

Emerson skulked with his head hung low into the Black Market offices with his hands in his pockets, his eyes straight ahead, and a lead shield of over-cautiousness to protect him from the slings and arrows of outrageously poor judgment on his part. He approached the reception desk.

The receptionist--a supremely old, possibly even dead woman with the name "AGNES" printed quite plainly on her security badge--eyed him from over her thin-framed glasses. Without so much as glancing from her computer monitor, she asked in a smoky, cobwebbed old voice "D'you have an appointment?" She had clearly grown entirely bored of the interaction before it had ever really begun.

"U-uh, yes." Emerson stammered. "I believe it's with a Mr... Oh, gosh, what's his name..." He scratched the back of his head, embarrassed, just trying to remember who it was he'd made the appointment with not even a week before this moment. "Mr. Blackstone87, I think?"

Agnes pushed up her glasses and looked into her computer screen. Her fingers tippity-tapped across the keyboard with the unexpected lightning speed of someone three hundred and seventy years her junior. "Are you Emerson Cherry? Age 41? Address, 3720 West Crickett Avenue apartment 212? Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55410? Phone number, 612-555-6565? Social security number, 419-58-3—"

Emerson interrupted her from rattling off even more of his most personal details, worried that she might get to something like "number of women you've slept with" or "favorite Japanese cartoon character."

"How do you know all that?!" asked Emerson, all astonishment.

"We know things," Agnes said indifferently. "It's one of the many things that we do." She pushed up her glasses again, which had been trying to leap off of her haggard face like a woman leaps from a burning building onto a firefighter trampoline. She pointed a bony old finger at a row of empty chairs against the wall. She said, "Have a seat over there. Mr. Blackstone87 will be with you shortly." She then resumed her work as a statue.

Emerson went and sat in one of them and observed the gleamingly dull lobby around him. Wooden wall paneling, brown carpet, and an amalgamous odor of yogurt and bleach all reminded him of the mid-1970s, when he'd just been a kid.

The only thing that seemed new was a shining stack of magazines, which enticed him from the adjacent table. He picked one up and began flipping through it.

An advertisement caught his eye on the very first page. "Holiday Sale! Buy now for 30% off!" It had said in big, bold, red and green letters on an explosive blue background. A Santa hat sat crooked and arrogant on the edge of the 'H' in 'Holiday', and Christmas ornaments were splayed across the page like droppings in a petting zoo. "The Polski-Chekov 3700 Rocket-Propelled Grenade launcher!" An image of the massive RPG took up near the entire page. He looked at the cover of the magazine. Arms & Armories, it was called.

Wow, Emerson thought to himself.

The surreality of the Black Market had begun to dawn on him. It was a classic expectations vs reality scenario. What he'd expected was shady deals in back alleys, knives and leather jackets, 80's haircuts and—he'd hoped—some really spectacular martial arts. What he'd found so far was about as dull as his everyday life.

He was new to criminality. He wasn't accustomed to being a freelancer, much less a freelance hacker. He'd toiled for six boring and passionless years in college to become a boring and passionless software engineer for fifteen years designing boring and passionless user interfaces for high-end microcomputer-controlled kitchen appliances. When his employer laid him off and he couldn't find any other work, he spent his newfound free-time exploring the depths of the internet rather than job hunting.

What he found while exploring was one of the greatest security flaws in one of the largest corporations in the world. He'd been dicking around on the website for the Integra Computer Corporation, inspecting software elements and lines of code, looking for ideas but also looking to make himself feel better by nitpicking at software bugs of small consequence and unnecessary or inefficient lines of code. He hadn't intended on doing anything with it, he just enjoyed looking at other people's code, and considered himself a sort of technological copy editor.

He hadn't quite known how to react when he accidentally stumbled upon an embedded username/password matrix for the entire Integra server, though. It hadn't been encrypted in any way. It didn't even take him any real effort to find it or to decipher it among the thousands of lines of code. To him and ok any software engineer worth his salt in the Java language, it was plain as day.

At first, he didn't believe it. He accessed the employee login screen and entered one of the username/passwords combinations for Fielders, Y. Yancy Fielders was the current CEO and one of the cofounders of Integra. He was in! And not only was he in, but he had access to everything. He could change the air conditioning temperature for the entire Integra headquarters facility. He could reset anyone's passwords. He had unlimited access to hardware schematics, prototypes, software debug logs, payroll; everything.

Ever the conscientious do-gooder, he immediately contacted Integra Computer Corporation and informed them of the gaping shotgun wound in their security system. He loaded up an e-mail, cocked it back, and returned fire, shooting a warning message through their public contact forum to inform them about their massive security flaw and all of the access he'd commandeered. He immediately received an automatic response that went something like this:

Customer—

Thank you for contacting Technical Support. Your message has been received and we will respond as soon as we can.

-Integra Technical Support

He'd waited for the response. A full month and some change passed by, and still, he'd received none. He logged back into the server to check if the security flaw had at least been addressed and, to his only partial surprise, it had not. He was absolutely confounded by the corporation's lack of interest in the security of their server, especially when the consequences for them could be so severe.

He'd posted his findings in carefully vague detail on a popular forum which he'd frequented, ruddit.com. Most of the rudditors told him that he'd done the right thing in trying to inform them, and that it was beyond his control. One response in particular caught his attention. A rudditor by the username Leviathanblue commented, "You're better off selling your high-level exploits to the Black Market."

The Black Market? The thought hadn't even occurred to him. To him, the Black Market was just some faraway plot point in several action films.

Curious as to where this might go, he sent Leviathanblue a direct message and asked him, "What do you know about the Black Market?"

Leviathanblue responded immediately with a foreign phone number and a simple message that said, "You didn't get this from me. Delete this message immediately."

Emerson wrote the phone number as well as Leviathanblue's username on a sticky pad and obediently tapped the delete key.

He'd kept the sticky note stuck to his computer monitor. He looked at it every day while a few more weeks and the cockroaches in his apartment walls both scurried on around him in undetectable silence. Emerson was still out of a job, living off his old savings which was beginning to fade away faster than a photo in a time travel movie.

Despite his decreasing savings account, what kind of money could be possibly get from a deal with this Black Market? Even an extra couple thousand could help him for another month or two. But what then? He wasn't sure if he even wanted a new job. What could the Black Market do for him?

He called.

A relaxing pentatonic chime came through the earpiece, followed by an electronic recording of a voice—a deep, electronically distorted voice. It said:

"Thank you for calling Black Market. We value all of our members dearly. For English, press 1. For Spanish, press 2. For Italian, press 3. For Mandarin, press 4..."

This went on and on and on. Emerson could have pressed 1 right then and there, but he found himself entranced by the voice and the increasing absurdity of the message. After he'd reached the offer for "Azerbaijani", which sounded made up, Emerson pressed 1.

A tenor saxophone wailed with passion, fronting a classical-jazz quartet complete with piano, bass, and just a light touch of percussion. It came through quietly and with poor reception, cutting out and back in every couple of seconds or so. Still, the music was effectively soothing.

A click interrupted the song. Another deep and distorted voice followed close behind, which was only slightly but still clearly different.

"Thank you for calling the Black Market, this phone call will be recorded and monitored for quality purposes. My name is hot4twat, how can I help you today?"

"...I'm sorry, what was your name?"

"hot4twat, sir. How can I be of assistance today?"

"Uhh, hi. I, umm... Oh gosh." Emerson began to sputter and choke and question his sanity, ultimately deciding that if he had finally lost it, he might as well dive right in and be balls to the wall, off the rails, cardboard box for a T-shirt crazy. "My name is Emerson Cherry. I've found something that might be worth, uhh... Something."

He heard some distorted tapping in the receiver on the keyboard. "Ok, Emerson. What have you got for us today?"

"Well..." As quickly as it had left orbit, his sanity had come crashing back down to earth. Questions arose in his head, backing him into a hesitant silence. What if all of this was an elaborate trap? What if Leviathanblue had been some sort of government agent just waiting for some idiot hacker to spill information to the wrong person?

But, an even darker realization dawned on Emerson: what did he have to lose, anyway? He'd played it safe and followed every rule for his whole life and still managed to lose everything. In all likelihood, even a year in prison would be more exciting than his entire cumulative life.

"...I've found a security flaw regarding a major corporation."

There was some more typing before hot4twat spoke again. "Ok, and what is the nature of the security flaw?"

"Pardon?"

"The nature of the security flaw, sir."

"Well, I'm not really sure how to answer that."

"Not a problem, sir. Describe the flaw to me, and I will determine the classification."

Emerson thought for a moment. "Well, I have access to the entire server of this corporation. Passwords and bank accounts and prototypes and... I dunno. Stuff like that."

More typing. "Ok, sounds like that might fall under information. And what is the name of the corporation?"

Emerson cleared his throat. "Integra Computers."

There was a long silence. A couple of extra keyboard taps in the background, and then hot4twat said, "Alright, sir, I'm going to have to transfer you to my supervisor. Please stay on the line."

More jazz came through. A different but somehow identical piece played through the receiver with the same poor reception.

Another distorted voice came on after a couple of minutes, similar in pitch to the previous but very different in tone. "Thank you for holding, Mr. Cherry. My name is Blackstone87. I'd like to meet with you in person and discuss the terms of this deal, if you don't mind. It's rather high-profile. Is that alright with you?"

Emerson stopped breathing. He ran through every outcome that he could imagine in his head, which only counted up to three. It's a setup by the cops. The criminal might kill him after he gets the information. Or, he could make some extra money. For the second time in only minutes, Emerson reached the conclusion that no single one of these outcomes seemed any worse than his life to date.

"Y-yes. This sounds good."

"Good," said Blackstone87. "Our offices are located in New York City in the 51st street subway station on the Lexington line. There's a public restroom with an out of service sign. Go in and enter third stall on the right. Flush three times within 30 seconds. You will know what to do after that."

"Toilet? Wait, what?" Emerson collected himself, temporarily ignoring the absurdity. "Wait, sir, I live in Minneapolis. New York is a pretty big trip, and I can't afford—"

"There will be a first class ticket available for you with U.S. Airways if you just give your name," said Blackstone87. "When you arrive at the airport in NYC, a TSA agent named Lincoln will be stationed at your gate's exit. Give him your name and he will give you precise directions to the station. Your plane takes off at 8:42 AM next Tuesday morning. I'll be expecting you to arrive in my office that same day."

"Uhh, ok, sir, thank y—"

Click.

Emerson hadn't really been reading the magazine anymore. He just sort of stared at it and allowed his mind to wander from the events that led him to this weird office behind a toilet to other minor things; common thoughts such as: I wonder if I left the oven on? Or: What will I be having for dinner? Or the ubiquitous thought on everyone's mind every day: Are these criminals going to steal the information and kill me?

Agnes broke the spell.

"Mr. Cherry," she croaked, thirsty for WD-40. "Mr. Blackstone87 is ready for you."

Emerson set the magazine down and stood up. She gestured toward the door in the corner, and Emerson approached. He felt his palms begin to sweat and wiped them on his slacks before reaching out and opening the door. He poked his head around into the office for a peak.

"Come in," said the man behind the desk. His face was hidden behind a huge computer monitor. Emerson could see the man's hands on a mouse and keyboard underneath the monitor, moving around, clicking and typing with the air of purpose that says, "I've got to have this presentation finished by Thursday or the board is going to have my head." A very professional placard was displayed on his desk that read simply: BLACKSTONE87. "Have a seat, Mr. Cherry."

Emerson eased the door shut and crept over to a chair to sit down. He'd expected the man to move the monitor out of the way and share a face-to-face conversation with Emerson, but then

again, he'd expected back alley deals, leather jackets, 80's haircuts, and—he'd hoped—martial arts. At this point, all expectations were out the window.

The man's voice was very professional, brisk, and deep. He had a very slight touch of a foreign accent—maybe Swedish or Dutch—but it was faint and distant like a siren through the fog at sea.

From behind the monitor, he spoke. "So, Mr. Cherry. I understand that you have complete and unhindered access to the Integra Computer Corporation username/password matrix. If I were to ask you to, could you prove it?"

"Yes," said Emerson. "It's really very simple."

"Good," said Blackstone87. He tapped away at his keyboard for a minute or so and said, "Integra Computer Corporation's net worth is about \$54 billion dollars. Generally, a security breach of the type that you've described can yield anywhere from 10 to 40% of that value. I can offer you 25% of that profit yield for payment for your crucial part in this transaction."

Emerson calculated the numbers in his head. His brain dropped into his stomach, then they both dropped down together into his colon, which felt like it was going to spill out into his pants. The final value seemed unreal. Even at the low end of that figure, 10% of \$54 billion dollars is 5.4 billion dollars. 25% of 5.4 billion dollars is about 1.3 billion.

He nearly choked on each zero that he tried to swallow.

"W-well sure! That sounds great."

"Good," Blackstone87 said casually. "I'll invite one of our hackers here tomorrow to meet with you. You can show him how you've done it."

"Wait!" Emerson objected. "What about payment? How do I know you won't rip me off?"

"Ah." Blackstone87 clicked a button on his desk phone. "Agnes, could you bring me a small case, please?" He then unclicked the button. He re-clicked it. "Hold that thought. Emerson, would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, sir" Emerson spouted obediently. He hadn't really wanted coffee, it was just his natural reaction to authority.

"Also bring us a couple of coffees in here." He unclicked the button again.

A few moments later, Agnes walked in with a simple brown rolling luggage case and a wooden tray of coffee things--a carafe, two mugs, some creams and sugars. She set the case next to Emerson and set the carafe on the desk in front of him. She then proceeded to fill up the mugs and prepare them with creams and sugars. Emerson hadn't noticed any of this coffee business, because he had been glued to the case at his feet since it arrived there.

On her way out, she turned around and asked, "Will that be all, Mr. Blackstone87?"

"That's all for now, Agnes. Thank you."

Exit Agnes.

A slurping noise from behind the monitor and the rich aromatic sensation pervading the air worked together to bring Emerson from his fixation. He began to ask if there was any cream and sugar around, but when he saw the cup, he noticed that it had already been prepared. He took a

sip and it was perfect; not too sweet, not too bitter, and not too hot. He downed it all in one long draw.

“Mr. Cherry, in that case is five million dollars. Open it up and check it for yourself. They are legitimate, unmarked bills.”

Emerson opened up the luggage and, sure enough, an army of Benjamin Franklins stared him in the face, emotionless, and prepared to die for him if they must. He ran his fingers through the cash, lifting out bundles and seeing more bundles underneath the bundles. He pulled back, afraid he might bungle the bundled bundles.

“This is a down payment for your services. You will be paid again in full your 25% when we have reached full harvest.”

“And how long does that usually take?”

“Anywhere from two weeks to a month.”

Emerson zipped up the case. “Sounds good, sir! Thank you!”

“Thank you, Emerson,” the man replied. “Come back tomorrow. Go out tonight and celebrate. Tomorrow, one of our hackers will be here to learn your technique.”

Blackstone87 paused for a moment. He took a pensive sip of coffee, or it at least looked pensive from behind the monitor. He then placed the cup neatly to the right of his mousepad, leaned back, and folded his hands on his sternum. “Trust is of utmost importance in this business, Emerson. I want you to know that you can trust us, and we're hammering this home in two ways. First, by just handing you five million dollars up front. Second, that coffee you drank...” he gestured from beyond the monitor with his hand, “...could very easily have been poisoned. Agnes could have done it whether or not you had been watching. You'll notice by your continued existence that it was not. We hope that you can trust us, but more importantly, we hope that we can trust you.”

“Of course you can trust me!” Emerson began defensively. “I'm not a thief!”

“No, I don't believe you are. But you must know the kind of people we deal with here. We have to be cautious until trust is established. We have a system in place and important rules to follow which keep us insulated from such people.” Blackstone87 leaned in as close as he could without showing his face and said softly through the monitor, “It would be wise of you to assume you're being watched, at all times, by anyone and everyone. People disappear in this city very often and very easily.” He picked up his coffee and took a modest sip. “Of course, we wouldn't know anything about that.” Judging by the tone of his voice, it sounded like Blackstone87 might have been winking. Emerson would never know for sure.

“You can count on me, sir! I'll be back tomorrow! Bright and early!”

“Good. I'm glad to hear it. Don't let us down, Emerson, and you'll get your payment. We'll see you tomorrow.”

“Ok. Thank you, sir! Thank you. I'll be back tomorrow, I promise.”

Emerson stood up and reached his hand out to shake Blackstone87's. The man extended his hand around the large monitor and shook it in return.

On his way out the door, case full of cash in tow, Blackstone87 called out to him. “Hold on,” he said. Emerson turned around.

“I’ve got one more concern,” he said. “You’ve been throwing your real name around rather carelessly. We’ve been doing what we can to protect you from legal action, but we can only go so far. This has been the easy part. When business really begins, a full federal investigation will be conducted. You mustn’t use your real name anymore. Your ruddit username, it is rag_and_bone, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“From now on, you will go only by that when you do business with us. Thank you, Mr. rag_and_bone. I will see you tomorrow.”

Mr. Blackstone87 continued his clicking and typing and Emerson left, his luggage case packed full of real cash trailing behind like a very expensive pet. He began walking toward the lobby’s exit.

“Take care, Mr. rag_and_bone,” Agnes managed to drone as he opened the door to the New York City subway station bathroom. He stepped around the toilet and walked out onto the subway platform.

And so began Emerson’s exciting new career.