

Chapter 6

The Merger

On Friday, Rich and Vanessa arrived after Doug did. They were at the office until 9:30 or so the night before, finishing their work on the merger reports. Todd Molin had not come in yet to see the finished work. Though his remarks on their reports were plentiful, they were not of the type that would need another review. The reports were done. Doug noticed that his binder had been removed from his cube.

The office seemed to be under a spell of some kind. Time had sped up. People were flitting around the halls like hummingbirds. Office managers were delivering memos, and the phones were ringing about twice as often as they normally did. Cakes were delivered about mid-morning, and a camera crew had come through to set up in the conference room.

Obviously, nobody was working. Rich and Vanessa were hanging around in Doug's cubicle, and they had a good excuse. They had completed a grueling 2-week project, and nobody had given them a new assignment yet. They figured there was not going to be one before Monday.

Everyone else also had an excuse to do nothing, because it was fairly obvious that something was going on. Stephen and Brey stopped by Doug's cube. "Do you guys have any idea what's happening?" asked Stephen.

"Nope," Doug said. "We thought you did."

"Well, we didn't expect you to," said Brey. When the training program started at PMW, Doug was uncertain about Brey. He figured Brey was sheltered by his life as a corporate heir, but by now Doug had dealt with him often enough that his feelings about him had solidified. Brey was an asshole.

"Naturally the VPs buried you in something deep to keep you last in line," Brey continued. "We're thinking it will be an expansion to South America. We've been put in position to be a knowledge leader on this project."

"So you've been running the whole show? I thought Molin was still in charge around here," said Rich. As strongly as Doug felt about Brey, Rich hated him even more.

"Well, naturally, with the expansion, management will look to us for our expertise gained over these last two weeks," chided Brey.

Rich laughed, "What expertise? Country code, exchange, country code, exchange, country code, exchange--"

"It's much more than cold-calling, Rich. We are also learning the networks, the culture," said Stephen, more indignantly than anyone thought he was capable of.

"Dude. You've been cold-calling," Doug said.

"And who's been getting the commissions on your leads, huh?" challenged Rich.

"A little jealousy, do I hear?" asked Brey with a definitive mock in his voice. "Face it. We're in, you're out."

"How's your Coke stock, by the way?" Doug said, narrowing his eyes.

Brey looked at Doug a little incredulously, then he hollered, “You’ll be reporting to us when this shit goes down, Dougie-boy.”

“Guys, quit it,” said Vanessa with a small laugh. She was trying to lighten the mood, but the guys had gone pretty far already. It was obvious that the cliques had formed. They stood glaring at each other over the cube wall.

“It’s Friday, for crying out loud,” said Vanessa. This time she did not laugh.

At that moment, there was a voice over the PA system. All employees were to gather in the main cafeteria in ten minutes for cake, and an announcement. The trainees were still fuming at each other. Brey was smiling ear-to-ear. Karen suddenly appeared over the cube wall.

“Hi guys. Shall we head to the cafeteria?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Rich. None of them had any problem with Karen, which made her kind of like a stabilizer for the group. Doug stood up, and the six trainees left the cube and headed toward the cafeteria.

As they walked in, they saw others streaming in from the other doors. There was no way that 750 people would fit into this room, but it was unlikely they would all try. Usually, many junior partners were on calls, and others figured it was something they could ignore. These meetings never roused more than half of the staff at headquarters.

Within a few minutes it was clear that today would be different. The trainees grabbed some cake and sat down, but

they realized they would have to stand up again as more people came into the room and could not find seats. A podium was set up in the middle of the room, and everyone left a circle around it. The trainees stood very near the inner edge of the circle.

The only reason everybody would show up like this was that they knew the news was big, the kind of news that would affect the scope of their jobs and the track of their careers. This time, they were going to be right.

After a merger, all kinds of things happen to a company. One corporate culture devours the other one, regardless of who did the buying. No matter what the new ownership structure is, and no matter what the new name is, the more tenacious leaders always win. Doug hoped the firm could keep its culture the way it was.

“They’re going to announce the opening of a South American office,” said Brey, still poking at his cake with his fork. His smug look would have annoyed Doug if he did not know how wrong Brey was. Rich glanced at Vanessa and Doug, and grinned slightly.

Finally the room stopped filling. Doug looked out over the crowd, he saw people standing outside the doors, and he could not see how many were beyond them. The entire crowd was buzzing loudly. Vanessa said something but he had no idea what. Doug nodded anyway.

Mr. Molin walked in from the kitchen. He was always dressed well, but today he had a new look to him. He had a closer shave, his hair was thicker, and his skin was clearer than

ever. His suit was impeccable, and probably brand new. It was a slick grey-black with the faintest pinstripes. He wore a powder-blue shirt and a very dark tie with a silver block pattern. Doug realized he was dressed up for his appearance on CNBC, and possibly some other networks.

Molin held up his hand, and the circle grew quiet. The buzzing faded toward the back of the room, then out through the doors, and soon there was only silence. Molin leaned his tall frame over the microphone and started to adjust it. It did not budge, and he gave up and started talking instead.

“Folks, thank you for coming to hear this announcement,” he began. Doug could hear his voice coming directly from him as well as from the ceiling. “I knew many of you would respond to bribery, which is why we brought the cake.” A titter of laughter spread through the crowd. “By the looks of this group, this is nearly everyone here. I believe there were very few sales calls today.”

He continued, “I am pleased to make the announcement for you now so it will not be a surprise tonight. I want everyone to celebrate freely tonight, so we will make a few presentations, but it will be mostly a cavalcade of drunkenness and loud revelry.” There was more laughter in the crowd.

“I know you have seen Mr. Weaver visiting the office a lot more than normal, and I know you have seen the Asian executives who have accompanied him. These are directors of Shangzhen-Yi, a large Asian investment firm, who wish to expand their banking division to North America.”

A buzz in the crowd started to rise, but then fell again, devolving into mostly shushing sounds. Molin paused.

“Without further ado, folks, Prichart, Molin, & Weaver has merged with Shangzhen-Yi, and will become their North American investment banking division.”

Now a din rose, as people outwardly wondered whether this meant more opportunities for them, or a negative turn in their careers. Most seemed to be pleased with the news, but Stephen and Brey were apparently confused.

“This is going to mean great things for our company,” said Molin. “Shangzhen does not operate in North America, so we will be their leadership in this part of the world. That means you, and 1700 others working for us around the country.”

“It also opens up channels. Shangzhen operates in South America, so now, we do too. Shangzhen operates in Australasia, so now, we do too. We are also their leadership for operating in Europe. Because of this new relationship, PMW can now operate as a global corporation.”

Now sounding almost triumphant, Molin brought the hammer down. “Ladies and gentlemen, the next era of our success and yours has begun!”

There was loud applause in the room. Brey and Stephen clapped as well, and Doug saw Brey lean and whisper something to Stephen. He continued applauding.

Molin held up his hands, and the clapping died down. He added, “If you’re not busy with a deal or a project this afternoon, get out of here!” He looked around the room, and

Doug thought he paused at Rich and Vanessa. “We’ll see you tonight. Thank you all.”

Molin waded back through the crowd to the kitchen. People began to applaud, disperse, or linger for another go at the cake. Brey looked right at Doug and narrowed his eyes.

“You guys knew. You said you were doing something in Asia,” he said.

There was no point in hiding it now. “We got the assignment to research this deal,” Doug answered.

“Right,” said Rich. “No cold-calling. Pure research for the SEC report. We kicked some ass, too.”

“So you guys are gonna get a credit in the report?” asked Stephen.

“I imagine so,” said Vanessa.

“Okay. Okay,” Brey seemed to gather his ego, then he held out his hand to Doug. “Congrats. Good job.”

Doug took his hand and shook it. So did Rich and Vanessa. Stephen hesitated, and then awkwardly held out his hand as well. Karen stood and watched, saying only “congratulations.”

As the trainees headed back toward the cubes, Joe Franklin came toward them. “Guys, great job on the report,” he said to Rich and Vanessa. “Molin’s going to use some of your theories in his interview on CNBC.”

“Wow, thanks.” Said Rich.

“When is he on?” Doug asked.

“Supposed to be between noon and 1:30. We’ll let everyone know over the PA. You wanna hang around for it?”

Rich smirked “Yeah, we’ll be here.”

Brey looked at Franklin and stated, “We wouldn’t miss it.” He had gone into sycophant mode. He and the others had cheered up a little, and seemed to act like good sports. It was mostly due to their tendency to hang close to success, and today Doug and his friends were their only claim to it.

The trainees stayed around the office for a couple more hours, waiting for the call. A lot of junior partners had already left, but there were some associates still hanging around waiting for the same announcement. Doug kept a CNBC stream on in his cube, to make sure he wouldn’t miss it.

Rich and Brey were in the middle of some more verbal sparring, when they finally heard “Please turn to CNBC to see Mr. Molin” over the intercom. Doug turned up the volume control on his PC.

The Liquid Lunch anchor, Marty Schobel, shuffled some papers, and then leaned into the camera and intoned, “and there have been some major developments in the investment banking world recently. We’ve always talked about there being money in China. Well, it turns out the Chinese think there is money right here in the US. We’re talking with Todd Molin of Prichart, Molin & Weaver. Todd, great to see you again.”

“Thank you, it’s good to see you, Marty,” said Molin, smiling broadly on his side of the screen. Doug had rarely seen

the Todd Molin he was watching now, and he recognized the conference room he was sitting in, just a dozen yards away.

“Now, PMW is something of a boutique shop, is it not?” asked Marty.

“We describe our company as a premium investment bank. We try to focus on the quality and longevity of deals, and we leave the giant deals to the bigger houses.”

Schobel picked up his papers and read them as he spoke. “Nevertheless, you have been involved in some huge mergers in the past. You’ve worked with Master Lock, Kellogg, Alcoa, CSX, to name a few. Always as part of a team, but still, that’s impressive.”

“We think so, too. Thank you. Wherever we have been part of a group, we still focus on the higher details. We expect that of all our associates.”

Schobel put down his papers again. “Now, your latest deal involves PMW itself, doesn’t it?”

“That’s right, Marty. We have just announced our merger with Shangzhen-Yi, the Chinese banking giant.”

“This is quite a deal. It will be the first entry by the Chinese into the North American marketplace.”

“That’s right, and we are proud to have become a partner with Shangzhen-Yi. They are a leader not just in Asia, but in the southern Pacific and South America.”

“The deal, as I understand it, is worth about \$17 billion, and it gives you the opportunity to work in Asia as well as for Shangzhen to enter here.”

“Yes. We believe the merger gives us greater power to work with multinational firms, which, as you know, are becoming more prevalent, everywhere.”

“That’s right. To do business with global companies, it helps to be a global company,” said Schobel. “And the SEC report was filed today. All the ducks are in a row, here?”

“That’s right. We’ve had some great people working on it. Martin Weaver led the deal, and Vice President Joe Franklin was responsible for leading our fine team of associates, Richard Garrison, Vanessa Harman, and Doug Wilson.”

The three trainees felt their heads swell up like balloons as Molin spoke their names.

“They did a tremendous job. We look forward to meeting SEC requirements and getting this deal approved.”

“Well, this is a fine opportunity for your company and for your young associates,” said Schobel. “Good luck to you and everyone at PMW.”

“Thank you.” Molin nodded with a grin, and the screen went back to Schobel. Doug turned the volume down.

“Damn!” said Rich, clapping his hands together. “We’ve got to get that tape.”

Vanessa smiled ear to ear. She seemed dazed as Rich took her by the shoulders and shook her. “Our name in lights, guys,” he said.

Stephen and Brey were smiling weakly as they watched the others celebrate. Doug felt like he was floating 6 inches above the floor. He looked at Brey and nodded. “You guys will

get the shot next,” he said, not knowing why. Rich actually looked at him curiously. At that moment, there was a lot of goodwill to go around.

A few minutes later, the others headed back to their cubes, and Doug decided to go home to get ready for the party. He planned to meet Rich and Vanessa in front of the tower, and they would walk over to the convention center together. As he crossed in front of the reception desk, Molin came out of the bathroom, still wiping his hands with a paper towel.

“Doug!” he said.

Doug stopped and turned toward him. “Yes. Great job today, by the way.”

“Thanks. Not a bad thing to hear your name in the news, is it?”

“No. Thank you for that.”

“Sure. There is something I wanted to ask you about. Remember the database you were working with?”

“Yeah. Is this about the code changing?” Doug asked.

“Not really,” Molin said as he moved close. “That code, er, address, changes all the time. I just wanted to ask a favor.”

“Sure.”

Molin lowered his voice. “Never use that database again,” he said.

“Believe me, I don’t need it now that the-”

“Forget it. Forget the address. Just forget the whole thing.” Molin then backed away and said, now louder, “See you tonight!”

Doug watched him spin around to head back to his office. He had no idea whether he knew what Doug had done to Coca-Cola’s stock or whether something else was going on. Either way, he knew that forgetting about it was a pretty good idea. Molin got his message across.

Doug headed home to get ready for the party. There really wasn’t much to do. He would change, and maybe get something done, like laundry or dishes. The weather was still pretty good, so he decided to walk instead of taking the train. From the building to his apartment on Beacon Hill was really not that far, just a few subway stops. Sometimes he could swear the ride took longer than walking.

Doug entered his apartment and played the answering machine. There was a message from Dad. He said he was going to be in town for the seminar, and Doug had to rack his brain for a few minutes thinking “Seminar? What seminar?”

Then he realized it was the Army of the Free Majority meeting. “Holy shit! That’s tonight,” Doug thought. He had forgotten about it completely. He remembered that it was taking place in a conference room at the same convention center where PMW would hold its party. He was sure he could get a few minutes free to go check it out. Maybe he would ask Rich and Vanessa to join him. Why not get in a laugh or two to add to the celebration?

Doug left his apartment at about quarter past 6 and walked back to work. The weather had gotten colder, which he realized only after he had stepped onto the sidewalk and took a

few steps. Doug decided not to go back for a bulkier coat. He had promised to meet the others at 6:30, and he would only make it if he caught all the lights.

When he got to the tower, Rich and Vanessa were already there. They had not left the building all day, and they were a little impatient after standing outside wearing the same clothes they wore to work.

“Hey, it’s about time!” said Rich. He shook his head but could not suppress a smirk.

“Jeez, what time is it anyway?” chided Vanessa.

“Guys, it’s only been 10 minutes,” Doug said. “I could have come upstairs. We didn’t have to meet out here.”

“Yeah, that’s why it’s not a big deal,” said Rich.

“But it is freaking cold,” said Vanessa. Her arms were folded tightly, and would stay that way as they all walked to the convention center.

Doug, Rich and Vanessa crossed the street toward Copley Plaza. It was now dark at this hour, and the trees were mostly bare. The leaves were piled in bunches, mostly by the wind, and they were dark and wet from the damp fall season. The three had to sidestep some puddles, and as they crossed the plaza, they noticed that the suit of armor was gone.

“Hey, what happened to that knight that was standing there?” asked Rich.

“Oh, I saw something about that on the news. The whole exhibit has gone to New York,” Vanessa answered.

“What, it’s going to stand there covered in snow?”

Doug joked.

“I guess. It’s all fake anyway, right?” said Rich.

“Not all of it. Some of the items are antique. Those will be inside,” said Vanessa.

“Ah,” Doug said, while Rich nodded.

They kept walking past the restaurants, which had removed their outdoor tables because of the weather. This made them seem even busier than usual. Some people stood outside, waiting for tables or smoking cigarettes. The city had passed a law banning smoking in public places, and despite a lot of griping, the bars seemed as packed as ever.

“Couldn’t get a table if we wanted to tonight, huh?” said Rich.

“Guess not,” Doug answered. “Business is good.”

“The smoking laws didn’t change anything, huh?” Rich said with a smirk. He looked specifically at Vanessa.

“No. I never said they would,” she answered. “I just said some bars would adapt, and some would not.”

“Look at this restaurant right here,” said Rich as they passed. “They put out velvet ropes for the smoking section.”

“Yeah, but this one didn’t, and they’re doing fine, too,” Doug mentioned.

“We don’t know their trends, though,” said Vanessa. “We don’t know how they’ve done in the past, and how it compares now.”

“Fair enough,” said Rich. “You’re the detail one!”

Vanessa laughed. She was right. It appeared that the restaurants were all doing fine, but the trainees had no idea what their business was like before the law, compared to what it was like now. Maybe the law change just stirred things up for awhile, but would settle down before long.

That was how everything seemed to go. Somebody came up with an idea to change something, there was a period of hand-wringing from people who would be affected, and everything went back to normal after the change occurred. The ground rules may change, but in the big picture, life goes on.

As the three got to the convention center, they saw the Army of the Free Majority handing out their flyers. There was no sign of their leader, Eric, or whatever his name was.

Doug saw some fellow PMW bankers walking in as well. They either ignored or shook their heads at the protesters. They really weren't protesting anything tonight. Doug thought it was strange that they weren't really protesting anything at all. The world seemed to be going their way. Businesses were merging and doing more business overseas. PMW was now a global conglomerate. There was money everywhere. The folks at the packed restaurants weren't exactly scraping pennies.

So what was the Free Majority's mission? There was nothing to protest. To fail in this world, Doug thought, you really had to be a born loser.

The protesters were getting no takers for their little meeting. Doug worried that if they did go to it, they would be the only ones. He almost started to feel bad for them. Almost.

Doug and his friends entered the main hall of the convention center. It was a small meeting hall that had been replaced by Boston's much larger convention center across town. It still got plenty of business, but it had to adapt to smaller shows that would normally use one of the nearby hotels. The PMW party would probably have taken place in one of the hotels, but the prices here had dropped quite a bit since the new center opened.

The new convention hall, Doug had read, was still having booking problems. Because it was so large, it had to cater to large conventions that were usually held in warm places with a lot of golf courses and sandy beaches. Boston had its share of golf nearby, but it was definitely not a warm place for much of the year. The merger party could easily have been held at the new building, but this place was closer to the office, and near a lot more of the hotels and nightlife.

The main stairs led up to the floor of the atrium, which was a large, round hall with staircases winding up each side. The walls were painted bright white, and the black marble floor was glossy enough to reflect the entire room. The main convention hall opened to the first floor of this atrium, and it happened to be the room where the PMW party was being held.

A giant poster surrounded by blue and yellow balloons was hung over the entrance. Many of the balloons had fallen, so many that Doug wondered if this was on purpose. It was. They walked through the huge open doorway, and balloons were all over the floor. They were everywhere. Blue and

yellow were not the colors of PMW, whose logo was usually published in black and green. This was Shangzhen's color scheme. As Doug suspected, the merger was very one-sided. All decisions would be in Shangzhen's favor from now on.

The room was darkened, and there were not a lot of people in the room yet. Those who were there were milling around the open bars. Doug looked up at the stage, which was also draped in blue and yellow curtains, though the blue was much darker than the balloons. One large banner was hung in the middle, behind the podium. And a similar small banner hung on the podium itself. Both bore Shangzhen's logo, with the words "One True World" underneath. There were also a number of chairs lined up onstage.

Rich, Vanessa and Doug walked over to target number one; the bar, where they glad-handed with the fellow workers they could recognize. They got in line for drinks, and chatted with some of the VPs they would normally never talk to. More to the point, the VPs would normally never talk to them.

"Gentlemen! And lady!" called out Bart Hawes, one of the higher-level VPs. He was obviously shit-faced already. "You folks are in for a treat. Bet you never had this much booze in your life. How's Salt Lake these days?" he asked Rich, who shrugged. Doug was pretty sure Bart had no idea who the three were. They nodded anyway.

Rich answered, "Fine, fine. You?" and shook his hand.

"Good. You're really getting it done, I hear. Should be in line for a big cut of this deal," said Hawes, chuckling. He gave Rich a big pat on the back and moved on.

Rich rolled his eyes. "I know what he's thinking. He thinks I'm Robbie Newton. He's a star in the Salt Lake City office."

"I've heard of him," Doug said. "He closed CSX this year."

"Yeah, and he's like 27," said Rich.

"Oh, you should be able to get some more mileage out of that," said Vanessa.

"Yeah, unless he's here," said Rich with a shrug. Then he froze and nodded toward the bar.

Just turning around was Randall McNeil and his wife. He was a partner in Singapore, and a major player in the merger. Word was he received the tip that Shangzhen was looking to enter the US, and he made first contact. Though he was short, about five and a half feet, he was every inch the fat cat.

But the trainees weren't looking at him. They were looking at his wife. Though he was at least 55, she was probably their age. She was Asian, with long black hair, and gorgeous.

"Stop it," hissed Vanessa as the McNeils came closer.

"Hello, Mr. McNeil," said Rich. He didn't hold out for a handshake, since McNeil had a drink in each hand.

“Hello, boys,” McNeil answered. “Sorry I find my limbs laden with libations. But it is most pleasant to meet you. This is my wife, Malii, and you are?” he said as his eyes froze on Vanessa.

Rich began, “Rich Garrison, and this is—”

“Doug. Doug Wilson,” Doug said.

“I’m Vanessa Harman,” said Vanessa breathlessly.

“Beauty secondary to none, save one,” McNeil said as he looked at his wife. “We stand in the path of fame, dear!” he said in a much larger voice. “I was stunned by the mention of your names this afternoon in the airport. Great work!” he said, bowing slightly.

“Thanks,” the three said almost simultaneously.

“We heard you had a lot to do with it,” said Rich.

“Well, I wasn’t honored by the fourth estate, but that’s tolerable. There are other means of recognition.” He nodded knowingly, then he laughed, sounding almost sinister.

“No doubt!” said Rich. It was likely that McNeil had earned tens of millions in the deal.

“Well, we must circulate. Dear?” McNeil said as he motioned to Malii. “Pleasure to meet you all.”

The three nodded and said their goodbyes to him and his wife. As they watched them walk away. Rich looked at Doug and gritted his teeth. “Oh, my God,” he said under his breath.

“Mm, hm,” Doug answered. Vanessa caught them, and smacked Doug on the shoulder. They arrived at the bar and

ordered their drinks. As they waited, Doug asked, “Damn. What business does a guy like that have with her?”

“This business,” Rich said, waving at the room. “That business,” he said as he pointed at the banners over the stage.

Vanessa shook her head. “Guys,” she said in mock disgust. Hanging around these two enough, she knew what to expect.

“Seriously, look around,” said Rich. “All these people, movers and shakers. Winners. Leaders. And we’re nothing. Nothing at all compared to these folks, and you know what people would give to be where we are?”

The drinks were ready. Doug tapped Rich and handed him his drink, then he handed Vanessa hers and took his own. Doug had a martini, but he wasn’t sure what the others had. They walked away from the bar and Doug started looking for a table.

“No. No,” said Rich, holding his hand up. “No table.”

“What do you mean?” asked Vanessa.

“You never get a table at these things,” he said. “You get a table, you sit there all night, and you meet nobody. You ever see where the CEO sits? No, because he doesn’t.”

“Ah, so we keep circulating,” Doug said.

“And meeting, and greeting. Everybody thinks you’re somebody if you don’t have a table,” said Rich.

Vanessa looked at her shoes. “I’m gonna be a somebody with blisters, then.”

“The chairs around the room are fine to rest. Just no table.”

“That’s the rule?” she asked.

“That’s the rule,” answered Rich.

“Well, then, let’s circulate,” Doug said.

The first hour or so of the event was well spent. The three trainees met quite a few important people. They met up with Joe Franklin, and he took them around to meet the Directors of the San Francisco office, the Atlanta office, the Sydney office, and a few others. These were men and women who served on the boards of many huge companies. They were at Delta, GE, Bank of America, and some others Doug did not remember.

That was the strength of all three being together, Rich would say later. It made it easier to remember all of the people they met. This was even more important since nobody would be exchanging business cards. They were all at the same firm and it was bad form.

There were appetizers circulating through the room, but Rich had advised Doug and Vanessa to stay away from them while doing meet & greets. Let others eat. It gave the three the opportunity to talk a little, and avoided awkward pauses that could kill a good conversation.

Rich had a lot of little rules. A good conversation need not be long, just with an important person. Unimportant people were to be avoided at all costs. They tended to talk a lot longer.

Rich also told the others to avoid monopolizing other people, since it would make them seem unimportant.

Doug figured everybody they talked to knew intuitively that they were peons, but as with McNeil, the mention on CNBC was a great ice-breaker.

They finally sat down to take a break. Working the room with Rich was tiring. He was relentless. Doug and Vanessa were sure that without him, they would have sat at a table and met nobody all night. That was when he saw Stephen, Karen, and Brey sitting at a table. They were alone at a table with 9 chairs. Rich’s face broke into a smile as he looked back at Doug and pointed at them.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“C’mon. Don’t be an asshole,” said Vanessa.

“Nobody’s going to be an asshole,” Rich said. “Just going to see how they’re doing.”

Rich and the others got up and walked over to them. “How you doing?” Rich asked, leaning on one of the empty chairs.

“Great! Can’t beat open bar,” said Brey, holding up his drink. It was something red with a lime on the rim.

“Seriously, what do you think of this merger?” asked Rich.

Stephen and Brey looked at each other. “I think it’s going to be a great thing,” said Stephen.

“Yeah. Probably going to be some good opportunities,” said Brey.

“Any downsizing on the horizon, you think?” Rich asked them. Vanessa and Doug looked at each other.

“No. No. It’ll be somebody making real money anyway,” said Brey.

“It won’t be the guys with their names on TV,” said Stephen.

“Not us, huh? Just wanted to see if you’d heard anything,” said Rich.

“You’ll be the first to know, apparently,” said Brey with a trace of anger.

“Um, guys, this is unnecessary,” Vanessa said.

“Hold on, you want to rub our faces in it, go on. Everyone gets their glory day,” said Brey as he looked back at the stage, where people started to walk up the steps.

“Everyone gets their storms, too,” said Stephen calmly, swirling his drink. He had not once looked up at the other three.

Rich said nothing. He looked up toward the stage. Three well-dressed Asian men were standing on stage in front of their chairs. He also saw Weaver and McNeil onstage shaking hands with them.

Joe Franklin suddenly appeared at the table. “Guys,” he said. “You’re needed up there. We’re about to begin.” Rich, Vanessa and Doug looked at each other. They had no idea they would be part of the presentation. Still, it was a nice surprise.

Joe turned away and walked toward the stage, and just when he was out of earshot, Rich said “Sorry, guys,” to the three sitting down. “Today is glory day.”

They followed Joe up onto the stage. The three Asian guys stood still, looking at them, and Joe introduced them all to each other. They shook hands, and the trainees went to their chairs at the end of the stage.

“You’ll sit here. But not yet,” Franklin said, just as Doug started to. “Mr. Molin will mention us, and we will stand up. The rest of the time we’ll be sitting.” With that, he turned and stood next to Rich.

Doug looked out at the audience. He noticed that the room was far more packed than it had been when they arrived. The tables were still mostly empty, except for Brey and the others still sitting at their table. Brey leaned in and said something in Stephen’s ear.

“Well, how does it feel to be famous?” Doug heard somebody ask. He turned and saw Mr. Weaver standing next to him.

“Not too shabby,” Doug answered.

“Thanks for inviting us up on stage. I’m not sure we deserve it,” said Vanessa.

“You don’t,” he said. “Just two weeks of research does not get you up here. This is a record banking deal, and you had nothing to do with it.” Weaver smiled the entire time, and even waved at a few people out in the crowd.

“Then why would we be up here?” asked Vanessa.

“Oh, we’re trying to tweak some other trainees, like your fellow inmates down there, and some kids from other offices. They aren’t performing. We want to spark a little competitive desire.”

“Sounds fine to me. We’re still up here,” said Rich.

“That’s the right attitude,” said Weaver. “It’s only important that they see you, and that you know it’s bullshit.” He waved at another person in the audience.

“I can live with that,” said Doug.

“Good. The clock starts again Monday.” Weaver walked back to the other end of the stage and started talking to McNeil.

At that moment, the trainees saw Molin walking through the audience. People stood and applauded as he made his way toward the stage. Molin reached the stage and climbed the stairs. He stood and waved for a few seconds, then turned and shook hands with the Asian guys. He finally reached the end of the row and greeted Doug and the others.

“How you doing? Weaver talk to you?” he asked.

“Yes,” Doug answered.

“Good. See me first thing on Monday. All of you.” He walked back toward the podium and stood next to it, waving as the audience continued to applaud. Somebody next to Molin moved toward the podium. Doug had no idea who he was. He leaned toward the microphone and said, “Thank you.”

The applause died away, and the stranger continued to speak.

“Thank you for being here tonight. I hope those who have come from far away enjoyed your trip.” He waited for the applause to die down, and continued, “I’m Harold Nightingall. You know me as the manager of the San Francisco branch. Tonight, I am honored to introduce a man who has exemplified leadership, not just in our company, but in the investment industry. He joined this company when it was still a small house with only 7 bankers, and helped bring this company to where it is today. Please welcome Mr. Todd Molin.”

There was applause as Mr. Molin walked to the podium and shook hands with Nightingall. He started with a few thank-yous and a few mentions of people he had seen in the crowd. Doug leaned over to Rich and Vanessa and whispered, “Hey, guys.” Rich did not hear, but Vanessa looked at him and leaned in. “After this speech, do you want to check out the seminar with me?”

“What?” she asked.

“Remember the protesters we met?”

“Yeah,” she nodded.

“Their meeting is tonight.”

“Those globalization people?”

“Yeah. That’s why they were outside. It’s in this building,” Doug said.

Vanessa paused, and asked, “When?”

“8:30.”

She carefully looked at her watch, hoping that the thousand or so people watching them could not tell. Doug’s

watch was on his other hand, and it would have been much too obvious for him to look. Vanessa's watch read a little before 8:00.

“If we can make it,” she said.

Doug looked up at the podium. Molin was repeating the same spiel he used in the lunchroom. Vanessa leaned in to Rich and started whispering about the seminar. Doug saw him nod.

At that instant, Mr. Molin gestured toward the three. Franklin had stood up. Doug jabbed Vanessa in the ribs and they all stood up. There was more applause. Franklin waved, and the three trainees followed his lead.

Molin finished by introducing Mr. Weaver. There was more applause, and weaver walked to the podium to shake hands with Molin. The speeches went on. One of the Asian men spoke, and after that everyone on stage stood up. Molin popped a bottle of Champagne and poured a glass for everyone on stage. Finally, there were no more words to say, and the applause continued for a few more minutes. Doug's watch read 8:20 as they started walking toward the stairs. Franklin turned and said, “Good catch, guys. I thought you weren't going to stand up and receive your undeserved glory.” He smiled.

“Sorry,” Doug said.

“Not a problem,” he answered. “Most of these folks are way too drunk to notice anyway.”

They made their way down the stairs and shook hands with a few people. Franklin was right. They were already

trashed, had no idea who the trainees were, and Doug was pretty sure they would never get the time of day otherwise.

The three made their way to the table where Brey and the others were.

“Good job,” said Brey, holding his hand out.

Doug took his hand and shook it. “Guys, it's overrated.”

McNiel came up behind them and took Vanessa and Doug by the shoulders. Rich was too tall for him.

“Rising stars. Where shall thou point thy beam?” he said.

“Shakespeare?” Doug asked him.

“McNiel,” he said. “That was our little bequest tonight. Now, you must fulfill it.”

“Thanks,” Doug said as Brey looked at the three of them with a curious look.

McNiel shook the two of them and said, “I know you will. Those who let us down won't be found in the company of success for very long.” Then he left to find his wife.

With that, Rich, Vanessa and Doug snuck out the side door.