

## **Chapter 18**

### **The Hack**

Doug slept like a log. The room had no windows, so he never saw daylight, but when he pulled back the covers and sat up in the top bunk, the fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling glared into his eyes. Doug blinked, but at least he felt well-rested. Kand and Rich were not in the room. Kand's bunk was tightly made with hospital corners, while Rich's bunk, directly below, consisted of a comforter wound up into a ball.

Doug opened the two doors at the back of the room. The first one he opened was a closet. In it was hanging a goofy-looking outfit that featured a yellow shirt and a bright purple jacket. There were also black pants and shiny black shoes that looked like they were the right size for him. Doug figured the AFM dudes were screwing with him.

The next door, thankfully, was a bathroom. It had a small standing shower as well, which was a welcome find. A few minutes later, Doug looked at the stupid outfit again. He had no choice but to put it on. The clothes he was wearing had been reduced nearly to rags by being soaked and slept in.

Doug dressed and opened the door to the corridor. He smelled the faint aroma of bacon and heard voices at the end of the hall. Walking out, the smell of bacon and scrambled eggs became ever more intense. He was ready to drool.

“Doug! I thought you were never getting up again,” Rich greeted him from a chair in front of one of the monitors.

He and some of the others were furiously crunching away in front of their own screens.

“Morning,” said Eric, and a few others grunted. Nobody took their eyes off the screens for more than a second. The coffee table and the counter were strewn with plates, and what leftover eggs there were looked several hours old.

“Oh!” hollered the group. Doug turned around. Something had happened on one of the screens, the one Rich was using, and the outburst was a response to that.

Doug walked over to the screens, which were all set to various index readings, stocks, and metals prices. Some were tuned to cable news. One of them was set to the database, but nobody was using it.

“What's going on?” Doug asked.

“Weird shit, man,” said one of the Free Majority. There was Eric, Beth, Brey, Kand, and the two goons from the previous night. Nine in all, including Rich, Vanessa and Doug.

Brey turned around from his screen. He had a dark black eye, and Doug grinned a little, only to himself.

“I shouldn't have acted like that,” Brey said, sounding a little insincere. Eric shot him a nod, and Doug felt that they must have had a talk of some kind.

Brey had extended an olive branch, and though Doug didn't buy it, it looked like a lot of people in the room did. “Sorry. I was tired,” Doug said.

“Not too tired to dole out a beatdown, though,” said one of the Freemers with a laugh. A few of them laughed aloud, but

Brey sat silently. Then everyone went back to looking at the screens. Doug figured he could deal with Brey later.

“Thanks, Jim,” said Eric, signaling that the fun was over. Then he turned to Doug. “Hey, nice outfit,” said Eric, tugging at his jacket. That’s when Doug noticed what they were all wearing. Like him, they were dressed in black pants and shoes, with the same bright purple jackets and yellow buttoned-down shirts. They had credentials and a swipe card hanging around their necks. Seeing the entire group like this helped Doug realize what the outfits were. They were all dressed for the trading floor.

“You mean,” Doug pointed at the jacket.

“Yeah,” answered Eric. Doug looked at the group. Even Kand wore the circus getup. Traders wore colorful jackets like these to identify which firm they were with. Doug grabbed an extra card and lanyard from the coffee table.

“Jeez!” someone yelled. Eric looked back at the screen.

“Type A Engineering is down 30 points!” Doug recognized the name of a little-known, but large public company that made machine parts, mostly for the military.

“They have been pretty stable of late?” asked another. Doug heard a slight air of hoity-toit in his voice.

“Standard deviation 3 points for over a year,” said the first guy.

Rich interjected, “Yeah, and they were only around 8 times earnings. They should be through the roof.”

“With all the other noise, though?” the second guy asked.

Rich shrugged, “Hey, why today? Maybe all the other shit going on.”

“What’s going on?” Doug asked.

Eric leaned toward Doug to avoid disrupting the others. “We’re seeing prices moving that were pretty stable, even with all the other flux. Indexes that normally rise on certain types of news are falling instead. Look at this; Aluminum jumps 15% in 2 hours, and commodity electronics equipment drops by the same number.”

Eric walked over to another monitor, where the guy with the stuffy manner was sitting. “Colin here has been crunching the numbers. Manufacturers have been, well, Colin,” he prompted.

Colin was eager to jump in. “Actually, it’s by subsector. Rubber manufacturers, for example, have all moved in the same way, but there should be differences. These are all different companies, agreed? But instead, it’s by the same exact points, to the third decimal.”

“Steel, same thing,” Eric added.

“Mining, as well,” said Colin.

“The third decimal?” Doug asked.

“Well, that’s all I’ve resolved to. You need more? I’ll check how far it goes.”

“No need,” Doug said, realizing it was weird enough.

“The whole morning has been like this,” said Eric.

“There’s only one thing climbing through it all, precious metals,” said a voice behind Doug.

Doug looked at the database on the screen sitting by itself. “Have you tried to do anything with that?” he asked.

“What, with the modeler?” Eric asked.

“We thought about it, but with all that’s going on, we haven’t had time,” said Colin.

“But it could model this sort of activity,” said Eric, seeming to know what Doug was getting at.

“It could. It would take ages to set it up, though,” Colin continued. He never took his eyes off of his own screen.

“Why not try to break one of these logjams with it?” Doug asked. Vanessa and Rich both glanced at him.

“Why?” asked Colin. “It’ll just-”

Eric held up a hand, then, turning to Doug, he said, “No, continue.”

“Just log in and push one of these rubber companies a different way from the others, and see what happens.”

“Push one the wrong way?” Colin asked. Doug noticed that most of the people in the room were now focused on him.

The other guy, Jim, piped in, “It’s too dangerous, we-”

Eric held up a hand and leaned toward Doug. “You might be onto something. You’ve already used this,” he said. Doug realized that everyone’s eyes were on him and Eric.

“Used what?” asked Brey, sounding accusatory. “What did you do?”

“You never told him?” Doug asked Eric.

Eric took a deep breath. “There was no point as long as you weren’t around,” he said.

Brey looked at him fiercely, “But now-”

“I was the one who toyed with your Coke stock,” Doug told him.

“What?” said Brey. He looked like he wanted to have another brawl.

“I’m sorry, Dude! I thought it was a modeler.”

“But it wasn’t! You guys wrote it to control the markets,” he yelled at Eric.

“We designed the database for your company a few years ago. It wasn’t our fault they gave Doug the code,” he said. “Water under the bridge.”

“But you still know how to get in,” Brey said, looking at Doug. Brey’s face seemed to darken to match his black eye.

“I do,” Doug replied.

“Then fix this,” Brey said, standing still. Doug noticed he was trying to suppress his rage.

Eric gestured toward the monitor, and Doug took a seat in front of it. He punched in the code: 429502893.

The database opened to the same familiar menu screen. Doug went to the stock readings and looked at the rock mining companies. Just as Colin had said, their values were moving slightly, and always at the same time, what looked like the same percentages.

Doug changed the number for Superior Aggregate from \$7.81 to \$8.00. Jim and Beth ran back to their own screens. They saw the price jump exactly the way Doug typed it in.

Suddenly, the rest of the subsector, copper mining firms, jumped by the same margin. Doug sat up and raised his eyebrows. This was wierd.

“Holy shit!” he said.

Doug changed the \$8.00 to \$7.75. The number changed. Within a few seconds, the entire sector jumped downward by roughly the same rate.

Colin furiously crunched numbers on his spreadsheet. “It’s the same,” he yelled, “to 5 places.”

“It’s running a macro,” said Eric.

“It follows a leader. Try another firm,” said Rich.

Doug picked another of the mining companies, Rullion Earth, Inc., and moved it from \$4.72 to \$5.20.

They waited for a few seconds longer than the other changes took. Then the entire sector jumped upward.

“Ten point one-six-nine-four-nine,” said Colin. “Ten point one-six-nine-four-nine. Ten point one-six-nine-four-nine!”

“Damn!” said Rich.

“It chooses a new leader if something changes,” Vanessa said.

“That’s a pretty damn smart macro,” said Rich.

“It’s not a macro,” Colin said. “We never wrote it.”

“So this isn’t the database doing this?” asked Brey.

“No, it is, but somebody’s hacked it,” Eric answered. He began to look very concerned about something.

Doug picked around some other stocks, making ever larger changes, and they all did the same thing. The group was not afraid of the system like he was when he first used it, and it was obvious why; they wrote it.

Doug noticed that though the numbers behaved strangely, one thing they did not do was crash. He had seen Coke’s stock fall through the floor after he made a much smaller adjustment than the ones he made now. Feeling Brey standing somewhere behind him, Doug stayed silent.

“What’s funny is, nobody in the media has really figured out what’s going on yet,” said Beth. She had been monitoring the news on her screen all morning.

“Yeah, they’re talking about volatility, but we might be the only people in the city doing the math,” said Colin.

Something frightening suddenly occurred to Doug. “When was the last time you saw Dr. Currier?” he asked Eric.

Eric narrowed his eyes. “I know what you’re getting at,” he answered. “He has nothing to do-”

“Just tell me when you heard from him!” Doug yelled.

“A few days ago, that’s all!” Eric hollered.

“Guys!” Rich yelled, watching them.

“Seriously, Eric,” Doug said, lowering his voice. “Did the guy ever talk about some kind of plan to crash the world economy?”

“No. That’s asinine.”

“Do you know what kind of people have been members of your group?” Doug demanded. Kand looked up from where he was standing and did not turn away.

“Of course,” Eric said in an angry whisper. “CEOs, media owners, leaders of government agencies. This is a very esteemed gr-”

“Yeah, I don’t need the brochure. What are these people saying about what’s going on right now?” Doug asked him. Kand started to grin slightly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Eric, looking back at the screens in front of them.

“If there was a plan-”

“Shut up.”

“If there was, Currier would have covered the bases, right?”

Eric stood silently watching the screens, and the whole room did the same. Eric turned to Beth, who was sitting near a screen that displayed a newscast.

“Can you turn up the volume on that screen?” he asked Beth, who nodded and turned it up. A grey-haired guy in a suit was pontificating about the current market volatility.

“...minor changes that seem to have a correlation, but sometimes it means significant structural problems with the industry in question. Profitability in machine parts has not met expectations-”

“What?” Rich said, arching his eyebrows.

“Yeah, that’s weird,” said Jim. “You said that it should be through the roof.”

“Who is that guy?” Doug asked.

Eric looked on somberly. “That’s Raymond Fleming, Goldman analyst and former VP at GE. He would know this shit. He’s way off base.”

“A former member of your group?”

“Yes.”

Vanessa turned to a screen that contained press feeds. It had been screaming with updates all morning. She started to read a few of them.

“Guys, who is Clare Schumaker?” she asked.

“Only the lead PR flack in this town,” Colin answered. “Kind of a big deal.” Colin noticed Eric staring at him. “And a former member.”

“Well, she says that if a major crash results from this, it could take commercial real estate with it.”

“Why would commercial real estate have anything to... Never mind,” Eric said, looking at Colin. “Check our guy at Fed.” He then glanced at Doug.

Colin searched for recent quotes from the Federal Reserve Bank. One popped up, by a guy named Charles Fobb, the Fed’s press secretary. The group gathered around the screen and read it.

“This morning’s volatility could indicate a convergence of serious structural issues, and the Chairman will give an emergency briefing at 12 Noon today,” the quote read.

Eric’s jaw dropped. “Fobb’s a friggin’ press sec! What kind of balls-”

“Convergence of serious structural issues?” Colin yelled.

Doug looked at Rich, who held his head down and shook it slowly, “What is the problem?” Doug asked.

“A press secretary would never issue such strong words in a briefing announcement. That’s the Chairman’s job,” Rich answered.

“Even the Chairman would never say this,” Brey added.

“A press guy would get canned for putting his opinion on the street,” Rich said, then looked at Eric. “So is he-”

“Yes,” Eric told them. “Fobb is a former AFM member.”

Rich, Doug and the rest all looked at Eric for a long moment.

“These people would only say these things if they were trying to crash the entire world,” Eric said.

“Fleming is almost always upbeat,” Colin said.

“That’s diplomatic,” Eric said. “The guy’s a brown-nosing shill.”

“Well-”

“And normally I’d expect him to do his corporate sycophant routine, but this only proves something,” Eric said, turning to Doug. “You’re right, I’m afraid.”

“What are you talking about?” Colin demanded.

“You think Currier’s behind this? You sound like these crackpots!” Jim yelled, nodding toward Doug and Kand.

“Guys, you’ve seen what our people are doing,” Eric yelled as he pointed at the screens.

“Why the hell would he? Why would they?”

“That’s some hack,” Rich said with a smirk.

“You’re daft,” Colin said, standing up. Kand moved toward them and looked like he was ready to say something.

“I have no idea,” Eric said. “It would go against everything we-”

“There are parties who will benefit,” Kand said quietly.

Eric and the others glared at him. “Who? This would cause a global depression,” Jim said angrily.

“Everyone is tied together by economics,” Eric added.

“You think so,” said Kand.

“Yes,” Eric said. “That’s what globalization is. One country buys what another makes, sells what they make to a third, and the third sells to the first.”

“Only if there is perfect balance,” Kand answered calmly. “Only if every nation has internal stability.”

“No, it happens because of specialization,” Eric said.

“This specialization has become your weakness,” said Kand, nodding to the screens.

Eric looked at the screens. Entire sectors rose and fell together, and Doug noticed that some major national currencies rose and fell with them.

“You see,” said Kand. “Through your quest for perfection, these countries have staked their entire economies to just one industry. Each of them.”

“But that’s how commerce works!” said Eric. He pulled a medallion out of his jacket pocket. It was his version of the Global Grid, the one Kand said was wrong. “This is what progress leads to.”

“No. The symbol does not show progress. It does not prescribe specialization. It only maps the requirements for a complete society.”

“Like diversification,” said Doug.

Eric was stunned. He looked at his medallion and put it back in his pocket. “So what do you think Currier is trying to do?”

Kand was silent.

“You have no fucking idea, do you?” Eric demanded.

Kand remained quiet and looked at Eric with a blaze in his eyes that Doug recognized. It reminded him of every photograph of wild-eyed terrorists that he had seen. Doug was just about to open his mouth in Kand’s defense, when he finally spoke.

“He has talked of balance, as I have. But he wants to bring it about by crashing the world economy. He is not your leader, he is your enemy,” said Kand.

“Balance, huh?” Eric said, “By destroying-” Then he looked at one of the screens and his jaw dropped. There was a

flashing red dot on the screen. “Well, it doesn’t matter, really, because somebody thinks we are the enemy.”

Eric turned to the other Free Majority folks. “Guys, time to go,” he told them. They nodded and started to walk toward the closet.

“Where are we going?” Doug asked. Eric paused for a minute and looked at Rich, Vanessa and Doug, as well as Kand, while the others moved toward the closet. Jim opened it and pulled out all of the clothes hanging inside. More purple suits. He threw them on the floor. At the back of the closet, Doug saw a ladder that headed up into the ceiling.

“We can’t be here when those Feds arrive, can we?”

Jim, Beth and Colin started to climb a ladder at the back of the closet. Eric and Brey stood in front of it with the others.

“What the hell is going on?” Rich demanded.

“There are agents looking for us. We’ve been one step ahead of them so far, but our little test with the modeler seems to have alerted them to this location.”

“So we should go!” Doug yelled.

“We?” Eric asked, stepping forward.

“What are you doing?” Rich yelled.

“We’ve got to figure out how to shut this down. We can’t do that here, and you’ll help us buy time.”

“What are you talking about?” Vanessa screamed.

“They are already looking for you three, and him,” Eric said, motioning to Kand. “They’ll be here in moments, and

there you'll be, with all these computer screens and your fake outfits.”

Brey grinned and turned to climb the ladder.

“Hey!” Eric yelled. He grabbed Brey and pushed him toward the others. “You're with them.”

“No way!” Brey yelled as he turned toward Eric, ready to push him back. Eric pulled out a handgun, and Brey stopped short and gasped. Everyone else did, too, except for Kand, who just shook his head.

Doug's eyes fixed on the black handgun. He had not considered this little development.

“Back to the screens!” Eric yelled. Rich, Vanessa, Doug, Kand, and Brey stepped back toward the monitors. As soon as they were far enough away, Eric stepped into the closet and put a hand on the ladder.

“By the way, go ahead and tell the agents about us. It will make you look even more like terrorist crackpots. You might tell them about the Grid, and the database, and the hack. Hell, tell them about the bomb in the armor!”

“What bomb?” Doug yelled. Eric started to climb the ladder, and Doug ran to the closet and yelled again. “What bomb?”

Eric reached the top, two stories up. Doug saw him climb out into the daylight and close the cover. The ladder disappeared into a dark void. Doug climbed the ladder and reached the top. It was the inside of a metal box, and there

were no latches or hinges, no screws, and the top would not budge. Doug had no idea how they opened the thing.

He climbed down to where Rich was standing. Brey and Kand were on opposite sides of the room. Kand was pacing. Vanessa came back from the other door, having obviously tried it.

“Anything?” Rich asked.

“No,” she said. “We're locked in,”

They looked at Doug.

“Not that way,” he said, gesturing toward the ladder.

“Not without a torch or something.”

“Fuck!” Brey yelled. He looked around for something to kick, but everything was either too large, too cumbersome, or too high-tech. He slumped in a chair.

Vanessa looked at him with disapproval, but Doug could tell she felt a little sympathetic. “I can't believe I was starting to follow this guy,” Vanessa said.

“He had us all fooled,” said Rich.

“Not all of us,” Doug said. He looked at Kand, then at the computer screens. The room had no windows, so they had no way of knowing when the Federal agents arrived.

Doug shuffled over to the screens. The red light continued to blink, but did not get bigger, nor did it flash more quickly. The stock prices continued to bounce around, but they remained within a few percentage points.

“Kand,” Doug said, still looking at the screens. “You have to tell me what it is that these guys have done.”

Kand looked around, waiting for the rest of them to gather closer. Maybe he thought the room was bugged.

“I told you how they believe in technological progress. That part is fine. The problem is that they discard the older technologies.”

“You said they embrace specialization,” said Rich.

“Yes, and it makes national economies unstable.”

“Because a sector can collapse, taking a country with it?” asked Vanessa.

“Too many eggs in one basket,” said Rich.

“So a smart nation would diversify, like an investor,” Doug said.

“Ideally, yes, but when a nation refuses to specialize, they are destroyed by those with a stake in progress,” said Kand.

“You mean us,” said Rich.

“Or at least people like the Free Majority,” Doug offered.

Kand continued, “It’s in the way they arrange their grid icon. They think it follows time. They think that eventually, the roots, which are resources, order, and work, will be eliminated.”

“And you believe that is not possible,” Doug said.

“It isn’t,” said Kand. “No matter what, whether we are replaced by robots, or light energy, or water vapor, something has to be extracted, something has to be moved, and it has to conform to some kind of law.”

“Otherwise nothing happens,” said Vanessa.

“Yes,” said Kand.

“Well, something may happen, but it won’t be civilized,” said Rich.

Doug continued to look at the screens with their fluctuating numbers. “So Currier is responsible for this?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Kand. “He thinks he can bring balance to the world economy with this.”

Brey piped up. “Eric said it was a hack.”

“That was before he pulled a gun on us,” Rich yelled back.

“You said you believed him, too,” Brey hollered.

“Guys!” Doug yelled. He turned away from the screens. “Any productive ideas, I’m listening!”

Rich and Brey looked at him. Kand grinned slightly.

Rich came to one of the monitors and sat down in front of it. “What if we can shut down the macros?”

“What?” Doug asked him. “Let’s get caught red-handed whenever these authorities get here?”

Rich looked at the screens and said, “What does it matter?” We’re in here. These are here. We probably don’t have much time.”

Doug took a seat next to him. Vanessa sat down on the other side. Brey and Kand kept their distance. Brey sulked. Kand paced.

Doug opened the database and went to the menu screen. He selected Configuration, an item he had never clicked before.

The configuration screen opened to several settings that looked like they could all be what Doug was looking for. There were settings that dealt with standard deviations, curve analysis, and a lot of other mathematical gibberish. As an MBA, Doug understood it only superficially.

“Guys, it’s no use,” he said.

“We could fuck this up even more,” Rich said.

Vanessa pointed to an icon on the screen. “Hit that,” she said. It read “Text Programming”.

“Okay,” Doug said with a shrug. He clicked it, and a listing of filenames opened up. Most of them appeared to be gibberish.

“Holy shit!” Vanessa gasped.

“What?” Rich and Doug asked. Kand and Brey came toward the screen.

“Look at these names,” Vanessa said. “Here, pmw0402tm.pgm, pmw0806tm.pgm, pmw1003tm.pgm, pmw1006dw.pgm, and a bunch more in numerical order.”

“So?” Doug asked.

“Look at the acronym. PMW. Our company.”

Rich gasped loudly. “Look at the other initials. TM is Todd Molin.”

“Yes, look,” said Vanessa. “The numbers must be dates. April 2. August 6. October 3. That was the day Molin brought us into the Shangzhen work.”

“Oh my God,” Doug said with his mouth agape. “You’re right. On October 6, the initials change. DW.”

“Doug Wilson,” said Rich.

“October 6,” said Brey. “I know that date.” He referred to the day a ton of his net worth went out the window.

“Brey,” Doug said. “I had no idea it was real.”

“You chose Coke. Why the fuck-”

“Dude, focus,” said Rich. Brey fumed.

“After the 6<sup>th</sup>, it’s all you,” said Vanessa.

She was right. The rest of the files had Doug’s initials on them, all the way down and beyond the bottom of the screen. They were all the days that he had used the database for research, or at least what he thought was research.

“Keep scrolling,” said Rich. Doug did. The last file was dated 1119. Today.

“So it records a file whenever you log in,” said Vanessa. They looked again at the blinking red light.

“Eric and those bastards were counting on this,” said Vanessa. She referred to the Free Majority with all the disgust of a person who had been kidnapped by them and forced to believe in their bullshit ideology for a few days.

Kand walked over. “Can you open the file?” he asked.

Doug had no idea what a 'pgm' file was, but he clicked on the last one. The computer froze for a second and then went back to what it was doing.

"Guys," he said. "I don't--"

There was suddenly an incredibly loud banging sound from the other side of the door. Doug jumped up and looked at the wall as flakes of paint flew off of it. Dust rose from the seams between the door jamb and the wall.

They walked toward the middle of the room. Doug raised his hands. For all he knew, these people were going to come in shooting.

"Doug!" Rich whispered loudly. He nodded to the computer. Doug had not logged out of the database.

"Shit!" Doug whispered as he ran to log out.

Just as Doug turned around again, the door flew into the room and threw up a cloud of plaster. The metal jamb and heavy door clanged loudly as it fell, and Doug felt the old brownstone shudder. In the doorway, there were two men crouching in dusty black suits and Kevlar helmets. They were holding a large metal boom that they used to ram the door.

Two more men stepped over them and held their very threatening automatic rifles at head level. They came toward Doug and the others quickly, yelling for them to get down. Doug got to his knees and saw another man come through the door in the same black outfit. He carried no rifle. Doug's face went white the instant he realized who it was.

It was the interrogator from the Bangor airport.