch just typed "let him enter" in the dialog box.

The office door opened. Stephen Whiteman was almost the age of the patriarch's son but he was taller and bigger than him. His square face was impressive, especially since smiles were rare. When he entered, John Fieldpatrick saw that his trusty director of security was looking bad. Odd. Another hostage-taking at a factory in South

Cyber-games with friends

America? No, the boss would already know. An industrial accident? Also no.

John Fieldpatrick rose to greet the man by shaking his hand. Then they both sat down together, each on the appropriate side of the desk.

“Well, Stephen, what’s going on? It’s rare that you show up like this early in the morning, especially when you’re making that face.”

“There was an incident yesterday morning that initially seemed minor. But I preferred to warn you when I realized that the alert was probably more serious than I had thought. I only found out about it by accident, because I was passing by the office of the computer maintenance technicians and one was yelling at an accountant. We were lucky. Normally, I shouldn’t have known. And I shouldn’t have asked myself more questions.”

“You intrigue me, Stephen...”

“The accountant had her professional workstation infected with a fairly standard virus. However, the technician was certain that this thing could not have passed through the network without being immediately detected. So that meant that the safety instructions were not followed. Something from outside had been plugged into the computer. In general, the culprit confesses without difficulty in this type of case. It’s a minor mistake that just leads to a warning. But the accountant blushed in denial. And the technician was angry because the girl was lying to him.”

Cyber-games with friends

“So, you approached...”

“Exactly. And I thought the accountant was going to faint when she saw me. I told the technician to fix the machine and asked the accountant to follow me to my office.”

“Why? It’s a minor incident, a virus on a workstation...”

“What shocked me was that the girl was lying. She wanted to hide something.”

“And so?”

“I thought she was going to liquefy while sitting in my office. She started crying and confessed to me that she had plugged in a USB key. I asked her why it was freaking her out. She had become mute. I asked her what was on that key. And then she told me the whole story. She thought she would find on the key a CV of her boyfriend of the moment, to print. And, instead, there were child pornography videos.”

“I understand the shock. And the virus was therefore on the aforementioned key, I presume.”

“I called the technician who was handling her workstation and told him to come with an unconnected test laptop. I had to threaten the girl of firing her to get her to give it to me, but we were finally able to examine this key.”

“And so?”

“The girl was in a bad state. She realized she had slept with a monster. I called her department head to inform her that the accountant was

Cyber-games with friends

suspended for three days, with the possibility of covering the sanction with days off if she wished. The reason was the breach of safety rules. I ordered the technician to keep the incident strictly confidential. As for the girl, I told her that three days off wouldn't be too much given her condition. And I called the police.”

“So the incident was actually more serious than one might think. You did well. Child pornography is indeed repugnant. But this accountant was apparently not responsible. And the company wouldn't be liable, would it?”

“No sir. That's not why I came to see you. The police left with the accountant for her deposition. And I gave them the key, of course. But we had made a copy of the content. And our internal teams worked on it. This morning I got their report. They analyzed the virus until quite late. This morning, when I arrived at the office, I had almost forgotten the incident. At my request, my assistant had just sent to the entire company, by email, a reminder on the ban on connecting external media to our computers, indicating that an employee had just been laid off for this reason. It was when I found the message in my inbox that I remembered the incident. And then I got a message from the technicians who worked on the virus.”

“I take it you've found something out of the ordinary and disturbing in the key...”

Cyber-games with friends

“It was an information system penetration tool used by some cybercriminal gangs. The objective was clearly to steal information from us. But not on the directly infected workstation. It is a virus whose modus operandi is well known.”

“Why does this worry you so much? Businesses fall victim to this kind of thing every day.”

“I think there will be other attempts. And that the attackers were looking for something specific. The virus had a clear mission. The project.”

Cyber-games with friends

8

Luke Watford hated going to the forensic service. The smell there was terrible. And the cases that brought him there usually fairly rotten also. He got out of the elevator and walked over to the girl he had taken the statement from the day before. A tory of a USB key with child pornography videos. She was dressed in black, without makeup. And, she was so pale that, without realizing it, they could have put her away in a drawer in the morgue. Fortunately, she was crying. So she was alive.

“Amanda Zimmer?”

“It’s me.”

“Luke Watford. Do you remember? I’m the lieutenant who took your statement yesterday.”

She nodded. Difficult to fix her attention. She lowered her head, shaking new sobs.

“Miss Zimmer, I called you here this morning because we want you to see a body and tell us if you know this person.”

“A dead person?”

“In the morgue, yes, usually the bodies are dead indeed.”

Luke Watford immediately regretted his joke. Amanda Zimmer was shaken by another round of sobs.

“Please follow me.”

Cyber-games with friends

The lieutenant had used a tone that was both gentle and imperative. The girl got up and followed him, as if going to her own funeral. They both entered a tiled room with morgue drawers and two examination tables. It was cold.

A man in a white coat approached them.

“Is it for the shed body identification, Lieutenant?”

“Absolutely, doctor.”

The pathologist opened a drawer. It contained a corpse with clear strangulation marks. Luke Watford, used to body IDs, picked up Amanda Zimmer in his arms with a sigh. Another one who fainted when she saw a corpse. As usual, he laid her down, tilting her head up. In a disillusioned way, the doctor tossed him a small vial from his pocket. The strong smell escaping from the container woke the girl.

“Well, is that your boyfriend, the one who gave you the USB?”

She nodded without saying anything. The lieutenant turned to the doctor, giving him back his bottle.

“OK, you can put it away. And start cutting if necessary.”

“That won’t be necessary. Toxicological analysis is done, as is the neck X-ray. I am finishing my report this morning. You will have it before noon. Nothing special.”

Luke Watford helped Amanda Zimmer up

Cyber-games with friends

and then they left the forensic department. They took the elevator back and found themselves in the lieutenant's office. The policeman invited the young woman to sit down and he himself took his place. He recalled the case file to his computer screen.

“For your information, the guy whose body you saw hanged himself in an abandoned harbor shed a few hours after your text message exchange. He probably couldn't stand you discovering his vices. But can you confirm his name for me?”

“Wlamywacz. Igor Wlamywacz.”

“What's annoying is that we know this gentleman as Kevin Bellig. This is the identity mentioned in his papers. And it is also under this name that he has a small criminal record. Stories of computer piracy and counterfeit music and films. Nothing too serious it seems. Another annoying point is that he is supposed to be unemployed, without income, but he has a fairly expensive lifestyle.”

The lieutenant thought for a moment that the young woman was going to faint again. But she took the hit. Maybe she was getting tougher, shock after shock. The rest of the audition was based on the interpretation of rumblings, nods and, occasionally, a few words.

Little by little, Amanda Zimmer learned that she had slept with a guy whose real name, job,

Cyber-games with friends

source of income, or place of residence she did not know ... and that she had been manipulated into introducing a virus in her employer's information system. A patrol car drove her home. Luke Zimmer hadn't wanted to let her go home alone. He had taken the liberty of calling her doctor, who would come to see her shortly after her return. The policeman predicted a long-term sick leave and severe depression.

For the lieutenant, the young woman no longer interested him. He should wait for the examination of the computers and documents found at Kevin Bellig's house, but Bellig's modus operandi was very curious. Why infect Bioxem with a key he shouldn't have given to his contact? Or was he indeed mistaken and the virus intended for someone else? Or was he himself a victim of the virus circulating in a pedophile gang seeking information?

Cyber-games with friends

9

The place was quiet, almost deserted. The limit of the car park and the quay was a stone parapet on which, further on, a young couple had sat, looking at the sea and the birds, in each other's arms.

The black van was parked in reverse, ready to drive away. The driver, with the typical face of a bully like you only find in movies, got out and walked around the vehicle, waiting in front of the rear sliding door, without taking his eyes off the dark-haired thirty-year-old who was walking towards the van, and with a small smirk.

When he got to the van, the driver said, "Mr. Leprechaun is waiting for you." Then he opened the door. The man walked in and sat down on the jump seat that faced the man in the backseat. The door closed with a click.

"Mister Bao Yu?"

"Absolutely. After our discussions, we finally meet. It is rare that I physically meet my clients."

"I am an older generation man, Mr. Bao Yu. I like to really get to know the people I work with."

"Even for illegal business? It's very reckless, actually."

"I take precautions, as you can imagine."

Cyber-games with friends

“Not enough, Mr. Francis Hampton. Tracing you was child’s play. You are using an Energol owned vehicle: I checked it on my smartphone when I saw the registration. As for the driver who has a killer face and who has just sat down in his seat without losing a crumb of our exchanges, his name is Serguei Katorgovitch. He made himself a small reputation in South America at a time when you yourself lived there.”

“Are you aware of playing with your life, Mr. Matt Abalone, since you don’t like pseudonyms?”

The 30-year-old shrugged.

“My pseudonym is pretty transparent. I often use Chinese products, which I prefer to Russian things. And an abalone is called bao yu in Chinese. Of course, I took my usual precautions. And if something bad happened to me, all the necessary elements would be handed over to the police. But I actually prefer to play cards on the table with my clients.”

“Since presentations have been made, let’s get down to business...”

Cyber-games with friends

10

Opening his door, Luke Watford greeted Mary Hayward with a smile but immediately inquired, “Well, tonight, aren’t you coming with a gun or some other surprise?”

“Promise!” laughed the young woman, making a scout sign with the fingers of her right hand, ostensibly crossing the fingers of her left hand at the edge of her back. Then she showed what was in her right hand: a bottle of California Champagne. She explained herself: “I have to make amends. And also thank you for your involuntary collaboration.”

Closing the door behind the young woman, while she took off her jacket, the lieutenant started again.

“My collaboration in what, please?”

“To the development of special effects for an amateur film that we shoot with friends. You know, advertising pays me my rent and food but, frankly, institutional films, commercials and virtual tours of buildings sold in future state of completion are not much fun. So, I have fun with amateur films. Two days ago, I played you my future scene.”

She looked at the white wall.

“Yes, I was indeed able to clean everything with a damp sponge without any problem”

Cyber-games with friends

confirmed the policeman.

He was especially delighted to see that the young woman was wearing the same skirt as the other day. And her legs were similarly covered with a fine black veil. Luke began to imagine what the skirt was hiding. Seeing the direction of the policeman's gaze, the young woman smiled lustfully, a small piece of tongue crossing her lips.

"Did you do the right thing?" she asked.

"I'll let you check."

Mary Hayward picked up the bottle of champagne from the shoe cabinet and walked into the living room. On the table, cutlery, glasses and plates were laid out according to the rules of the art. A candle was lit opposite the window. And a champagne bucket half-filled with ice sat between the table and the window.

"Perfect!" observed the young woman.

She went to sit in her usual place and put the bottle unceremoniously in the bucket.

"I'm waiting for you to open it. Even if it comes out of the refrigerator at my house less than an hour ago, we will let it rest for a bit."

The policeman bowed with a parody of reverence. Then he went into the open kitchen and grabbed a cooking dish from the oven, which he brought to the table.

"I hope your scallop and leek gratin is still as good", the young woman falsely worried. Then she asked her host, "And the dessert?"

Cyber-games with friends

“Apple, pineapple and raisin crumble with cinnamon and fresh cream, as requested.”

“Wow. Champagne is to make amends. But, you, you have things to ask me.”

The policeman smiled.

“After lunch. With an ageless Armagnac, straight from France, just the way you like it.”

“Oh my god! The police is in deep fog, to say the least.”

“And you, are you still an expert bound by professional secrecy?”

“Even when I’m not paid, indeed...” she sighed.

“Remember that any saving in the budget is a saving in the taxes you pay. And a scallop gratin, like a crumble, has value.”

Mary Hayward pouted amusedly. She wasn’t doing it for the money anyway. A little for sex, it’s true. And the good dishes of the cook policeman. But the main thing was the fun, the challenge.

She had to wait for the last crumb of dessert to be swallowed. Luke cleared and cleaned the table, asking the young woman to please sit on the couch. He then brought back two balloon glasses and the bottle of Armagnac. He put everything on the coffee table before pouring nice doses of the golden liquid into the glasses. He handed one to his beautiful friend and clinked glasses delicately with her. She looked him straight in the eyes, as she should, but without losing her mocking little

Cyber-games with friends

pout that drove all the males lucky enough to look at her mad.

Luke sat down. Mary then turned enough to put her legs through the policeman's thighs. They were covered with a thin veil of black Lycra, so soft to the touch. But the feet had already lost their sneakers.

The lieutenant put his free hand on a leg in the idea of chasing this pair of intruders but could not help but caress them. Yes, he loved caressing those legs, just covered in Lycra to make them so soft. He took a sip of Armagnac after the golden liquid had made the rounds of his mouth several times.

“Go ahead, continue while talking, it helps me think”, encouraged the girl.

“I don't know if that helps me think...”

“Tell me, now!”

“OK. Of course...”

“It's top secret, super-privacy required, I'm not here and I haven't heard anything. OK. I know. Speed up, my darling, we're not going to spend the night on this. We have other things to do.”

“Good. A guy with a small background of illegally sharing music on the Internet and a few little hacking stories, handed a thumb drive to an accountant from a local business. Normally, this key should have contained his CV to be printed. But, when the girl wanted to print it, she only found child pornography videos on the key. The

Cyber-games with friends

guy texted her to tell her he had the wrong key, not to open it. The girl then sent him off.”

“Good. OK. Where is the mystery?”

“One moment. It’s coming. The key contained a virus. It infected the accountant’s workstation. But it was immediately blocked. Where it gets out of hand is that the guy who gave the key was found hanged in a shed. First off, it’s suicide.”

“The guy knew he had reported himself for child pornography. He committed suicide to avoid arrest and dishonor. Good. Where is the problem?”

“You summed up the story you want us to believe. But several things do not stick. First, the virus is certainly basic but it had been tinkered with to make it possible to look for something. As a result, the infection of the information system of the accountant’s company was necessarily specifically intended. It was not a broad-spectrum infection.”

“Not a randomly tapping ransomware? Or a thingy that picks up everything it finds?”

“No, the virus had a specific target.”

“Was the guy who gave the key infected on his own machines and other keys? In other words, had the virus been introduced into his home, via child pornography videos for example, so that he transmit it to the girl? Was the suicide only an intermediate victim?”

“We couldn’t find anything on his machines.

Cyber-games with friends

And when I say nothing, it's no illicit videos apart from the few put on the key. On the other hand, there were various hacking kits."

"The virus could have self-destructed, but in that case your specialists would probably have found things. And the absence of videos at his home would tend to suggest that it is a smokescreen. Illogical."

"So you understand why I chose this Armagnac."

"It is indeed exciting. Go up a bit."

"What?"

"Your hand. Go up my thighs."

Cyber-games with friends

11

Surveillance cameras always give poor quality images, especially since they do not zoom. So, when we want a focus on a certain part, we obviously lose definition quality.

However, Luke Watford was certain of the identity of the nervous guy buying a rope from a hardware store near the port. The same hoodie, ordinary denim pants. The guy had pulled the hood over his head and never faced the camera. He lowered his head as much as he could. He didn't want to be recognized. He had paid for the rope in cash. Then he was out. Always lowering his head. This was about an hour before the suicide according to the timestamp of the video. An hour is a lot. He must have hesitated. Or look for the perfect place.

The video had been recovered as part of the usual checks. If the guy had bought his own rope, then there was no doubt about suicide. Luke Watford told himself that he had cooked for nothing and that he could have kept his Armagnac. There was no mystery.

However, the guy was so nervous, he moved so strangely that he seemed much stronger than the whipper-snapper who had hanged himself in the port. Luke shook his head. He had to stop being paranoid. He had proof before his eyes that the guy

Cyber-games with friends

had committed suicide after buying a rope to hang himself. What more did he want?

Didn't he want another guy dressed exactly like the dead man buying a rope and being nervous like a guy who wants to get it over with? And that, in the end, the guy who buys the rope pretending to be the future dead man murders the so-called man who committed suicide? Luke Watford thought that he should write movie scripts. He would be richer. In real life, assassins are idiots.

It's like the computer virus thing. How do you believe in a game of four or five cushion pool? It was absurd. The guy had just copied the wrong files to the already preloaded key to infect a computer.

Possible. Likely, even.

Mary was right. There was no story we wanted them to believe. There was just a simple, basic story of a loser who sleeps with an accountant and thinks, little hacker that he is, that he is going to try to hack into his girlfriend's business. Paranoia must stop at some point.

At least Luke had fucked good. Mary was in good shape. The scallop gratin always works.

Cyber-games with friends

12

The sun was high in the sky. A beautiful blue sky. While sitting back at her desk, returning from her lunch break, Angela Watkins stretched out her long legs and placed her feet in maximum extension, causing both a small creak and the fall of her pretty varnished ten centimeter high pumps.

Looking out the window, Angela Watkins sighed. She would be fine on the beach. In the morning, she had to work quickly on an urgent presentation by Frank Fieldpatrick. A lot of stress and concentration. She was now tired and, as a result of the morning, she had little motivation to return to work. As a good assistant, she had given the necessary documents to her boss, who had gone to a lunch meeting in the best restaurant in town. She had a few hours ahead of her before he returned. But she did not see herself, all the same, taking a nap.

For a moment, her hand was lost under the desk, between her thighs, caressing the stockings inadvertently. The impudent hand evacuated the premises quickly. But the pretty blonde thought that the caress had been nice. She sent her hand back on the spot, even raising the short skirt slightly to better caress a flesh that was screaming with desire. Ok. Calm down. Any senior executive

Cyber-games with friends

in the company could come into her office at any time to ask to see the boss. Sorry, Boss.

She tossed her pretty blonde hair so that they may loosen on her shoulders. At thirty-five, she would still have to find a permanent man. Soon she would be too old for that. And no question of being satisfied with a cat. Rather die.

She wanted to be invited by a man tonight. And, then, to invite him to a last drink at her place. And to invite the lucky one to more to end the evening and the night. There would still be a enough time to think of something else later. If she wanted to. Otherwise, well too bad. It would be a cat. And a fireplace. And knitting in front of it. Yuck. No, really impossible.

Angela Watkins had some work to do. She looked out the window again, saw the beautiful blue sky and sighed. Then she turned back to her computer and dialed her code to exit the screen saver.

Suddenly, she heard a characteristic beep coming from her bag. She opened it and took out her smartphone. She saw that she had received an email on her home address. What do you know, Matt. Since she needed a man, he would do if she could convince him...

“Hi kitty.”

Angela interrupted her reading by letting out a half-laughing, half-sensual serial killer “meow”, while miming a paw clawing at a virtual

Cyber-games with friends

interlocutor. Matt always told her that she was a perfect cat imitator, especially when she curled up against him and purred. Angela continued reading.

“I hope you are free tonight. I want to hear you purr. I reserved a table in the place indicated. Print the invitation link to come. Or let me know if you’d rather I pick you up. In any case, confirm me quickly. 7 p.m. downstairs from your office or half an hour later on the spot, as you wish. Banzai kisses and caresses.”

That was a good surprise. And ten thousand kisses and caresses was a good start. Or ten thousand years of kisses and caresses, that wasn’t bad either, although a bit long, especially towards the end. With only one man, it must be tiring.

OK, where had he invited her? She opened her browser on her computer. Then she logged into her personal mailbox and read again with a smile the message of one of her lovers of the moment. She clicked on the link that led to a private subdirectory of the personal website of this friendly computer scientist. Nice animations with “tatada”, a red curtain that opened... Well, is he going to say where he invited her or not? On the other hand, it raised the tension...

Finally, a cute presentation with a cartoon restaurant waiter bowing led to a photo of the most beautiful restaurant in town. Below, an access map. Well, no need to print: that was where she had sent the Boss this afternoon. She knew.

Cyber-games with friends

So it was a very good choice: Auberge du Port, a french restaurant. It was the last old building in the waterfront district, and a sort of vast thatched cottage connected by modern corridors verandas to outbuildings in the style of the main building distributed around a large paved courtyard. The old walls were no more than a backdrop for a very modern establishment also comprising around thirty rooms. It was there that all the famous people passing through the city got off.

Ah, damn it: a printable invitation for the Special Tasting Menu. You needed a paper version to show at the reception desk in order to be brought to the right table.

She loaded the document and started printing. Then she hurriedly put her shoes back on and fetched the document from the MFP in the hallway, just outside her door.

Cyber-games with friends

13

Energoil was not one of the world's major oil players. Nevertheless, the company remained one of the big companies still based in Monterey. The headquarters of Energoil consisted of a set of small buildings near a hardly touristy part of the port. Medium-sized tankers, the ones the basin was designed for, rarely came back there. Most of the oil came from distant sources and was brought in by supertankers. Those ships docked elsewhere. The large reservoirs intended to receive crude oil or various refining products, attached to the historic refinery of Energoil (and its last still in operation) were further away, further south, and inland, near the oilfields, on the road to Los Angeles. Energoil no longer had any active wells there, but that was its historic location.

With his back to the window overlooking the port, on the highest floor of one of the oil firm's headquarters buildings, James Burton was reading an analysis report on the oil and derivatives markets, with a study of Energoil's current position and development trends. He turned each page with a sigh. The heavy mass of paper weighed on his knees. The company's cash reserves, suitably invested since the bull years, was now bringing in more than the industrial activities.

But the losses were piling up. Oil-related

Cyber-games with friends

activities were largely producing deficits. And the cash reserves were more undermined each year. James Burton, as a wise CEO, knew this. He had arrived too late at the helm to really rectify the situation.

In South America, he had worked wonders on the profitability of the extraction subsidiary. This is why the Board of Directors then entrusted him with the head of the company. But, in reality, miracles never happen. Never. The South American subsidiary had a unique role: to pump oil. He had just cut all related costs, at a loss. The oilfield, one of the last that Energoil owned, was going to be exhausted and all the geologists agreed on the fact that the region did not contain any untapped aquifers.

There wasn't much left to salvage. The wisest thing for the shareholders would have been to close everything and share the little remaining capital. This was not the mission assigned to him. And there were still some interesting activities, particularly in the oil services and fine chemicals. A nationwide network of gas stations could also be worth something, albeit small.

Before admitting defeat, looking for a buyer of the last assets among the world giants in his sector, James Burton had played one last card. And he wondered if he had done well. The methods that could be used discreetly in South America, spraying a few corrupt ministers, judges or

Cyber-games with friends

policemen, were not necessarily very well suited here. The phone rang. The identifier displayed that it was his assistant.

“Yes?”

“Sir, Mr. Francis Hampton has arrived.”

“Let him in.”

James Burton cornered the page where he left off in reading his report and closed it before putting it on his desk. Francis Hampton was his accomplice from South America. He had taken the old mercenary with him, a former Marine officer who had gone bad, despised by his former friends. Maybe the CEO had been wrong. He sometimes pondered over this. But Francis Hampton was leading one of the last-ditch operations for Energoil.

Staying behind his desk, James Burton rose to shake hands with the newcomer.

“Sit down, Francis.”

“Thank you. I finally have some good news.”

“That is to say?”

“They found some very interesting things.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“And how...”

“Remember, James: you don’t want to know how. And it’s better for everyone. Like in South America. You know nothing. You pay me to get results. I bring you results. And that’s all.”

Cyber-games with friends

“Yes, you’re right. It’s better that I don’t know. At least, I hope so. What can you tell me exactly?”

“I have not yet obtained the document that John Fieldpatrick worked on with various investors at the Auberge du Port. But I got the summary note at the end of the meeting. And that’s the main thing.”

“Is that what we thought?”

“Yes. Our first information was correct. We must act quickly. Their share price can explode when the project is known. The destabilization operation must be carried out quickly.”

“We are now at 5% in their capital, through their presence on the stock market. We’ll still have the Foundation in the way, but we can get majority control. If we of successfully carry out the takeover bid and the withdrawal from the stock market. The merger-absorption will settle the question of capital control.”

“I do my part of the job. The rest is up to you.”

Cyber-games with friends

14

People who sell their computing talents in the same place know each other. And, although the market is global, local communities exist. Sometimes it is a question of protecting oneself, sometimes of attacking (not very legally), or even of counter-attacking.

Mary Hayward barely raised an eyebrow when Luke Watford told her of Kevin Bellig's death. He had not named him, but a little research in the news and some cross-checking had enabled a quick identification. This guy was a loser and an incompetent who hadn't abused many people, a little low-level cyber-thug. However, he was not a pedophile. Mary Hayward would have bet on that. Had he been framed by someone who used him to attack Bioxem knowing he was dating an accountant at the company? No, it definitely wasn't believable. The videos must have been a gift from some guy he must have pissed off on a hacker forum and wanted to bully him into loading the videos onto his computer, unrelated to the hacking operation he had himself wanted and done.

Outside, it was dark. Sitting cross-legged on the carpet, Mary Hayward stared at her laptop screen on the floor. She kept herself somewhat up to date with the latest news from the industry.

Cyber-games with friends

One of her monitoring tools beeped. Hum. A very unsophisticated attack. A raw mode penetration attempt through normally closed network ports? Who dared? In addition, the attacker's IP address was easily traceable. He didn't live very far. He was connecting via the same telecom infrastructure as his target. The attack bit packet was not just a random sequel. She ran it through a hex reader. Bingo. An explicit signature.

Bursting out laughing, Mary Hayward went to her usual community forum. Her contact was, of course, connected.

"Hi Bao Yu!"

"Hi little slut Nikita."

"I see that I have been unmasked..."

"My smartphone was tracked for how long? Your thing was discreet and destroyed its tracks in a fairly clean way."

"A little over a week. How did you find it?"

"There was unusual data traffic, so I looked it up. Not bad. But how did you manage to implant it?"

"The White Hats don't reveal their secrets any more than the Black Hats, my dear. Except when it comes to demonstrating a feat. And, in this case, I don't want to demonstrate anything, except that I fucked you."

"We're both Grey Hats, dear, you and me. Don't be proud: you work for the police as well as

Cyber-games with friends

for good guys being attacked as well as bad guys doing the attacking. Or for your own account by fucking your current lovers or your old ones.”

“And also those who would like to fuck me but haven’t been convincing enough yet.”

“Let it go. You are no longer a target for me.”

“Would you rather have a cute executive assistant? And after having invited her to the best restaurant in town?”

“You fucking watched my entire private life!”

“It’s called getting hacked, buddy.”

“I owe you. Are you still fucking your police lieutenant who brought you in after the affair with your ex?”

“It’s up to you to find out.”

“It’s a challenge?”

“You could say that. But remember the rule: no being evil. It’s just about proving your best skills. Otherwise, I might get evil.”

“I’m not a villain. Just a mercenary. Unlike you, I readily admit it.”

“Well, tomorrow I’m working. Ciao bello.”

“Ciao.”

Mary Hayward logged out of the forum. She was happy with her little prank. There remained a dozen active spies among the hackers which she knew. Only two had discovered them so far. Matt Abalone had taken almost two months (which is

Cyber-games with friends

objectively a little more than a week). The first infected hacker had found out in less than three days. She had warmly congratulated him, even if a bit of luck had helped him. It is true that his spy was discreet. And efficient.

But Mary Hayward suddenly had a revelation. Kevin Billig had tried to hack Bioxem by going out with an accountant. And Matt Abalone, a more gifted hacker and real computer security consultant, had invited the assistant to Bioxem's boss to the best restaurant in town, probably not just to talk. Two hackers approaching two single women working for the same company. It's a curious coincidence.

Mary Hayward should be getting to sleep. But she was probably going to take more interest in this case. And Bioxem had been her client some time ago. Maybe there was a way to negotiate a mission. This would allow her to earn a bit extra, in addition to the salary of the communication agency.

Cyber-games with friends

15

The black van was driving up Drake Avenue in Monterey. Francis Hampton was in the back and thinking. It was indeed safer to go and see James Burton at home. No need to meet at the company's headquarters, in front of everyone. It would lead to gossip.

On both sides of the causeway, beautiful wooden houses dating back often more than a century belonged to the wealthiest citizens of the city. They often had a very nice view over the sea, at worst from the first floor. Some, like James Burton's, were more recent but particularly luxurious and embraced the shape of the slope.

But the place lacked the class of the Fieldpatrick family mansion, located on a much steeper and more prestigious slope in San Francisco, near the Coit Tower and Filbert Street. The main building was in the center of a garden but was higher than the trees. The wide driveway that led to it from the street guaranteed a beautiful view of the sea to the inhabitants of the house, without being hindered by trees. An old outbuilding, completely renovated and along the street, housed the couple Frank Fieldpatrick and Cynthia Chervil, with their children, Peter and Paul. She was the sole heiress of the maritime carrier Transocean.

Cyber-games with friends

Francis Hampton had toured the mansion of his targets, to get to know them well. Yes, he was envious. Even James Burton had a villa he could never afford. He had inherited nothing. Military families are pretty poor.

For several more minutes, the van rolled down the avenue. The villas passed by Francis Hampton's window. Then the van slowed down. He stopped in front of a high gate piercing a concrete wall high enough to prevent anyone curious from looking at what was on the property.

Sergei Katorgovich took his cell phone and dialed a pre-recorded number. The driver switched to speakerphone mode and brought up the numeric keypad on the screen.

"Hello. I am the home automation central. Please enter your access code."

Sergei Katorgovich complied.

"To adjust heating or lighting, tap one. To open the portal, double tap. For..."

The driver pressed two.

"Thank you. The portal will open. Remember to deactivate the alarm when entering. This cannot be disabled remotely."

Cutting off the call, Sergei Katorgovitch put the phone back in his jacket and started up again. The gate opened slowly. Once the van entered, it closed automatically.

The driveway was not very long and came to a tarmacked courtyard enclosed on three sides: the

Cyber-games with friends

wall separating the property from the street, the garages and the house. The latter was a modern bourgeois residence, dating back about twenty years and created by some local architect.

In front of the garages, two vehicles were already parked. The van positioned itself to park between the two of them. Sergei Katorgovich pressed a button on the dashboard. An electronic voice was heard.

“Auto-Drive. Please do not touch the controls of the vehicle.”

The van moved slowly, guided by its radars and its cameras, and parked itself in the right place. The engine cut off automatically.

The driver got out and went to open the rear sliding door of the van. Francis Hampton got out of the vehicle and headed for the door, where James Burton was already waiting for him.

The driver settled back into his seat in the van. A little nap would do him a world of good. His ability to sleep on time had always been a strength of his. It is important to be able to rest anytime, whenever possible, to be fully operational when necessary. In the commandos, it is a talent that is cultivated. Among the mercenaries too.

James Burton shook hands with Francis Hampton and led him into the house, closing the front door as he passed. The house was modern. The boss had acquired it while returning to the headquarters of Energoil in Monterey. It was made

Cyber-games with friends

up of three plateaus superimposed on the side of the cliff, the lowest being even below the level of the road. This was the floor where James Burton's office was.

Upon entering, Francis Hampton was struck once again by the extraordinary view of the sea. The large bay windows were intended to provide it. The mercenary rarely came here but he envied his boss who could enjoy this landscape every day.

Cyber-games with friends

16

The bar was located on the border between the port and the city. In the past, it served drinks to port workers. But that era was over. There were far fewer workers, sailors or dockers in the port of San Francisco. And those who remained did not drink their pay. Many jobs even required, with the new rules, abstinence from alcohol or drug consumption.

So the place had adapted. It was huge in order to accommodate a more bourgeois clientele than before and above all much less numerous. The rear part had therefore been transformed into a nightclub with several dance floors. And, closer to the entrance, the large tables for dozens of workers each had been replaced by small islands each consisting of a table, benches and chairs, separated from each other by planters and containers. a series of wooden poles stained in various colors.

Mary Hayward had settled into a plush bench. She was sipping a cocktail made up of several layers of various colors: white, red, blue... She was drinking the contents of her glass with a long straw which she made go up and down in the liquid, to have sips mixing the different tastes.

She wore a small white suit and a blue skirt of an appreciable length, longer than that of her usual outfits, reaching almost to the knees. And

Cyber-games with friends

her shoes were worthy of a wise, faithful married housewife and mother who spent her Sunday mornings in the church singing hymns.

A rather tall, burly man approached her table. She tilted her head and smiled at him.

“Sit down then, sir.”

Stephen Whiteman complied, taking a chair across from the young woman before shaking her hand with a formal “Miss.”

“Still so stuck, poor thing”, she thought.

A waiter approached the table.

“Sir?”

“What kind of whisky do you have?”

“I have several Loch Lomonds including a very oaky 12 year old Oakshield and a 30-year-old Special Imperial Reserve.”

“If you have SIR, I’ll take it!”

“Well, sir. Mary, do you want something else?”

“The same cocktail. And add a plate of snacks, please.”

“Peanuts? Or do you prefer small tapas? I also have homemade guacamole served with corn chips.”

“Let’s go for the guacamole and the peanuts”, Bioxem’s director of security said.

The waiter immediately disappeared while thanking them. He knew when a client wanted to tell him to clear off with a very quick and decisive choice.

Cyber-games with friends

Speaking softly, almost in a whisper, Stephen Whiteman turned to Mary Hayward.

“Did you want to see me, Miss?”

“Absolutely, sir. Haven’t you been dealing with various computer attacks lately?”

“Like all companies, Bioxem regularly experiences intrusion attempts or other attacks that are sometimes a little more sophisticated. Nothing special to report.”

“Nothing in particular, are you sure?”

“Did I miss something?”

“I do not know. Maybe. Haven’t you had a more ... let’s say ... targeted attack lately?”

“I couldn’t talk to you about it, even if it had happened. Or not.”

“Always cautious, as I can see, and, of course, I can’t blame you for that.”

She gave him a small smile, her small smile, the one you never knew if it was that of an ingenue or a whore. The waiter then placed the whisky, the cocktail and the nibble plates on the table. And he left immediately.

“Being a married and faithful man, I wouldn’t want to spend too much time in this place of debauchery...”

“You mean those two girls, probably Silicon Valley start-up engineers, kissing over there? You are very old-fashioned. We are not in bad company.”

“Cheers, Miss”, he replied simply, raising

Cyber-games with friends

his glass as Mary Hayward dipped a chip into the guacamole.

“My dear Nikita, you have worked for Bioxem before. If I understand correctly, you think it would be appropriate for us to spend some more money to engage your services?”

“There you go, right on target. You have a certain sense of getting straight to the heart of the matter.”

“Right now, I don’t see the point.”

“But if something new...”

“Then I would study the situation taking into account this new thing. We were very satisfied with your work the last time. And I can find some room in the budget if needed.”

“So be it.”

Cyber-games with friends

17

Two cocktails and just guacamole was insufficient for dinner. Always a gentleman, Stephen Whiteman had paid the bill with a personal bank card, ostensibly crumpling the ticket. Mary Hayward had seen him want to drool. She wasn't too gerontophile, but she didn't like a man to resist her. That anything or anyone resist her, in fact. It was becoming an interesting challenge to sleep with this faithful husband.

But until then, if she wanted to be able to supplement her salary with attractive fees, she had to find something concrete. She put some peeled and washed radishes in a bowl, which she mixed with sea salt. She also prepared some buttered toast. She added a jar of mixed fruit compote, a spoon, a glass, a carafe of water... She placed all this on a tray which she put on the floor next to her laptop.

She sat cross-legged in front of the keyboard, started munching on her dinner as she began to review dear Matt Abalone's activity over the past few months. She was sure that this rival had been paid to break into Bioxem's system. But how did he do it? He was way smarter and more competent than that jerk Kevin Bellig. It must have been more subtle than an ordinary infected USB key. This kind of attack is almost always doomed to failure

Cyber-games with friends

in a properly protected company. But, in fact, Kevin Bellig had not been far away from succeeding.

Matt Abalone probably had not even attempted such a blow, too unsophisticated for his standing. He was almost certain, however, that the boss's poor assistant, delighted to be invited to the best restaurant in town, had been a vehicle for the intrusion. Men are definitely bastards to use such methods to deceive innocent young women who are too full of love, thought the hacker. Then she burst out laughing at how naive her thoughts were.

Mary Hayward decided to focus on the last few weeks to find some new things in Matt Abalone's activity between before the date and after. It had recorded all the activity but not all the content.

In the Internet connection logs, she found a trace that she knew well. A very practical little application to find out who owns a car, based on a license plate. She couldn't find the answer directly: it was encrypted and there was no point wasting her time. On the other hand, she found the question without difficulty.

She therefore posed the same question to the same server. And so she got the same answer. A black van of a recent model, from a high-end series with various options such as self-drive to park ... belonging to Energoil. Interesting.

Tired of looking at logs manually, she

Cyber-games with friends

decided to extract all the phone numbers incoming and outgoing. Then she ran software that queried the slightly hacked phone book to override do-not-lists or other common precautions. Opposite each call, she had, while eating her apple pudding, a name and, sometimes, a company.

Again, there were calls about an Energoil number. Always the same. A cellphone. And he was assigned to a guy she didn't know, Francis Hampton. Of course, the number was not supposed to appear in the public directory.

The tool used did not make it possible to know what this Francis Hampton could have said to Matt Abalone. Nevertheless, one more mention of Energoil. And it was shortly after the first call from this individual that Matt Abalone began to flirt with Angela Watkins with text and email exchanges. Too out of the ordinary to be just a coincidence.

Mary Hayward decided to assume that the Energoil company was very interested in Bioxem. Another coincidence was that the first contact between Francis Hampton and Matt Abalone took place the same day Kevin Bellig died. Amusing. As if Matt Abalone had been called in to replace a failing Kevin Bellig. This moron probably killed himself before completing his mission.

Yawning, Mary Hayward looked at the clock hanging on the wall. It was really late. Tomorrow, she would work to earn her salary, not for

Cyber-games with friends

hypothetical fees. And, for the moment, she had no real information to show Stephen Whiteman.

If necessary, putting Luke Watford in the circuit, should be possible too. After all, it was likely that there had been some misdemeanors committed. On the other hand, if there had been crimes committed, the very first was that of hacking into the smartphones of a series of hackers. Including the one of Matt Abalone. Annoying. It would just be necessary to find the track, warn Stephen Whiteman, so that he finds legal evidence and, for Luke Watford, to stay in the shadows. Besides, it wouldn't have been very ethical to turn Matt Abalone to the police. It doesn't happen in their small circle, except in serious cases like murder or something like that.

Mary Hayward turned off her computer and went to bed. The rest would wait until tomorrow.

Cyber-games with friends

18

Officially, Luke Watford was supposed to close the Kevin Bellig case. It was a suicide, that was all. Why there were so few child pornography videos didn't matter even if all pedophiles collected them. Perhaps he was erasing them as he went along. Or was he storing them on a remote server that could not be found. There were more important matters.

But this morning Luke Watford had returned to the abandoned shed. It was early. Homeless people slept in a corner, under the half-rusted metal mezzanine, wrapped in blankets and boxes. No need to wake them up. They would know nothing, would have seen nothing. Or they would say anything in the hope of getting a coin or a cigarette.

The policeman walked cautiously on a floor strewn with debris. All the windows had been broken over time, especially on the mezzanine level, where the offices probably had been before. There was also bottle glass. And the concrete floor was cracked. It was easy to trip over a hole, twist an ankle, or fall headlong into shards.

Luke Watford sighed. He was stupid, he knew it. The scientific police had examined the scene in detail. The procedure is always the same. The policemen were looking for the slightest clue

Cyber-games with friends

to identify a body when they did not know if they would find useful papers in his pockets. They had taken the stepladder. Nothing in particular was found. So how could he, on his own, with his instinct as his only instrument, do better than the specialists loaded with equipment? He told himself that he was just an idiot. He exited the shed the way he had entered.

Rather than go straight to his service car, he headed for the edge of the water. There was an esplanade for maneuvering trucks and storing containers. Gulls flew over the water.

He sat on a mooring bollard and concentrated on the flight of birds. If his instinct was right but he couldn't prove it, he risked ending up like some cops, sitting on a bench or a mooring bollard, watching the birds, and waiting to die for holding back too many regrets.

But he wasn't beaten yet. And his instincts could be wrong. If his reason was convincing enough, his instincts would be forced to give up. He was just a young cop. No question of aging too quickly.

Cyber-games with friends

19

The sun had set, but a small lamp was shining on Mary Hayward, sitting cross-legged in front of her computer screen on the floor. She had been examining what her spy had gleaned from Bao Yu for three evenings. But she had only traces of the exchanges, no content. Bringing home the content would have consumed a lot of bandwidth and the spyware would not have been as discreet as desired. If Matt Abalone had the necessary tools -and Mary Hayward was sure he had them- he would have detected her little creation, of which she was very proud, in just a few hours.

To think that she had injected it wirelessly the last time they had a drink together... The contamination assistant had found an unfilled loophole on the smartphone and, voilà, a few seconds had been enough. For the dozen others infected, it was enough to cross them in one way or another. Sometimes without the victim even knowing it. Hiding at the foot of the building, waiting for the target to come out and, for example, taking the same bus for a two-station trip ... and that was it. Mary Hayward had enjoyed herself.

She thought she would deactivate her spie software soon enough. Perhaps some victims would not react with the same ethics as Matt

Cyber-games with friends

Abalone, whom she knew well.

But, first, it was necessary to find something which would justify going to beg some fees from this brave Stephen Whiteman. And, in three evenings, she had found nothing.

Maybe, in the end, he had just flirted with this executive assistant for his own pleasure. Or maybe he had even fallen in love. Mary Hayward smiled. Imagining this dear Matt in love amused her. No, let's be serious. Either he had seduced her as part of a mission -which did not exclude taking a little pleasure on the way as a bonus- or it was a sexual adventure with a pretty woman. Drawing this one in had been child's play. She was not very careful. Swinger dating sites, social networks, etc. She was everywhere. Under pseudonyms, of course, but easy to find.

Suddenly, Mary Hayward noticed something strange. She listed the emails received by her victim. And some came from a strange domain name. Never from the same shipping address, so her first ranking tool did not notice, with shippers being at the bottom of the quantitative ranking. But it was a random address, a series of numbers and letters preceding the domain.

She did a little research. The domain was that of a Panamanian fax-to-mail company. In other words, she had virtual fax where she could receive documents that she converted into office files. And these files were sent to the owner of the

Cyber-games with friends

fax number by email.

Scanning the service's website, Mary Hayward took a closer look at what it offered. Already, it was quickly specified that the faxes were returned in an encrypted format with a key inserted by the sponsor, the price of the service varying according to the length of the key. Even if Mary Hayward had retrieved the content, she would have suffered to read it. And that would have taken a long time. Assuming she could decipher the messages. In addition, to avoid being easily traced, the shipping addresses were randomized, as Mary Hayward had spotted. These were vicious people who had to go to professionals with things to hide.

But sending faxes to Panama was still a curious thing to do. It would easily arise suspicion. Very quickly, Mary Hayward found the answer to her objection: the service offered fax numbers in almost every country on the globe. These were numbers that referred, in IP traffic, to servers in Panama. In short, no processing or storage in countries where courts could easily raid server rooms. Smart. And annoying in this case.

But why faxes? Who could send so many faxes to Matt Abalone? It was completely obsolete. There were only a few very specific areas left where there were still many fax exchanges, such as international shipping. Almost everyone used emails now.

Cyber-games with friends

Mary Hayward stood abruptly. She paced, rubbing her chin, a bad habit she had picked up years ago. It helped her to think even though it made her chin contort.

No one sent faxes anymore. So no one monitored the fax. At least, not carefully. And technically, a call list on an itemized bill did not distinguish faxes from phone calls. You would have to look for the sending station, which must be a fax machine, to know that it was a fax.

But today, who could send so many faxes? It was necessary to have a fax machine, an antique machine, close at hand. It could not be discreet.

Mary Hayward was thinking. If she had to send a fax, how would she do it?

Cyber-games with friends

20

The apartment was nice. Well decorated. Nice view through the window, on a private park. The meal had been nice. And the young woman was also very friendly in addition to being a good cook. The dinner had been less classy than the one in the best restaurant in town, but excellent all the same.

Matt Abalone sincerely hoped she wouldn't get in trouble, that she wouldn't be found responsible for contaminating her business. Business is business but Matt Abalone remained a romantic type. At least, that's what he told himself in the morning when he looked in his bathroom mirror to shave.

Angela Watkins had come to curl up against him. He wrapped his arms around her, kissing her neck. Then he pulled the blanket over them both. One day, one would have to find a way to hold the blanket in place when making love like savages.

"Are you staying tonight?" she asked without turning around.

"Tomorrow I have to leave early. I don't know if that's a good idea."

"What time do you have to leave?"

"About six."

"I'm going to set the alarm for five o'clock. That'll give us time to have a coffee and a shower.

Cyber-games with friends

Maybe a little more.”

He smiled. She slid out from the man’s arms quite seamlessly. Picking up the clock radio on the nightstand, she changed the setting. Then she turned to her lover and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him.

It was dark but it was not late. They had gone to bed soon after dinner. The caresses on the sofa had not lasted long. Getting up at five in the morning would therefore not be a real problem, except for jet lag.

However, Angela Watkins had no trouble falling asleep. She felt so good in this man’s arms. They slept together a little too often, maybe. Angela Watkins feared becoming attached. And she hoped for it at the same time. Provided that it was reciprocal.

On the other hand, Matt Abalone closed his eyes insistently, forcefully, but he couldn’t fall asleep. He even had the beginning of a tear in the corner of his eye. He didn’t want anything bad to happen to this woman. And he was ashamed of having abused her. Never should she learn what he had done. Never.

Cyber-games with friends

21

“Hello Miss.”

“Good evening, sir. Please have a seat.”

Same time. Same bar. Same table. Mary Hayward and Stephen Whiteman were just a few days older. The young woman had taken the same cocktail again but she had not had time to drink it much.

The waiter approached but only had time to greet the newcomer who immediately ordered.

“Bring me a Loch Lomond Oakshield. I am going to try it. And a snack plate. The one with guacamole. Thank you.”

“Well, sir.”

As soon as the waiter had disappeared, Stephen Whiteman turned to Mary Hayward who was a little surprised at the speed of the order. Her straw was still rising as she drank down the different layers of her cocktail.

“My dear Nikita, I feel that you have sworn to make me an alcoholic. Usually I don’t drink whiskey that often.”

Mary Hayward smiled but waited until she had finished her sip of alcohol before answering.

“I would feel guilty if I bribed a client.”

“A former client, for now.”

“Did you tell me you would consider giving me a little mission if I found something interesting

Cyber-games with friends

for you?”

“I confirm that.”

“Do you monitor your outgoing faxes?”

“My what?” smiled the man.

“Your faxes”, insisted the hacker.

“But we haven’t had a fax for years. Everything is done by email now.”

“Are you really sure?”

Stephen Whiteman was speechless for a few seconds looking at the young woman. She was smiling. She knew she had hit the mark. And Bioxem’s director of security suddenly realized that there might be a flaw in the protection he had built.

“Could you explain why I should monitor fax sendings, Miss?”

“I will answer you like a Jesuit, with another question. What are you faxing today? Do you still have fax machines?”

“I think not. And even if there is one left somewhere, there must be no more consumables like thermal paper, which would block it, even for sending.”

“Exactly. So, I repeat my question: how do you send faxes today?”

Stephen Whiteman tried to remember the last time he sent a fax. He couldn’t do it. Then he plunged back into the memory of his office. He examined his desk, then the smallest shelf. Then he did the same in his secretary’s office. No,

Cyber-games with friends

nothing could be used to send faxes in their offices. Still in spirit, while Mary Hayward sipped her cocktail in the indifference of the director of security, he went out into the hallway. What was in that hallway? Pots with plants. Chairs. A MFP printer. The toilet door. A coffee dispenser. No faxes.

Was it the sound of the glass of whiskey and the plate with the guacamole and chips being placed on the table that had disturbed Stephen Whiteman? Suddenly he thought he had forgotten something. He turned his mind around. The coffee machine. The toilet door.

“The multifunction printer!” Stephen Whiteman said suddenly, a little too loudly. He then repeated significantly lower: “the multifunction printer.”

Mary Hayward grabbed a chip and dipped it in the guacamole. But, before putting it in her mouth, she confirmed:

“That’s what I thought, indeed. The multifunction printers. All companies have printers that are also scanners with the ability to send scans or even documents via email or fax. Normally, your workstation should even have a virtual printer which is a fax machine. Everyone forgets it. And if you use this virtual printer, the document is sent by fax using the MFP’s modem.”

“But the MFP still has to be plugged into the phone!”

Cyber-games with friends

“It is, to the network. It’s enough.”

“But I don’t understand. Where are you going with your faxes?”

“How do you sneak information out of a company? If you use email, you will get caught. At least in a suitably protected company. But no one thinks of the fax. So no one protects it. Nobody is watching it. Not even you.”

“Do you think someone is faxing confidential information?”

“Nope. I think a virus has infected your MFPs - or at least one of them - and is faxing everything printed on them. Remember: a MFP today is a true stand-alone computer. It has its own embedded software, a hard disk... So it can be infected by a virus. And obediently send to someone with bad intentions all the confidential documents that can only be printed on paper by passing a badge.”

Stephen Whiteman turned livid. He took a sip of whiskey without bothering to taste its particular woody flavor, although he was a whiskey lover.

“Miss, may I know what makes you think I should urgently look into what might be going on with our MFPs?”

“Nope.”

“You will understand that it is a bit short...”

“I retrieved information in a way that must remain unknown to you. This information shows

Cyber-games with friends

that someone has received a lot of faxes and that same someone is interested in your business. And no, you can't know who that someone is. Nor how I managed to obtain the information I am giving you. So far, I have my suspicions. I don't know what this someone received by fax. Maybe I'm completely wrong. Or maybe not."

"And if you're not mistaken? How long did you spend on this case?"

"Directly on Bioxem, about three evenings. But this work builds on a few previous maneuvers that took a lot of work out of me."

"I see. I suggest that we stay at the price from last time if you are right. I'm going to do a review. Even if you're wrong, you've pointed out a potential security issue. In this case, a small compensation will be required. Let's put half. Is it OK for you?"

"Yes. And to go further?"

"I will see. If we have an infected multifunction, or several, we will need a team of specialists from the manufacturer. And a police investigation will be required. I take it you don't wish to appear in front of the police?"

"No, of course not. What I have done..."

"Is not very legal. I understood."

Retrieving the smile of a professional who sees an interesting challenge looming before him, Stephen Whiteman grabbed a chip that he dipped in guacamole before biting into it. Then he took

Cyber-games with friends

the time to taste his whisky.

He tried to imagine what the consequences of such an infection might be. Until he knew how many faxes had been sent and from which MFP, estimating the damage would be impossible. First of all, all the fax accesses of the multifunction printers should be disconnected. Not very complicated. Then IT maintenance should uninstall the virtual printers on all workstations. And then to browse through all the phone calls from the last few months. By finding the transmitting stations.

Cyber-games with friends

22

Coming out of the elevator that had brought him from the parking lot to his office floor, John Fieldpatrick realized that there was something like a revolution in the company. He had gone to bed late the day before and, privilege of his age and rank, he had allowed himself to arrive at a time when, normally, all his collaborators were already on duty. But there was a crowd near a MFP in the hallway, and another in the office of a head of department...

Arriving in the office of his assistant Angela Watkins, he greeted her as usual before inquiring about the situation. She seemed surprised at the boss's question.

"Didn't you see the email sent by Stephen Whiteman this morning? This caused real panic among freight forwarders and salespeople."

"Not yet. I got up a bit late this morning and didn't log in from home. What is going on?"

"All printers have been blocked and disconnected from the network. Not only can we no longer print but, in addition, we can no longer send faxes."

"But who still sends faxes?"

"Mainly freight forwarders and salespeople, sir."

"Ah... OK, I'm going to log in and read this

Cyber-games with friends

email. Does he explain the reason for all this fuss?"

"He invokes company security, without being specific. That's why it's gotten everyone so worked up."

John Fieldpatrick had perfect confidence in Stephen Whiteman. But such an initiative, taken without warning, surprised him. Waiting for his computer to boot up and load his emails, John Fieldpatrick peered out his office window. The weather was wonderful.

Then he stared in bewilderment at the number of email exchanges on the general mailing lists. All the heads of departments demanded that the printers be returned to operation. They also complained that IT technicians came by to uninstall fax-sending software. The total lack of consultation was shocking. Almost as much as the lack of response from the computer systems director who always reacted promptly when a user questioned the proper functioning of the computer department. As for the initial email sent the day before, a little before midnight, by Stephen Whiteman, it was indeed very succinct.

Sighing, John Fieldpatrick picked up his phone and called the director of security. The landline phone rang blankly. This worried the boss. This meant that not only was Stephen Whiteman not in his office, but so were his colleagues to whom calls were automatically

Cyber-games with friends

redirected. The boss called the mobile phone.

“Yes sir?”

“Well, Stephen, can you explain to me the reasons that prompted you to bring about a revolution in the company? And where did the CIO go? Usually he reacts instantly!”

“He is with me, sir. We are working on various technical documents in his office. I took the liberty of calling him last night urgently. And we’ve been working together since three in the morning. Specialist technicians from the MFP manufacturer are on their way. They’re coming from Texas. The local agency refused to process the maintenance ticket that I opened at five thirty-two.”

“Sorry? What’s happening?”

“I’d rather not talk about it over the phone, sir. And it would be better if I did not interrupt myself.”

“Which means I have to go down to IT to figure this out?”

“As you please, sir.”

“I’m coming.”

And the boss hung up. But he didn’t get up immediately. He felt stunned. That Stephen Whiteman was paranoid, he was paid for that. But that the entire IT department agreed to urgently follow him, even in the middle of the night for his manager, was pretty amazing. Usually, these two exchanged “Pain in the ass!” and “I don’t give a

Cyber-games with friends

fuck!” in a management meeting.

But he had to calm down his troops. So he quickly wrote an email sent to the whole company.

“Ladies and gentlemen,

A security operation is in progress. This implies a temporary unavailability of certain equipment. This does not prevent the performance of most of your tasks.

I even welcome this opportunity to remind you that printing should be limited to what is strictly necessary. The current operation can therefore be seen as a test and an exercise.

I ask you to postpone for a few hours the tasks that absolutely require printing a paper document. But I also invite you to see for yourselves that most of the impressions made so far were totally useless.

Best regards.”

He was about to get up to join the IT department when his phone rang.

“Sir? Stephen Whiteman. We are going up to join you in your office. After all, it will be easier that way.”

“Oh? Good. I’ll wait for you then.”

Stephen Whiteman must have found the cause of his worries. But John Fieldpatrick was flabbergasted again. He waited impatiently to know the reasons for all this mess.

Cyber-games with friends

He didn't have to wait very long, a few minutes in fact. If the CIO and the Director of Security were not running, their walk was barely slower than a race. They arrived out of breath in the boss's office, opening the door on their own without bothering to knock. Standing up, Angela Watkins showed that she was outraged. John Fieldpatrick invited his two visitors to sit down, reassuring his assistant by inviting her to close the door and resume her work.

"OK, so what's going on?"

Only Stephen Whiteman spoke. The CIO nodded steadily while trying to catch his breath. This acceptance of this secondary role surprised John Fieldpatrick as these two individuals hated each other.

"Sir, we have temporarily closed a security hole. But we have found the source of the problem and we will be able to restart the printers, without their fax functions for the moment. And we're going to have to consider the quick acquisition of two manual faxes: one for you, one for the freight forwarder department."

"But I don't need a fax!"

"However, your MFP has sent hundreds of faxes over the past week or so."

"Sorry?"

"I pulled all phone calls from the PABX over the past two months. Then I did a search on the numbers of multifunction printers. Only two sent

Cyber-games with friends

faxes: the two I mentioned to you. The one of the freight forwarders did it with a constant and normal rhythm. Yours obviously faxed all documents sent to be printed.”

“But sent to whom? And why?”

“To a local number that redirects to a Fax-to-mail service located in Panama. I got this information from the sales department of our telephone operator when I wanted to dispute the billing. Why? For espionage purposes, of course.”

“But the documents that are printed at my house are all highly strategic.”

“Sir, you just figured out the problem.”

“Did you call...”

“I phoned the young lieutenant I dealt with in the story of the thumb drive with child pornography videos. He told me that he was trying to get a judge to come with an expert. It turns out that this expert is the one who tipped me off.”

“But how was the problem detected?”

“Let’s just say ... this expert works for us from time to time. And she detected this potential security flaw. But it was necessary to examine the situation in detail before knowing whether or not this loophole had been exploited.”

“Any loophole is necessarily exploited. It’s just a matter of time. Isn’t that what you keep telling me?”

“Yes sir.”

“If the source of the problem is detected, can

Cyber-games with friends

we restart our printers excluding that of the General Management?”

“Yes sir. With an additional measure: permanently disconnect the fax function. This means going to buy a manual fax for freight forwarders.”

“For the manual fax, ask the purchasing department to take care of it urgently. For the rest, keep the infected MFP disconnected and restart the others before the company goes into a riot.”

“Well, sir.”

The boss remained silent for a short moment. His two men were about to greet him and leave when he asked them to remain seated. Then he told them his plan.

“Of course the police will do their job. But I want you to reconnect the fax function of the infected MFP. But you will only connect it to a computer isolated from the rest of the network. And in my office. You will quickly reinstall another MFP to replace the one put aside.”

“I do not understand very well...”

John Fieldpatrick’s carnivorous smile is enough to dispel any doubt about the imperative character.

“Do as I tell you. No arguing.”

Cyber-games with friends

Cyber-games with friends

23

Fortunately, Matt Abalone had installed a filter on his mailbox. All faxes forwarded by e-mail were thus stored in a dedicated directory, without cluttering the main inbox. Despite the constant change of sender, the recipient was a dedicated address, a simple redirect that sent everything both to the hacker's own address and to Francis Hampton's inbox.

The latter had expressed his satisfaction with the information received. So much the better. The first payments had been made. Nice amount, to begin with. Matt Abalone thought that Angela Watkins should be invited back to the restaurant. Or even invited traveling. Voilà. A small romantic trip. Rome, Venice... After all, she was a key factor in the success of the operation, even if it was an unwitting one.

In the meantime, the faxes kept coming. Early in the morning, there had been a rather bizarre stop. As if the secretary hadn't printed any letters or cooking recipes from the web for a few hours. Perhaps there had been a meeting that mobilized the general management. The flow had started again by mid-morning.

When he had finished processing another file, Matt Abalone went to take a look in the received faxes. There was a crisis meeting report.

Cyber-games with friends

With all the directors of the company.

Starting to read it while having a coffee, Matt Abalone nearly choked. His coffee had taken a wrong turn. Unless the contents of the document provoked a surprise cough. John Fieldpatrick had announced nothing less than the probable future bankruptcy of the company because of a lawsuit gone badly on the other side of the world. A dirty business whose details were not mentioned. Apparently, everyone seemed to know about this in the top management team, according to the minutes. Matt Abalone picked up his phone to call Francis Hampton.

“Mr. Abalone, I just wanted to call you.”

“Have you seen the report of...”

“Yes. I assume you can send this document completely anonymously to various journalists and bloggers?”

“Yes, of course, it’s very simple. It would be necessary to add other documents, to disclose the fact that Bioxem was hacked and thus explain the origin of this report. Given your objective, this will help you.”

“Very well. I’ll make a selection for you. Certain aspects should not, on the contrary, come out.”

“Good. It’s a deal. I await your selection. On the other hand, if you have what you need, the spyware should be deactivated and destroyed.”

“Why?”

Cyber-games with friends

“So far, it has not been spotted. But once Bioxem understands that its system has been hacked, security will come into play. No need to reveal cards that could be reused. And then, any trace discovered can lead the police to one of us.”

“I see. Let’s wait a few hours. Perhaps other interesting documents will come to us. You will destroy your spy moments before sending the documents to the press. Is that OK for you?”

“Understood. You will then proceed with the last payment which we had agreed on.”

“As expected. The suitcase with the money is ready. Let’s see, it’s nearly noon. The closures of the evening dailies have already passed. The ones of tomorrow and the television channels can wait until the end of the afternoon. Cut your software at four o’clock and send the documents immediately. I am also making a list of the people who will have to receive them.”

“We agree. For the money, shall we meet at six o’clock, at the usual place?”

“Perfect. Sergei will bring you the suitcase. As for me, I’ll be busy with other things, I think.”

The two men said goodbye and hung up. The operation would therefore be over by the evening, at least for Matt Abalone. It had been brief and lucrative in addition to being a total success. In short, it was a perfect mission.

As a precaution, he would destroy all the intermediate mail servers that allowed him to

Cyber-games with friends

discreetly retrieve documents from Panama via a cascade of referrals. The police would need to summon all of its courage in order to find his trace from the telephone communications. Assuming the cops find out how Bioxem was hacked.

Matt Abalone stood up from his desk. He opened the French window and went to the balcony. The sky was blue. It was an ideal temperature. He breathed deeply.

Tonight he would celebrate. But not before. Never before the real end. It brought bad luck. If Bioxem discovered something before evening, that would really be unfortunate. Last-minute failures were always the most painful. And the most dangerous. This is why one should never stay too long in a system. At some point or another, you always got spotted. Even that slut Nikita got spotted with her spyware in her smartphone.

Cyber-games with friends

24

Angela Watkins brought in a tray full of coffee cups, a candy pot, and spoons. She placed it on the large table in John Fieldpatrick's office. Everyone fell silent when she entered, their faces closed. She piled on her tray the waste from the meal, a few bags of sandwiches, now empty water bottles ... and withdrew, closing the door behind her.

"Well, let's continue, gentlemen", shouted John Fieldpatrick.

Around the table, in addition to the boss, there was his son Frank Fieldpatrick, Benoit Whiteman and Robin Davidson, the group's lawyer. John Fieldpatrick was the only one smiling, regaining a dynamism which he hadn't experienced since he was twenty years old. Frank Fieldpatrick dared interrupt his father.

"Dad, I think your strategy is very risky. We don't know what these people want to do. Not even who they are."

"My dear son, we shall, I think, soon find out. I have asked our stockbrokers to be alert to stock movements. And to be ready to place purchase orders on behalf of the Foundation."

"Buy orders for what, please?"

"Bioxem shares, of course. If the current operation aims to destabilize us, the objective is

Cyber-games with friends

probably to buy us back. We will pull the rug out from under our enemies, taking advantage of a low price.”

Robin Davidson spoke.

“This is where I wonder... This strategy pains me because it borders on insider trading. You are helping to manipulate your price by spreading false information. And you want to take advantage of it.”

“I don’t broadcast anything publicly. It is our attackers who will broadcast them if that is their objective. And the documents are fake.”

It was then Stephen Whiteman’s turn to intervene.

“The manufacturer has taken a certified copy of the corrupt firmware from the MFP. Lt. Luke Watford took her to the police computer labs. Maybe the police will find some signature or trace that will put us on the trail of the pirates. Now I monitor the network traffic going in and out of the MFP with every tool possible. What confuses me is that no document stored on the hard drive was corrupted. The virus destroys its history and traces.”

Cyber-games with friends

25

Would she ever sleep with Matt Abalone? Through the window, Mary Hayward watched the sun set while thinking. She pouted. That was unlikely now. Too bad, no doubt. Well, it did not matter. She smiled while keeping an aftertaste of sadness and regret.

Then she returned to her current occupation. Sitting on the carpet in front of her laptop, she removed the last DVD from the burner and put it back in its box. Then she made a perfect pile of all the DVDs she had just burned, lying next to her on the floor. The support was a bit old but had resisted well to the passage of time of at least ten years. And you just had to keep an adequate drive. A well-sealed plastic crate was waiting for them, in addition to freezer bags that she would seal.

The last DVD she made was the one about Matt Abalone. So she took her marker, opened the box again, and wrote on the neutral side of the disc: "Matt Abalone." Then she closed the box. On each DVD, she had noted the name of the victim of her spyware. Normally, these traces would be useless but she was reluctant to destroy all the work done.

She still ran a few scan scripts to see if anything strange had popped up. But she had found nothing obvious. In particular, no victim

Cyber-games with friends

received faxes apart from Matt Abalone.

It was finished. Everything was saved. So she launched the total erasure of the external drive where everything had been stored, data and logs. In a few hours, there would be no detectable trace of his small, guilty amusement, apart from the DVDs. The erasing software would overwrite every bit of the disk at least ten times. Considering the treatment undergone, especially because of the heating, the disc had a good chance of not surviving. She would physically destroy it with a hammer. Then she would throw it in the dumpster.

She left her computer running, all network connections cut, cable unplugged and wireless network disabled. She got up, carrying her pile of DVDs into the kitchen. She slipped each disc into a special freezer bag, vacuumed it and sealed it with the appropriate machine. Once all the DVDs had undergone this treatment, she slipped them into a plastic case which she clipped to close it securely. She then took a large piece of scotch tape and began to go around the box several times, at the joint of the lid. It would be perfectly waterproof for several years.

It was a little over eight o'clock. She had to wait a bit to get out with her load and a shovel. At least two hours. She would go and bury her crate in the usual place. She grabbed the remote and turned on the television to watch the news.

“ ... before the close of trading caused an

Cyber-games with friends

earthquake against the price of this company so far uneventful. Bioxem, a stockbroker told us, was a steady investment, without surprises. But the announcement of the hacking of its systems brought about a wave of panic, as always in such cases. Above all, among the documents published, there is this note on a lost lawsuit which could lead to the bankruptcy of the company.

We wanted to know more. But the company's spokesperson confined herself to receiving journalists in front of the entrance to the headquarters, the famous Blue Tower in San Francisco. She made a terse statement there before disappearing inside the company's premises, without answering questions. Journalists who wanted to follow her were blocked by the company's security guards.

This statement points out that, like all companies, Bioxem is regularly subject to computer attacks. All measures have been taken to ensure that no hacker is able to extract documents from company systems. About the documents that were released, the spokeswoman insisted that they were probably fake. She called on shareholders to keep their faith in a solid company. She is not aware of a possible lawsuit lost by the company which would threaten its survival.”

Mary Hayward smiled as she turned off the television. She wondered where the old man was coming from. She was just surprised that he was

Cyber-games with friends

printing documents on this corrupted MFP device, taking the precaution of completely isolating it. He continued, mixing insignificant documents, including cooking recipes, and strange minutes of meetings that never took place.

And then a document had arrived from outside, via the telephone link, to be printed. The document contained microcode that destroyed the virus infecting the MFP. Mary Hayward was able to verify this. The document had self-deleted but she was able to retrieve it from the machine's hard drive. The police, in the person of dear Lieutenant Luke Watford, had seized this hard drive. The police labs were going to have a little more work.

As for the multifunction, it was going to be recycled by the manufacturer. Bioxem was not taking any risks.

Cyber-games with friends

26

“Perfect. I thank you, sir. This was the element we were missing because they were our suspects for reasons that I cannot reveal to you and which will not appear in the proceedings.”

Luke Watford hung up. The revelation made by John Fieldpatrick justified the police operation. A simple phone call to the judge, a call from the latter to the banker behind the revelation and, in one or two hours, Energoil would be raided with the seizure of its entire computer system, in particular the mail servers. Specialists would take bit-for-bit full copies of all hard drives.

Once again, the tip given by Mary Hayward had proven to be correct. But why was a secondary oil company so interested in Bioxem? Their activities had nothing to do with it.

After his telephone conversation with the judge, Luke Watford smiled. It was still very useful to have banker friends. Especially when they owned about ten percent of your capital and were approached to sell their stakes at a reasonable price while the one who offered you the good deal bought the shares of the floating capital at a low price. Those who would lose money in the deal, as always, would be the small savers who panicked at the slightest storm. And who were massively selling their Bioxem shares.

Cyber-games with friends

In his office, John Fieldpatrick turned to his son. He was triumphant.

“That’s it, the Foundation owns more than half of our capital. Energoil is defeated. And its boss will have to explain why he launched all the reserves of the group in a stock market operation where they not come out unscathed.”

“And now?” asked Frank Fieldpatrick.

“Now we wait. The killing of the enemy must be done at the right time. I had call options placed at the probable price of Energoil shares in a few days. We will publish a formal tender offer within three or four days. Our law firm is preparing the case.”

“We will have to get rid of their last deposit and the refinery.”

“There will be buyers among their competitors. This is not a problem.”

Frank Fieldpatrick allowed himself to smile. But his father reminded him that nothing was over yet.

Cyber-games with friends

27

But why didn't that stupid banker call him back? James Burton was nervous and stared at his phone, as if it could make the device ring.

The price of Bioxem kept falling. There were lower and lower call options filed by Energoil. But Energoil didn't pick up everything that came up. Curiously, there was at least one other buyer who generally settled on a price barely higher than the one offered by Energoil. And the oil company only grabbed what it could during the time necessary to readjust its competitor's offer.

How much equity in Bioxem did Energoil own? About twenty percent. Too little. Far too little. Something was wrong.

And this banker who was not calling back...

No doubt had he gone to eat. But at this hour, he should have come back. Perhaps a bank board meeting was underway. It was a big operation, all the same.

And James Burton could not decently call back. At worst, he would make him a lower offer when all the floating capital was in his hands. And it did not go that way.

What if it was this nutty banker who bought back Bioxem shares? But why? Bioxem was supposed to go bankrupt because of this lawsuit on the other side of the world. Energoil could provide

Cyber-games with friends

the necessary cash to hold on. And, then... But a bank can also provide liquidity. Maybe that damn banker was going to launch a takeover bid before Energoil!

James Burton cursed. No. It was not possible. Only the CEOs of Bioxem, he and Francis Hampton knew that the Bioxem company was going to acquire an immense value in a few months. Unless that, taken by the throat, old Fieldpatrick had revealed his secrets to that pesky banker. And that the man had believed him.

Finally, the phone rang. James Burton answered with a sigh of relief. At last.

“James Burton.”

“Sir, it’s security at the entrance. Dozens of policemen have just arrived. They are rushing to the computer rooms and are cutting off entrance to the building.”

“Sorry?”

The guard had to repeat. James Burton thanked him like an automaton and hung up. What did that mean? Why were the police involved?

Cyber-games with friends

28

It was noon.. Matt Abalone was getting hungry. He yawned. He was working on a difficult case of securing a company with a complex IT architecture. He had to make sure that even he couldn't hack this company. He was paid for it. And had a good reputation for it as well.

One of the particular difficulties was the need for nomadic employees to connect to the system from their smartphone, and this from anywhere, when visiting clients. And his recent misadventure with Nikita had reminded him that you rarely secure a smartphone properly. Even he had overlooked certain aspects. And she had found the weak links. It was a good lesson for him. He should actually thank her. Even though his pride had taken a hit.

He got up from his desk and walked through his apartment, into the kitchen. He needed something good, not too heavy to digest and providing good energy. He opened his refrigerator. There were leftover baked potatoes, ham, eggs... All three would do. He also took sugar, chocolate, breadcrumbs, salt and pepper from a cupboard.

In a bowl, he broke the eggs. With a tablespoon, he scooped up the yolks and tossed them into a deep plate. He mixed them with breadcrumbs, salt and pepper. Then he began to

Cyber-games with friends

cut the ham into small pieces, mash the potatoes, mix them with the diced ham, forming patties and kneading them. Then he cooked them over high heat in a pan with a little oil. While cooking, he prepared a chocolate mousse for dessert. It lacked a bit of fruit or vegetables but he would make up for it in the evening.

While the mousse hardened in the freezer, Matt Abalone put his plate on the bar separating his open kitchen and living room. He picked up the remote to turn the television on to a 24/7 news channel.

"...Very strange case. The police thus confirms the rumor according to which certain documents belonging to Bioxem and distributed to the editorial staff were on the hard drive of the computer of the CEO of the company. However, some documents turned out to be gross forgeries, such as a report of a meeting that never took place and implied that Bioxem was on the verge of bankruptcy because of a lost lawsuit that never existed. But this document, in particular, caused a stock market panic. Energoil seized the opportunity to buy around 20% of Bioxem's capital at a low price. James Burton, CEO of Energoil, has been placed under house arrest and prohibited from contacting the employees of his company. The supervisory authority of the stock exchange..."

Matt Abalone nearly choked. He pressed the

Cyber-games with friends

button on the remote control to turn off the television. What the fuck was that? How did the police find these documents at Energoil? And who had made this false document since it had arrived by fax normally? What if Bioxem had detected the hack and manipulated it? What if Nikita had spotted the incoming faxes on her email? But how could she have made the connection with Bioxem? With the meeting with Angela Watkins?

No, he must be making all of this up. If she had found anything implicating him, her boyfriend Luke Watford would already be there to arrest him. Bioxem must have spotted the very unusual fax outputs. Damn, this Stephen Whiteman was really, really good. No company verified that. None adequately secured its multifunctional printers.

It made him think he had overlooked this aspect in his morning report when field workers needed to be able to print to headquarters from their smartphones. Damn, he would never get out of this case! He went to write down his thoughts on a post-it.

His potato pancakes did not seem so good when he came back to finish his meal. They had objectively cooled down a little. He hurriedly finished and ate his chocolate mousse.

He was going to have to quickly clean up his computers before the police showed up. Nobody should be able to find anything related to Bioxem,

Cyber-games with friends

Energcoil or that stupid Francis Hampton. The phone exchanges would remain. It would be impossible to delete them from the information system of the operators. But, on the other hand, there had been very few. And it could have been a request for a quote in order to secure the Energcoil system. Yes, that was it. It was a sales pitch. He had to reach Francis Hampton to explain this alibi to him. Discreetly.

But, for now, to clean up his house. Matt Abalone hurriedly returned to his computer and started a purge of the collected data. The backup made in a discreet server in Panama would do the trick if needed. The cleaning program would overwrite the hard drive with random bits repeatedly to remove all traces of the deleted documents. Matt Abalone let the software work.

Someone rang. He went to open the door.

“Sir, you are expected downstairs”, Sergei Katorgovich simply said.

Matt Abalone cringed slightly in surprise. The driver took the opportunity to slip his shoe into the doorway. He was strong. Matt Abalone understood that all he had to do was obey. Anyway, he had to see Francis Hampton discreetly.

He put on his shoes, then a jacket, took his papers and his keys, then left, Sergei Katorgovich letting him pass while remaining in the opening of the door. It wasn't until he was in the hallway that

Cyber-games with friends

the driver closed the apartment door himself, letting Matt Abalone lock it.

Downstairs, the black van was parked discreetly, next to the garbage cans, behind the building. The driver opened the rear sliding door. When Matt Abalone had entered, he closed it and then returned to his seat. The van started immediately.

Francis Hampton was having a bad day and this could be seen on his face. Matt Abalone was obviously not surprised.

“Mr. Abalone, we have a few minor issues.”

“I heard the news this afternoon. How come the police...”

“I do not know. A priori, someone has spotted the stock market movements. And, suddenly, the police worried about who benefits from the crime, as always.”

“Logical, indeed. But how come the documents were on your boss’s hard drive? This is a rookie mistake.”

“It’s negligence on my part, I confess. I justified my charges without taking the precaution of demanding that he delete the traces. And, like me, he belongs to the older generation. This computer stuff does not come naturally to us at all.”

“But you know you have to burn paper documents, right? Well, for computer files, it’s the same.”

Cyber-games with friends

“I know. But between knowing and having the right reflexes, it’s a different story. This is why I have to use your services again.”

“I can’t erase the documents that were copied by the police and put under seal. It is impossible for me to do so.”

“I suspected so. That’s something else I want you to do. James Burton has fallen. It’s about making sure he goes down alone. In an operation, there are often losses. It is unfortunate. But above all, they must be limited.”

Cyber-games with friends

29

A police car was parked in front of the gate. James Burton sighed as he walked away from his kitchen window. He was done for. But what a moron he had been to keep those documents on his hard drive! And who had made this forgery on which his operation was based? Another dirty trick from Francis Hampton? This time he had to let him go. San Francisco is not a remote location of South America where it was enough to bribe this judge or that politician. He might still be able to salvage a few things by denouncing his colleague. He collapsed on his couch, looking out the bay window. The sea, the ocean, infinity. So many men had wanted to conquer them. So many had failed. Many had not arrived where they had hoped. For better or for worse.

What could he do? Call his lawyer? He was working on the case. He had been very pessimistic. But he was working. He was seeking to bring into the proceedings some aspects which were obviously missing. The police could not have suspected Energoil just because of a phone call from a banker. It did not make sense. Where did the information come from? Why was it missing from the record? Who was protected by the police? Why? But the lawyer had clearly announced that this line of defense would be a last stand to try to

Cyber-games with friends

limit the damage. He could not see how to get his client out of the trap. The evidence was overwhelming.

The only contentious detail was that famous report of a meeting that never took place. Who made it? It seemed proven that it had arrived by fax, along with the others. So it had not been manufactured by Energoil. But the method of transmission prohibited, in fact, to trace back to the authors. At least by using computer tools.

The only possibility for James Burton was therefore to incriminate Francis Hampton up to his neck. He knew who had done what. He could reveal the dark spots. The more he thought about it, the more James Burton was convinced of it. And the more he was driven by a growing hatred for his damned soul. Already, in South America, he was ashamed of what this acolyte had done. He was a murderer, a savage, a barbarian. Why did he bring him back with him to San Francisco? It was a major mistake. Difficult to defend in front of a judge.

What if, in revenge, knowing he was lost, Francis Hampton dropped everything? If he revealed their dark secrets, the crimes in South America?

Cyber-games with friends

30

The black van had passed without slowing down in front of the residence of the boss of Energoil. The gate was blocked by a police car.

“Mr. Abalone, my driver needs to be able to retrieve whatever connects the failed operation to us, me and you. It’s an envelope in James Burton’s office. The police obviously hasn’t found it yet or I’d already be wanted. But there is an alarm, as I explained to you. If it rings, the police will rush.”

Matt Abalone was thinking. His client had called the alarm in front of him. He had identified the type of product he was dealing with. James Burton being there, with the police at his doorstep, he could have unplugged everything. Or he could have just unplugged the radars in the main rooms, leaving the anti-intruder alarm on the openings.

“If the alarm is completely disconnected, the problem does not exist. But I know this product is quite innovative. You can’t disconnect it remotely. It was designed to physically prohibit it. Even by hacking the opening control software, radars and other intrusion detectors cannot be disconnected by the software. You have to physically act on a button after typing the security code on the keyboard to access this button in a shielded box. Only someone on site can unplug everything. And someone who knows the code.”

Cyber-games with friends

“It’s hopeless, then?”

“I did not say that. There is a solution.”

“That is to say?”

“Only James Burton can do that as things stand. So it’s James Burton who has to unplug the alarm if he hasn’t already. Do you have cash? Enough to buy a small drone?”

“Yes, probably. Would a leisure model found in any store be enough?”

“Yes.”

Francis Hampton ordered his driver to cut through the residential area to a suitable store. There, the hacker would find what he needed. Francis Hampton hated this situation where he found himself overwhelmed by the situation. Above all, he felt obsolete in the face of new challenges and new technologies.

Cyber-games with friends

31

Four o'clock pm sharp. James Burton was half asleep, lost in thought when suddenly he was awakened by the shrill alarm. Someone was trying to enter his house.

He rushed towards the door. It was closed. He entered the code and disconnected the alarm before it deafened him. A policeman rang.

“What’s going on, Mr. Burton?”

“I do not know. I just disconnected the alarm before I went deaf. I’m going to put it back to work.”

The policeman entered after making an explicit gesture to a colleague who had remained outside. Once the door closed, the boss of Energoil reconnected the alarm.

While one policeman walked around the house from the outside, the other visited all the rooms. Nothing to report. No window was broken or opened. The police returned to their vehicle.

Four fifteen. New alarm trigger. The same scenes repeated themselves. Same patrols. Same result or, rather, no result.

Four-thirty. Four forty-five. Exactly every fifteen minutes the alarm went off. Each time, the police went around the building from the outside and inside, without noticing anything.

After another trigger at five o'clock, the

Cyber-games with friends

policeman who came inside asked James Burton not to reset the alarm. A trigger every fifteen minutes exactly indicated a malfunction.

At 5:15 p.m., the drone that had landed on the roof of the house took off again. It came and stood silently against a window on the first floor and gently struck it. It started again a little more strongly. Nothing. Not a sound. The alarm had not gone off.

The drone then returned to the van parked in a small street and entered through the rear door to land on an armchair. Matt Abalone tossed the remote aside, then took off his latex gloves and put them in his pocket. He always had such gloves on him, as well as a small screwdriver, to disassemble electronic devices without damaging them or risking leaving greasy traces or sweat. Or fingerprints on a remote control.

At a nod from Francis Hampton, Serguei Katorgovitch put on his leather gloves, clung to the top of the wall circling the property and disappeared beyond it in a few seconds.

Cyber-games with friends

32

There was no trace of his intervention in this case. Matt Abalone did not know what was in this secret envelope. A report from that moron Francis Hampton detailing the operation? Maybe. The hacker said to himself that he should choose his customers better. And no longer dabble in illegality.

Returning home by bus without waiting for the return of Serguei Katorgovitch, Matt Abalone had clearly explained to Francis Hampton, before leaving him, that it was his last intervention in this affair, that he no longer wanted to see him. Francis Hampton had thanked him. He had wanted to give him a new wad of cash but Matt had refused. He didn't want to walk down the street with cash when the police could control him.

There was one point left that could hamper the hacker. There were no more traces on his computers. But there was something very physical: those wads of cash handed over by his client. If the police came to see him, he would have to justify their existence. No question of using them directly. He quickly checked that there was no RFID tag in the middle of the bills. This technique was probably too sophisticated for Francis Hampton but Matt Abalone decided not to take the risk. He walked to his kitchen, took some aluminum foil

Cyber-games with friends

from there and wrapped up each bundle. Then he took a metal box of cookies and put the small packets inside before completing with a layer of cookies. He closed the box with tape.

Impossible to fly with such luggage. X-ray gates would force the box to be opened in front of the customs officers. So he had to fall back on the train. Then a car to cross the border even more discreetly. He was going sightseeing. By carrying his favorite biscuits in his luggage. Then he would deposit the money into his hidden account. And he would send it back when needed in the form of anonymous vouchers, works of art or other means. Money laundering is not that complicated with a little caution and time. The key is not to find yourself caught with the wads of cash.

Matt Abalone looked on the internet. It was still early. He could take an overnight train to San Diego tonight. And a car on arrival to cross the Mexican border. He booked his trip.

Packing up his luggage, he decided to listen to a 24/7 news television channel. This was how he learned that the police had discovered the suicide by hanging of James Burton as they were preparing to take him to the judge for a hearing.

Cyber-games with friends

33

The black van was driving on road number 1, along the coast. It had left Monterey with all the valuable personal belongings of the two passengers.

For now, Sergei Katorgovich was driving. Soon Francis Hampton would take his place. And then they would switch places several more times. They had to stay well rested. No more than two hours of driving.

The Mexican border would be crossed overnight if all went well. In the San Francisco area, it was best to avoid the main roads. But then the van could hit the highway. The tank had been filled. The autonomy of the van allowed it not to have to stop before the Tijuana airport.

The next morning, a plane would take them both to South America. Francis Hampton still had a fallback base. And everything he cared about had been placed in the few suitcases occupying the trunk. Sergei Katorgovich also had a few suitcases. Both had frugal habits. And they were always ready to quickly disappear.

By the time the police discovered that they had disappeared and, above all, that this disappearance could be of some importance, they would be far away. Very far. And protected with new identities. There, they would find new

Cyber-games with friends

employers without difficulty. They had the necessary connections for that. Like for getting new papers.

“Here is a small parking lot with a view of the sea. It will be perfect, Sergei.”

The driver obeyed without responding verbally. The van pulled into the parking lot, facing the ocean. Francis Hampton took off his seat belt and prepared to get out to take Sergei Katorgovich’s place. He also unhooked his belt. As the engine was running, there was an alarm. An annoying little beep. You had to put your belt on.

At that moment, Francis Hampton’s phone rang. He motioned for his driver to wait to swap places and picked up.

“Mr. Abalone? What a surprise! I thought you didn’t want to have a relationship with me anymore. What provides me with the honor of your telephone call?”

“I just wanted to make sure you got what you wanted from James Burton.”

“What I wanted to get back...? Ah, yes, don’t worry. Nothing and no one will now be able to link you to this case.”

“But I wasn’t paid to cover up a murder, Mr. Hampton. And it turns out that people who embarrass you, like this Mr. Burton, or who disappointed you, like Kevin Bellig, commit suicide by hanging with astonishing rapidity.”

“Who told you about Kevin Bellig, Mr.

Cyber-games with friends

Abalone?”

“Everybody knows each other in our circle, Mr. Hampton. Even the losers like Kevin Billig, we know them. And bringing information together is also my job. This kid was dating an accountant from Bioxem. Strange coincidence, right?”

“I told you you were too curious, Mr. Abalone. Would you have a cold in your throat right now?”

“Don’t worry about my throat. On the other hand, I inform you that hacking the auto-drive of your van is disconcertingly simple. It is even a matter of concern for the manufacturer. You should read the papers, Mr. Hampton. In the same way, your smartphone was very easy to hack. I know exactly where you are, within about fifty centimeters. And in which direction is the nose of your van. I believe it is time for me to ensure my safety. And also that I make sure that two murders -at least- do not go unpunished.”

The doors locked with the usual click. The handbrake deactivated. And the engine, driving an automatic gearbox, accelerated.

The van crosses the parapet, already broken many times at this place by suicidal people. It was only made of planks, awaiting further repair. Then the vehicle appeared to fly for a short moment before diving headfirst and crashing at the base of the cliff.

The nearly full fuel tank exploded. The

Cyber-games with friends

flames destroyed what was left of the van. And the last debris was scattered by the waves of the rising tide. Perhaps a walker would find some sheet metal , a tire or even a piece of roasted corpse, on a beach, in a few days.

But, very often, nothing was found, except a piece of chassis. Suicidal people often threw themselves from the top of the cliff at this place, jumping on foot or driving through the parapet with their cars. The police took it with fatalism. Another one bites the dust...

Cyber-games with friends

34

This time, the press was welcome in the Blue Tower. Journalists hurried into the hall where a platform had been set up with a desk and draped in blue. At the back, near the doors, smaller but higher platforms allowed the cameras to have a bird's-eye view of the room. Photographers were busy, all flashes darting, everywhere.

At the foot of the big blue platform, Stephen Whiteman was nervous. He looked at the room, the journalists sitting chatting, the photographers jumping, the cameramen doing their tests while starting to retransmit ... and the guards placed everywhere. It was a great day for Bioxem and nothing should mar it. He knew he had the confidence of the entire Fieldpatrick family. He would keep his job for many more years. As long as he was efficient.

Throughout the building, as in the other Bioxem establishments, everyone had their eyes glued to their computer screen. The press conference was broadcast live on the internal network.

Finally, John Fieldpatrick made his entrance amongst many cheers, followed three steps away by his son Frank and by his daughter-in-law Cynthia Chervil. An energetic woman, rather slender and of medium height, black hair cut in a

Cyber-games with friends

boyish style, the heiress of the shipowner Transocean rarely appeared in public. Her presence had not been announced. The journalists were surprised. All three wore wide smiles of contentment. Only John Fieldpatrick advanced to the pulpit first, his son and daughter-in-law remaining in the back.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have invited you to my last press conference as CEO of Bioxem. This morning, the Board of Directors unanimously elected my son Frank as its Chairman. As I withdraw from this entity, my daughter-in-law will enter it. For my part, I will, in a few moments, only remain the president of the Blue Ocean Foundation.

It has not escaped your notice that our company has been a bit shaken up lately.”

The patriarch paused, allowing the room to laugh softly. Then he resumed.

“As you know, the Blue Ocean Foundation today owns approximately 70% of Bioxem and a minority share of Transocean. We do not wish to conduct a total delisting of Bioxem following a takeover bid. This is one of the reasons why Bioxem decided to merge with Transocean. At the end of the operation, as soon as the two general meetings have confirmed it, within a week, the Foundation will hold 49% of the new entity. Finally, the public takeover bid for Energoil, conducted jointly by Transocean and Bioxem, is

Cyber-games with friends

now a complete success and we have started the procedure for the withdrawal from the stock market of this oil company which is facing difficulty. When this is done, Energoil will join the new company Bioxem-Transocean.”

Another pause took place. The patriarch slowly drank a glass of water. Journalists wrote on their pads or their computers. The flashes of the photographers crackled. Finally, John Fieldpatrick briefly spoke again.

“I told you about the past and how it was going to fade away. I am part of that past. All together, everywhere, at Bioxem as well as at Transocean, we have prepared for the future. It’s time to talk about it. To this aim, I give the floor one last time to my son. He has been my assistant for the past few years. Now he’s the boss here.”

To a loud applause, all over the offices, echoing throughout the building, John Fieldpatrick stepped back. He took his son by the elbow and invited him to take his place on the platform.

“Thank you Dad. I am proud to be your son, today maybe even more than before. Because this future which we have all prepared for years, it is largely thanks to you.”

Frank Fieldpatrick fell silent. He turned to his father, bowed and applauded him. John Fieldpatrick greeted the crowd with a sad smile. The farewell. The last farewell.

“The future...” resumed Frank Fieldpatrick,

Cyber-games with friends

letting the word trail.

“The future...” he repeated.

“Bioxem has prepared this future which I will now present to you and to which Transocean and Energoil will contribute in the new entity. Historically, our activity consists in extracting salt from the sea. For this, we dry the salt, one way or another. We wanted to make this mechanism more efficient. And, thus, we will -I am weighing my words- contribute to a new industrial revolution.”

The amazement could be read on the faces of the journalists. The reorganization of the group was in fact on the announced menu of the press conference. There was also a point “technological future of the group” but which was very vague. It could have been anything.

Adding drama to the moment, as his father had taught him, Frank Fieldpatrick waited a few seconds.

“Our researchers have developed a chemical cycle, inspired by the Krebs cycle, sometimes called the citric acid cycle, which allows our cells to draw their energy to function. In this case, our own chemical cycle allows us to use the energy of the sun to break down the water present in seawater. We thus produce hydrogen and oxygen from the molecules of water. This alone causes water impurities -including salt- to settle at the bottom of the devices since there is no more water to dissolve them. With the sole power of the sun,

Cyber-games with friends

we therefore easily and quickly recover large quantities of salt. But also, as I told you, hydrogen and oxygen. We store them. But to what aim?"

Another pause was observed.

"Hydrogen, ladies and gentlemen, is the bedrock of the new industrial revolution. This gas powers fuel cells. And thus makes it possible to store electricity, for example for electric vehicles. The large-scale use of this technology has always been blocked by the cost of hydrogen production. This cost, today, is almost zero, thanks to solar energy."

There were exclamations. A volley of flashes. Frank Fieldpatrick triumphed. He asked for silence in order to continue.

"Why did Bioxem take over Energoil? Why did we merge with Transocean? There are, of course, reasons of financial expediency: my father told you about that. But that's not the real reason."

Complete silence.

"Transocean has prepared the conversion of all its boats which will operate, as they pass through a shipyard in San Francisco, on hydrogen. And these ships will have the capacity to manufacture their own hydrogen at sea to supplement their tank, thus delivering an additional quantity of salt to us. Finally, Energoil has as its last really interesting asset a network of service stations that will allow us to quickly distribute hydrogen to supply vehicle fleets.

Cyber-games with friends

Several car manufacturers have signed partnerships with us to create this fleet, part of which will be offered for rental to companies, for their fleet of service vehicles, in order to initiate the virtuous circle of use.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the future.”

A blue cloth, which everyone took for a simple decoration, fell on the back of the stage. It gave way to a huge Hydroxem logo accompanied by a simple slogan: “Welcome to the future”. Bioxem, Transocean and Energoil ceased to exist in favor of this new entity.

There was a moment of amazement. Then the building resounded with immense applause.

Cyber-games with friends

Table des matières

1.....	7
2.....	17
3.....	21
4.....	27
5.....	33
6.....	35
7.....	37
8.....	43
9.....	47
10.....	49
11.....	55
12.....	57
13.....	61
14.....	65
15.....	69
16.....	73
17.....	77
18.....	81
19.....	83
20.....	87
21.....	89
22.....	95
23.....	103
24.....	107
25.....	109
26.....	113
27.....	115
28.....	117

Cyber-games with friends

29.....	123
30.....	125
31.....	127
32.....	129
33.....	131
34.....	135