

Gatac 2018-03-02 14:33:37

Operation SWITCHBACK commences and Wildcard races against the clock, trying to get ahead of Rol's next terror attack and catch some of their field leadership. The data transmission from the laptop, secure in the bowels of the "Black Vault", might hold some answers...

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With the refueling stop in RAF Croughton (where, incidentally, nobody's allowed off the plane), it takes about three hours to get from Amsterdam to Hamburg. A golden opportunity for some well-earned rest, which Mason gladly takes. Tim, however, has some family business to handle first, and with Operations' nodded blessing, retrieves one of the NIPR laptops from the SCIF's storage. That borrowed laptop is quickly sanitized to Tim's standards, then he avails himself of the plane's satellite internet uplink, VPNs into a secure server instance...and gets on FaceChat (tm). Within seconds, he gets a DM from @sydsorceress.

"TIMMY! what is UP bro I haven't seen you on lately."

Tim's fingers dance, light as his soul from this brief window into what Everyone Else Did. "The aid stations out here don't have reliable access, you know how it is. I did catch the Fairbanks show from some youtube feed!"

"yeah man that shit was CRAZY. this tour stuff is no joke. were waiting for the van to take us to the station. but good times, good times. how much longer is this hitch?"

"Couple more weeks, maybe another month. Don't want to leave these people short-staffed, they're doing some good work." Tim had no idea how deep Rol would go, or where Fractal would lead. "Maybe our tours will line up for a change. Did you talk to Mom?"

"called yesterday, texted today. because this DUMBASS here ruined her voice last night. 100% mom-versation, *ahem* oh Sydney dear do you have enough clean underwear I do worry about you sometimes, are you sure you're not taking any drugs?"

and I'm like MOOOOOOOOOOOM, I gotta get that looped and put on a soundboard also she says YOU don't call!!!"

Tim's smile is rueful as the old accusations roll in, familiar as a favorite blanket. "And that's all part of my master plan to make sure YOU'RE her favorite despite your dirty-ass underwear and all the drugs."

"that is SO MEAN tho! i gotta keep it rock'n'roll \m/ i can't just be having l'oreal hair and sobriety! time for TIMMY to step up and get some of that guilt. i don't see you getting married, mister!"

"I'm saving myself for the right country artist." Not even Tim can keep a straight face after that one, and his chuckle is jarring in the quiet cabin. "But for reals, country sucks. I got a line forming though, Syd. Stay in touch."

"inappropriately! rock on my dude. xoxo"

What kind of crazy world is Tim living in that his sister being a globetrotting post-djentcore vocalist is the normal one? Tim reflexively secure-deletes the laptop's user partition, sanitizes the keyboard with alcohol wipes and then replaces it back in storage. With that done, he looks for a good seat with minimal sun glare.

The second laptop on the plane is in Blake's hands. There's not exactly a DiasporaWiki, but pretty soon he's got it figured out: when it comes to Hamburg's resident aliens, the most interesting group is Afghanis - Hamburg actually boasts the largest Afghani community in Europe. It's a cheap conclusion that leaves Blake uneasy, but just because it's cheap doesn't mean they can just dismiss it outright. Fortunately, further research shows that the likely targets of RoI recruiters are nowhere near all of those people. The majority has been in Germany since the 50s and 60s, students and businessmen then who are now, well, academics and businessmen. Then there's a big wave of refugees from the Soviet invasion in 1979, but those are likely too old and too settled to be prime recruiting targets. No, if you were putting together a group of terrorists, you'd want to target the young and unmoored who have trickled into Hamburg since the 1990s. Slight problem: the community as a whole, thanks to the fundamental

split between those three waves, is not very organized. However, one name does pop up more than a few times: [Dr. Emal Sulemani](#).

Dr. Sulemani is a first-waver who studied - and subsequently practised - medicine at Hamburg's university teaching hospital with a focus on cardiovascular surgery. He is the namesake of the Sulemani protocol, a surgical technique that has been shown to significantly improve odds of survival for patients suffering from an aortic dissection in connection with Marfan syndrome. He has been active for two decades as chairman of the Afghan-German Mutual Aid Society, an NGO charity that seeks to provide both developmental aid in Afghanistan and all manner of assistance to Afghani refugees in Germany. The angel on Blake's shoulder says that someone who works with newly arrived refugees would probably be pretty well informed about their problems and anyone trying to start trouble. The devil on the other shoulder says that funneling money abroad through charity organization is Terrorism Financing 101. Either way, Dr. Sulemani goes straight to the top of Blake's Persons of Interest list.

"Everybody into the SCIF," Operations orders as you enter German airspace.

Once inside, the teleconference bridge to Langley comes back alive, with Deputy Director Marsh on the other side.

"Good evening," Marsh says. "Well, you dropped a hell of a whopper on our plate there, Operations."

"Always happy to help, Sir," Operations says. "What can you tell us?"

"Do you want the bad news or the bad news?" Marsh asks.

"Bad news first," Operations replies.

"The merc team you turned over to the Dutch cops has disappeared in transit to a high-security prison," Marsh says. "We were ever so cordially informed of this when

their MoD lit up our diplomatic channels and accused us of conducting a raid on their prisoner transport to get our hands on the rogues. Took a while to convince them that it wasn't us."

"The MSS?" Operations asks. "Fractal?"

"We only have speculation at this point," Marsh says. "And that's how it's liable to stay for a while. We've gotten nothing further from the Dutch. They've had their fill of our **help**, it seems."

"You mean saving their butts when Rol caught them with their pants down," Operations counters.

"Your words, not mine," Marsh says. "I've asked Agent Griffin to take point on sorting out the mess and smoothing the waves, but it'll be a while before we have an effective presence in Amsterdam again."

"Okay," Operations says. "And the bad news?"

"We're cancelling field support in Hamburg," Marsh says. "All agency assets have been ordered to cease direct action missions in NATO countries."

"They can't do that!" Laith pipes up. "We just saved Amsterdam from two terrorist attacks! We're the only ones who can stop the next one!"

"You don't need to tell me that, son," Marsh says. "But it's bad optics for us to be running these ops under the noses of our allies, according to the DCI. And I don't need to tell you where he gets his marching orders from."

Operations breathes. "Are we to stand down, then?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want answers to," Marsh says. "I'll have the newest for you when you check in. Stay safe out there. Marsh out."

The conference ends, and Operations draws in a sharp breath.

"Anyone who wants to wait for authorization from the central office can wait outside and stay on the plane," she says. "The rest of you, tell me what your plan is and what you need to get it done."

punkey 2018-03-02 15:40:18

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"First step is establish a base of operations," Mason says, the veteran Special Forces operator taking over the table for a moment. "That means a place to sleep, transportation - both car and metro - and communication, burners and radio. All not traceable back to us, which means cash, gift cards...five finger discount if we have to." He looks to Operations and Laith. "Can we still get dummy plates and IDs?"

"I can activate some off-the-books assets in Rome for documents," Operations says. "That'll take a day or two to get to us, though." She looks to Laith. "Don't look at me," Laith shoots back. "My friends live in cyberspace. The best I can do for a base of operations on short notice is find us a not-shitty AirBnB."

"How's your German, then?" Mason asks. "Buildings owned by real estate firms that are in receivership is a popular one."

"Deutsch ist kein Problem," Operations says, with that super-clean clearly enunciated non-accent nobody outside of Hannover actually speaks. "For the other stuff on your wishlist, I guess you'll be hitting the streets with our cash reserves. Unless one of you secret squirrels has buried a stash around here?"

(Mason: $1d6+2$ #Preparedness for gear drop = $(4)+2 = 6$)

Just then, Mason recalls that Mike once told him about this old garage in...Barmbek? As the address comes back to him, so does Mike's bragging about his last op with The Activity and how they boxed up all their good shit after a surveillance op there like some sort of mini-REFORGER. Your tax dollars at work.

(A quick explanation of caches like this one: the player who made the test (Kasey in this case) gets to name two things to retrieve from the cache for free. Additional items cost one point of Preparedness. Generally speaking, by one item I mean "enough to go around", I won't charge you for individual earbuds or shit like that, but at my discretion very specialized gear may be limited in number or plain not available in the cache.)

(Let's get supplies needed for high-end German IDs and a big stack of cash to start.)

skullandscythe 2018-03-06 14:50:26

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"We still have some necessities from our last op, bullets and ammo and armor," Blake lists what he remembers, and turns to Ops and Laith. "Do either of you need anything specific? Besides a big black SUV."

Blake is already thinking about vehicles that can accommodate the team and their stuff without screaming *"WE ARE SECRET AGENTS PLEASE ARREST US."* Blending may be quite important.

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"Van with an automatic transmission," Laith replies. "And heated seats. Lucy gets cold when she's lying around." Lucy raises her head at the mention of her name, but then returns to curling up on the floor.

"We should get some new laptops," Operations adds. "I would prefer not to mess around with Agency hardware as long as we're disobeying orders."

"And all the other crap you need in for a proper spy van," Laith says. "Maybe a black market stingray?"

"Let's walk before we try to run," Operations says.

Admiral Duck Sauce 2018-03-07 11:05:29

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"Let's make sure we have a burner car too," Tim suggests. "Whether I boost that now or we wait to have the IDs and cash on hand and just rent it with the van." He perks up, remembering something from somewhere, maybe sparked by DeSilva's love of motorcycles.

"Bikes too - bicycles, I mean. Hamburg's pretty bike-friendly, and they don't leave a paper trail at all."

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Operations nods to all that. "Good," she says. "You boys take care of transport and gear, I'll go on the hunt for a safehouse. Now let's strap in for the landing."

"Oh, hey," Laith says. "King's speech in five."

"Put it on speaker," Operations says.

"Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. Thank you for making time to listen to me on such short notice.

To all those who were worried, let me first say that my family and I are safe. The situation that unfolded is under control now and we do not believe that there is any ongoing threat to anyone in the vicinity. I know that these are concerning times for all citizens, residents and visitors in our kingdom. I hope to assuage these concerns by informing you all of the facts as we know them now.

Today, during my reception in the royal palace on the occasion of Remembrance Day, several armed men managed to penetrate the security measures in place. Through their audacity and their disregard for human life, they managed to take my family and me hostage. Their cowardly actions led to the wounding of three of our security officers and the tragic death of *Wachtmeester* Grossman of the Royal Marechaussee. To him belongs the bitter honor of fulfilling his duty to the last; whatever I can do for him and his family will never repay the debt that I - that my family - owes him. May he rest in peace. I am, however, glad to say that our dedicated men and women of the Royal Marechaussee, our security officers and - last but certainly not least - the Amsterdam police conducted themselves with the highest ability and professionalism during this crisis. Their timely intervention allowed them to confront the attackers and rescue us. Further, I am proud to report that, despite some warning shots being fired, nobody was killed in the final confrontation. Some might say that any and all measures would have been justified in such a situation, that this is some kind of proof that we are too soft in our struggle against terrorism. Yet I stand here today full of conviction that we must not let our souls be darkened by such ghoulish thoughts. We must keep believing that **life** is worth revering, not death, that restraint and mercy are the signs of wisdom and honor, not weakness. Our brave men and women acted in accordance with these ideals. And thanks to them, the attackers are now being held in custody and will have their day in court.

When this crisis unfolded, some of our first actions were to evacuate the palace and secure the area around it. I wish to personally apologize to everyone who was frightened and inconvenienced by these sudden actions. Although they were drastic, I stand behind them now as I did then. Please be assured that our overriding concern was everyone's safety. You have maybe noticed that I am giving this speech not from my usual podium, but from a small studio at a secure location. Today's events have sadly also made it necessary that my family, my closest staff and I be sequestered here until we are certain that the threat has passed. We will let you know when the current restrictions of the area around the palace will be lifted, but for now I must ask of you all a measure of patience and understanding. Much work and many questions remain. We do not yet know what the attackers wanted to achieve. We do not yet know how they came to arrive at their plan. Perhaps most seriously, we cannot be certain how they managed to get into the palace. I have already conferred with *Luitenant-Generaal* van de Pijksen of the Royal Marechaussee, Chief of Security Kruijssen and *Commissaris*

Slaghekke of the Amsterdam *regiokorpsen* to determine the best way to investigate the matter. We all agree on the way forward. An independent commission will examine the incident in detail over the coming months. I wish to make clear at this point that this is not a mistake that can be laid at the feet of any one person. Clearly, the security measures as a whole were flawed. We need to work together now and create a clear-eyed plan on how to recognize these flaws in the future and work to continually improve our security posture.

Ladies and gentlemen, today we came close to a national tragedy. Heartened as I am that it did not go as badly as it clearly could have, there is nothing to celebrate either. Today, we mourn. We mourn not only those whose lives were taken in the past, for whom we solemnize Remembrance Day, but also those who suffered today from the violence of men who came to do us harm. History will judge us for the decisions we make in the coming months. But I can assure you all that we will not be caught unprepared like this again. We have taken peace and stability for granted for too long. Now, we see that we must do better than that. I must do better than that. And I will.

Thank you all for your time."

"Hamburg Tower, November Five Echo, one zero north north west, inbound landing."

"November Five Echo, report left base for runway one five, wind is one six zero at four, altimeter three one zero five."

"Report left base one five, November Five Echo."

The landing and taxiing is uneventful, with the Wolfhound ending up in one of those hangars at the far side of the airfield. There's nobody here to pick you up, for good or bad, so that might be taken as a tacit sign of kinda-sorta approval for not standing down.

While Operations uses the hangar phone to order up a shuttle van for the lot of you - heavy equipment left on the plane for coming back after you have your own transport -, Mason checks an inconspicuous classifieds website section, finding an ad put up this morning for a five-pack of opened Star Trek TNG trading cards for sale. [PRO: Biff Yeager card! CON: Not signed](#). This lets him know Alira's trying to get in touch with him - specifically, it's priority 2, call when you have the time - but usually Mason responds even to those quicker than he did today. He smiles, knowing that this probably means she's already halfway through figuring out what his new gig is.

One circumvented security check and a minibus taxi ride later, you arrive at the garage/storehouse, which is one of what must be at least three dozen cinderblock garages in the middle of Hamburg's boonies, so to speak; several rows of garages, in fact, all opening onto an "E" of packed gravel driveway. And even for detached garages some way from the houses/apartments of their owners, these are clearly not a popular hangout spot. You'd all put money on being the first people in the complex this week. The specific garage used by The Activity as a storehouse has a padlock at the door, of course. A good one, even! But it's not good enough to stop Tim. As Mr. Lock gets to work, Mason glances upwards at the security camera - oh yes, there's a security camera, and it's nice and subtle and doesn't have a blinking red light, because it's there to watch, not to deter. He gives it a nice wave. Somebody will probably appreciate that, back home.

When did Mike say he was here? Well, it's clearly been a few months since anyone's had occasion to be here.

"ID forgery that way," Mason points out, and as Tim and Luc get to secure those materials and help Laith with his own shopping list, Blake draws the plastic tarp from the van that's clearly the main attraction. Hidden underneath is an off-white Mercedes-Benz Sprinter commercial van - some 200X model year, with the taller rear cabin and the slightly shittier mileage. From a glance at the outside and cracking the rear door open, it's got the whole setup for a spy van - workstation with monitors, hefty inverter and battery bank to power gear, camouflaged external antennas and mounts for cameras -, just with all the classified tech carefully removed.

"Aw, they ripped out the [TEMPEST](#) setup," Laith faux-whines as he climbs into the back. "But I think we can work with this."

At that precise moment, Mason taps the correct drywall panel in the rear and retrieves the proverbial Briefcase Full Of Cash from its hiding place.

"We can definitely work with **that**," Laith adds.

There are about a hundred phone calls going through [the cell tower with eNB ID 104398](#) right now. Those are not unusual. The unusual one is the encrypted VoIP call that's also being routed through it.

"Die Amerikaner sind bei ihrem Lager. Soll ich jetzt näher ran?"

"Nein, genau das sollst du nicht. Nochmal zu Mitschreiben: du bleibst auf Distanz. Wenn sie dich sehen, macht es alles noch komplizierter."

"Die sehen mich schon nicht."

"Kein Risiko. Abstand halten und berichten. Wir greifen nur ein, wenn's brenzlig wird."

"Ist es das nicht schon?"

"Das steht jetzt nicht zur Debatte. Bitte mach' einfach mal, was ich dir sage."

"Jawohl, Frau Chefchen!"

"Xavi..."

"Klappe halten und machen, geht klar."

"Dich kriegen wir echt nicht mehr groß, was? Meld' dich in 'ner Stunde nochmal."

And then it ends. Funny, that.

MikeS 2018-03-11 03:04:37

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"Vraiment, bikes? Vis is Europe. Bus or train goes almost anywhere you want, mon ami. Of course, you can combine ve two. Not sure if we want a pass, vough. Vose need an ID," Luc adds.

He had been smoking heavily over the past hours, wondering if the hacker had made good on his threat of outing the Serbian agent. More to the point, he was wondering if the hacker was still with the MSS and could provide details on the MSS' moves after

Amsterdam. While the Chinese weren't a priority right now, it'd be good to know what they were up to.

Once they have their burner phones, he logs on to a dark web portal for intelligence freelancers and posts: "Europe tour recommendation for Asian visitors: Amsterdam, then what?"

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(Mason spends 1 Preparedness to find a stashed encrypted satphone.)

If there's one thing that can be relied on in the Army, it's that they'll send a Blackhawk to search the desert for a lost M9 but leave controlled crypto equipment forgotten in some footlocker. Digging out a lockbox that doesn't even have its code set, Mason finds a plastic-wrapped satphone. It even powers on first try! Mason slides the phone into his pocket.

"I found a few listings online that looked promising," he says, heading for the door. "I'll see if any of them are as abandoned as they looked, maybe a good place to toss a few mattresses and a folding table."

"Oh, sure," Laith comments. "I'll be here for a while getting the van ready. Pick me up something for dinner when you come back, okay?"

"Greasy kebab it is," Mason replies, and starts walking towards the bus stop.

"Easy on the hot sauce!" Laith shouts after him.

Soon, Mason is on his way out of the garage complex and heading toward the street. There's a couple cars parked on either side and about a car every fifteen seconds

driving by, but most people are still at work. Not much foot traffic, either, but there are two older men at the bus stop, arguing about politics. As Mason approaches, he gets a better look at the two men. Both mid 60s or so? One is balding and wears a cap to go with his windbreaker, the other's wearing one of those leather jackets that are SUCH A GOOD DEAL when you're on vacation in Italy.

"It's like I always say," Mr. Cap says in a broad Hanseatic brogue. "Those social democrats, zero social, zero democratic!"

"Yeah, I guess you're right about that," Mr. Leather Jacket replies. "But what about the CDU? Can't vote for them either."

"You really can't."

"I tell you, it's no wonder the right is winning. The center's just completely spineless these days."

As Mason approaches, Mr. Cap gives him a grumpy sideways look and stops talking.

"What, you're not going to hear me disagree," Mason replies, and huddles underneath the bus stop. "Once Schmidt forgot where he was from, the writing was on the wall."

"Right," Mr. Leather Jacket says. The conversation pointedly does not resume as the two men stare at the street.

Mason shrugs and waits for the bus to come, which isn't a very long wait, as it just turns the corner then. The two old men get in first, showing their monthly passes to the driver. He regards Mason with a sideways glance as he steps up.

"Inner city? 3.30€, please."

Mason feeds the meter and heads to the back of the bus, near the engine and away from everyone else on the otherwise empty bus. There are three teenage boys about two-thirds down the length of the bus having an animated conversation about their weekend plans and how Murat is so **totally** gay, you don't even know it! One of them is playing [German "gangsta" rap](#) via their beat-up smartphone. Other than that, the back of the bus is empty.

With about twenty minutes to the first to-be-scouted property and plenty of time to spare, Mason pulls out the satphone and slides the unlabeled encryption card into the back before dialing the only number that works with that card. It doesn't even manage to ring twice before Alira picks up.

"Someone's been busy," she says by way of greeting.

"Oh?" Mason asks innocently.

"What, are you calling to tell me where you aren't and what you're not doing?" Alira says.

Mason smirks. "Oh, you know, around. Meeting interesting new people."

"I can imagine," Alira says. "Well, I can't let you have all the fun, you old dog. I...may have made a few calls."

"Learn anything interesting?" Mason asks. "New job is...tight with some info."

"I don't know yet," Alira says. "And I don't know if I'm barking up the right tree here. How about this, I give you a word, you tell me hot or cold."

"Works for me," Mason says.

"Fractal," Alira says.

"Hot," Mason says.

Alira doesn't do a very good job of muting her phone quick enough; Mason can still hear her breathe "Shit!".

"Okay, that's..." she says. "Shit."

"Lira..." Mason says.

"Gotta run, Masie," Alira says. "I'll let you know when to call."

"Lira," Mason says. "Come on. You know my past with them. I need to know."

"Jacob," Alira says after a breath. "I can't. Not like...this." She breathes. "I'll figure something out. For now, you stay the hell away from them."

"Okay, fine," Mason says. "Here's what I have. The cutout from Jakarta, and some ex-FARC trigger puller named Valentina deSilva. They helped us."

"I'm not even going to ask who 'us' is this time," Alira says.

"Smart," Mason says. "They know what's going on, and whatever angle they're working lined up with ours. Now, Lira. Please. I'm getting nothing from above on half this shit, and I could use some **help** here."

"You really are a dag," Alira says. "Why do you think I'm trying to get off this call? I need to pack."

Mason's stunned for a moment. "You're getting back in the field?"

"Well, I **was** enjoying retirement, but then my boyfriend got himself mixed up in something bad. I think he's in way over his head."

"And he hopes you don't punch him too hard for asking the next question," Mason says, and takes a breath. "Are you sure?"

"No," she says. "But when has that ever stopped either of us?"

Mason nods.

"Love you, 'Lira," Mason says. He'd said it many times before, but that one felt stronger than most.

"Mmh," Alira says, smooching into the phone. "Next time, you better say that to my face."

"How about this, then?" Mason says. "After this is done, I'm out. And you know what that means."

"Mmmmmh," Alira says. "Say that to my face, too. See you real soon, Masie."

"Bring the rings," Mason says.

Click.

Mason pulls the card out of the phone, slides it back into his wallet, and returns the phone to his bag. He figures that Ms. Wildcard won't be 100% thrilled about what's about to happen, but that's suddenly very low on his list of things to worry about.

"Gotta find a magistrate that won't ask too many questions," Mason mutters to himself.

The swiftness with which Liam Warren replies to Luc's coded message suggests a certain urgency in him...he's probably realized by now that the secret of Stana Debeljak's undercover mission is the only leverage he has, and after Luc didn't bite the first time, even that didn't look so...leverage-y. Now he's probably dealing with the thought that keeping the secret for as long as he has will not be looked upon favorably by Sage Thirteen - but it's not like there's much difference between being outed as doing so or admitting to it, so the best tactical move is to stay quiet and worsen the strategic dilemma.

"Bit difficult to recommend anything without knowing your budget," his coded message reads. "Mediterranean is always a good idea. email me with your details for travel tips."

Attached to the message is a long string of gibberish - the obligatory OpenPGP public key block for encrypted messaging - and a throwaway mail account with a "private" provider.

Tim's kept busy. Aside from using the supplies in the storehouse to whip up a set of fake ID and other documents for the team, he's also paid 200 bucks to a nice lady from Portugal who does "secretarial" services for him as needed. Half an hour later, ["Claus-Wilhelm Freiherr von Wertheim"](#), noted German socialite and philanthropist, has a 7 PM meeting with Dr. Sulemani to discuss a sizeable donation to "the cause". That's a little weird, admittedly, but Claus-Wilhelm has a reputation for learning about new causes and immediately wanting to lose some money on them, so it's not exactly out of character. It helps that Tim's been Claus-Wilhelm for a couple of years now; go to the good parties, spread some Agency cash around, find the right people. With a freshly printed portfolio, a new haircut and a fresh suit, Claus-Wilhelm shows up at Dr.

Sulemani's office ten minutes early, to be greeted by Dr. Sulemani's young assistant Muhammed.

"A good evening, Freiherr von Wertheim," Muhammed says, a smooth talker well trained in receiving Sulemani's guests. "The Doctor will be ready to see you in just a bit. Would you like a coffee while you wait? I don't mean to brag, but I do a rather good Turkish coffee."

"That sounds delightful," Claus-Wilhelm replies with just the right amount of geniality for someone who does not blip on his radar as a person but who is making him something that he'll ingest.

(Tim's Cover holds up!)

Claus-Wilhelm has barely found a seat when Muhammed comes back with a small porcelain cup with steaming hot, intensely flavorful coffee - it's got the grounds at the bottom so you know it's fresh and strong. Before Claus-Wilhelm can take possession of the cup, the door to Dr. Sulemani's office opens and the good doctor himself steps out.

"Freiherr von Wertheim!" Sulemani greets Claus-Wilhelm with a firm handshake and a reserved smile. "I hope you are well today. Please excuse the simplicity of our offices...we do not believe in ostentatious displays of wasted funds. I see you've met my assistant Muhammed." Sulemani turns to Muhammed. "You can go home, my son, I will lock up later," Sulemani says in Farsi, then turns back to Claus-Wilhelm and ushers him into his office. "Please, come in and make yourself comfortable."

As Muhammed follows you inside, places the cup on the desk and takes his leave, Claus-Wilhelm takes in the office. The walls are simple white wallpaper, but adorned with large-format photos of Afghanistan's more picturesque corners. There's even a photo of Dr. Sulemani shaking hands with [Rory Stewart](#) at some reception in Edinburgh,

both men trying to smile into the camera while looking a bit uncomfortable in their respective suits.

"I've always admired the way elegant solutions look simple," Claus-Wilhelm says after a moment's reflection. "And the way complex problems can bring the most disparate people together to solve them," he adds, subtly nodding for Sulemani to continue.

"Ah, you speak from my own heart," Sulemani says. "I will try not to bore you, Freiherr von Wertheim, with our struggles here. But I'm sure you understand the difficulty of our work. To too many people in the West, Afghanistan is a hole in the landscape...they think of terrorists, tribesmen with rocket launchers and call it 'the graveyard of empires'...but Afghanistan is a place with much beauty and history. And our people desperately need whatever help we can provide. A shattered Afghanistan benefits no one but the warlords and criminals."

Claus-Wilhelm nods. "Your organization assists with relocation as well as outreach, yes? With the ongoing, um, international concerns regarding refugees, I've taken an interest in seeing people placed in situations where further hardship can be minimized."

"Yes, this is one of our foremost concerns at the moment," Sulemani says. "With all the backlash against refugees, it has become very difficult to help new arrivals. Many of them hoped for a better life here and find themselves trapped by bureaucracy they don't understand in a country that is not very welcoming to them. We do our best to provide legal services, translators, religious services...education, food assistance and shelter, too. But most importantly, community." He smiles. "I make it a point to shake hands with everyone who comes to us if it is at all possible. They must see that they are not alone, that we take them seriously."

"I would love to meet some of the people you've helped and hear their stories," Claus-Wilhelm suggests.

"Oh, naturally," Sulemani says. "You are welcome to attend [Zuhr](#) with us tomorrow at 1 PM. Afterwards, we will have a communal lunch time and talk about how things are going."

Claus-Wilhelm beams. "I would... that would just be wonderful." Tim's left hand slips from resting in his pocket, palming the tiny audio bug. "It is just so refreshing to find a kindred spirit. I can tell you care about your mission here and the families you help, and

I'm definitely interested in being part of that." Tim extends his hand to shake, grasping Sulemani's shoulder in a heartfelt way that still provides good pressure to affix the bug to the doctor's jacket. "I will see you tomorrow for Zuhr, doctor."

(Tim spends Electronic Surveillance to automatically succeed in planting the bug.)

"I look forward to seeing you there, Freiherr von Wertheim," Sulemani says, returning the firm handshake. "Please be sure to bring an appetite!" he says with a slight smile. "And if you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to call or write us an e-mail. I'm heading home for tonight in a bit but Muhammed or I will get back to you as soon as possible."

The safehouse Operations picked from Mason's little scouting expedition is in a "business park" in Eppendorf - a whole little subunit for your use. The interior is half superglossy browser games startup with bright, solid color shapes painted onto the walls and lots of glass cube offices, but also half "we went bankrupt so hard they even ripped out the network cabling from the floor" mess. Blake is last to arrive, slinging his Amsterdam-acquired camera bag and a notebook full of information he gathered hitting the streets. Lots of names - dudes on corners, shop owners, local politicians. But we're here for the top layer, so he lays that out.

(Blake spends Human Terrain to scout the local muslim community.)

Well, things look a little different on the ground than they did from 10000 feet up. It's not that Dr. Sulemani is not a pretty big deal - he is - but what Blake's discovered is that his community is, shall we say, overly self-selected. Good photo opportunities of the "see,

multiculturalism works!" type to have someone tirelessly preach modernism and integration, but Dr. Sulemani very much represents the "have"s of the community, relatively speaking - people with jobs and families and ties to Germany. For all that he's the first point of contact for many refugees, many turn away from him when they realize that he can't work miracles for them, and it's easy to lump him in with "the system" and seek alternatives.

Alternatives such as [Abdul-Alim Shareef Hanania](#). Hanania is pointedly not an overworked old man trying to balance charity PR with actual charity - he's the hot imam of choice for local Sunnis. Holier than thou, more stylish than thou and swoler than thou, too. He's the guy who's gracious with grandma, respectful with father and the cool uncle to the teenage kids. Nothing he preaches has yet strayed from standard-issue orthodoxy, but the way he presents himself - successful, faith first, stand up for your identity - sounds like someone who could have his pick of young recruits if he wanted to. Blake wonders if they know that Hanania's flash comes not from vague "success" or community donations, but from cold hard petro dollars, being bankrolled by a Saudi prince.

Speaking of controversy, there's [Rabi'ah Tannous](#). She runs a website/blog dedicated to the "reform of Islamic values", and the articles there are pretty much a greatest hits compilation of things that are not cool to say in 21st century Europe: women belong in the kitchen (she's "just a housewife blogging about her thoughts"), Zionism is badwrong (with a fig leaf of "but I don't hate Jews, honest!"), homosexuality is a mental illness, and so on. She's been the subject of several lawsuits, but her followers are quick to pay her legal bills. It's hard to imagine someone with such an obviously confrontational course being involved in covert terrorist activities, but if Blake doesn't miss his guess, a look at some of the people traveling in her wake and populating her online discussion forum might prove enlightening. Only one problem: that forum is members only, and membership is by invitation only in turn.

Just as Blake finishes presenting his research, Operations seizes the opportunity to pin up a grainy, blown-up photo of her own.

"Some more of those bad news, boys," she says. The photo shows boxes of serious hardware being unloaded from a truck. "The Black Vault is getting millimeter wave scanning equipment installed this week. Once that goes in, they will have real-time tracking of **anything** that moves in there. We need a way inside before that happens."

[punkey](#) 2018-03-14 13:31:22

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"Any idea who's providing it and how it's getting there?" Mason asks.

[Gatac](#) 2018-03-14 13:42:29

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"The tech itself is from rapidScan, a German-Italian joint venture to commercialize licensed [Fraunhofer](#) tech," Operations says. "K-Group has their own technicians for installation purposes, but -"

"Manufacturer rep," Laith throws in.

"- there's likely one or two techs from the manufacturer who'll be turning up to calibrate the system after the install," Operations says. "And I know what we're all thinking, but we don't know their names and they're likely already on the way. And even if we intercept and replace them, that only gets us inside the vault. We'll still need to take care of the other security measures, pull the right drive and then get back out in one piece."

[punkey](#) 2018-03-14 13:47:36

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"Breaking it is easier," Mason points out. "And still gets us in the vault."

skullandscythe 2018-03-15 01:18:33

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"That's assuming the scanning is the only security measure in the vault," Blake counters, though he follows up with "Still, it's a simple solution, and done elegantly enough, no one will notice until the reps come in - and perhaps not even then, if we're really good. Ops, Laith, if we know this much about the equipment, I assume we have some specs."

Gatac 2018-03-20 11:41:19

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Ops takes a long look at Laith.

"It's...proprietary," Laith says, looking at Blake. "We could make some educated guesses" - he turns to look at Tim - "or we could acquire their design specs directly from the source."

Gatac 2018-03-23 14:00:56

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(Going to rule that a simple "background" hack like this is an investigative spend of Digital Intrusion.)

"Say no more," Tim replies, already reaching for a hastily prepped "clean" laptop. "rapidScan, right?"

"Right," Laith says.

"Sec," Tim says.

Tap tap tap tap click.

"Credit card," Tim says; wordlessly, Operations hands over one of the prepaid cards from your slush fund box.

Tap click tap tap.

"This is it, right?" he says, turning the laptop for Laith and Blake to see.

This is, indeed, "it". As Laith hmms and hrrms, Blake takes a closer look. COTS software controller for the oscillator array...mess with that, the system won't work. Mess with it just right, the vibrations will also transmit into the structure - and possibly interfere with the mounted security cams. Just one problem: these boards are supposed to be set and forget right from the factory. You'd have to get your hands on a control unit, crack it open and put new software on the microcontroller board - or swap them out completely, which is probably the quickest, if least convenient option.

skullandscythe 2018-03-26 11:38:35

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Blake harrumphs. "I'd say our best bet is to swap out the MCB with a...doctored version, ready to break. But however we want to sabotage it, we'll need to get access to the one they're installing." Blake looks over the group. "Instead of a rep, we could get in as a K-Group tech or a contractor. They'd be handling the equipment too."

Gatac 2018-03-31 09:19:17

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While the technical merits of getting into the "Black Vault" by messing with its latest security upgrade are discussed, Tim gets back on the laptop, scanning Blake's

reconnaissance results again. Rabi'ah Tannous, you say, and her followers are on a private members-only forum? Challenge accepted!

(Tim's Digital Intrusion squeezes past the difficulty to score a success!)

You're not supposed to use Agency assets, but then again, this isn't a Facebook profile Tim's ever used in an official capacity - though he did hijack it on Agency time, so eh? In any event, Mr. Mudar Ghanem from Syria (currently living in the middle of nowhere in Saxony) did not listen to the advice to not reuse his passwords, and it turns out he's already a member of the forum - or was, anyway. Apparently Mudar had a bit of a falling out with the moderation staff over some theological issues that are frankly not quite in Tim's boathouse, but suffice it to say he got himself banned three months ago and hasn't been back. Tim rolls his eyes and gets to work - not enough time to start with a fresh profile, so instead he conveys Mudar's most sincere apologies to Ali_74 via PM, he's seen the error of his ways. After some back and forth with the forum admin, Mudar gets what Tim needs - "provisional" read-only access to the members-only forum, with the promise/threat of a more in-depth backstage discussion to come.

(Tim uses Human Terrain to grok the messageboard.)

A few threads in, it's starting to become clear why Mudar was kicked out. There's some incredibly dense discussion of Islamic law happening in the forum, particularly as it pertains to everyday life in Germany, and Ali_74 - plus most of the members, it seems - take a strictly [Zāhiri](#) stance, which did not jibe well with Mudar's philosophy that, if we're being honest, cribs pretty heavily from Western "enlightenment" ideas, albeit wrapped in a kind of Islamic camouflage net. Anyway, you can just about guess the rest: lots of young men arguing that they have a right to practice their religion the way they want to and that they're not going to be taken in by "multiculturalists" and "moderates". But on the flipside, this is some pretty heavy stuff, scholarship-wise - Tim gets the sense that the heavy hitters in this are no-shit Islamic scholars and historians, albeit of a particularly "conservative" bent. Along for the ride are a lot of #metoo younger men and

a couple of forum users claiming to be women who are, if anything, even more into traditional thinking on faith, human rights and gender issues.

However, what the whole shebang is decidedly short on is any sign of terrorist sympathies or coded communication. Tim may not have as much Islamic literature on his braintape as he would need to be 100% certain, but all the literature cites and Koran quotes look like legit discussion. The only possibility left is that people are using PMs instead of forum posts to discuss the illegal stuff, but checking that out would require hacking an admin account - and Tim's got a "not worth the effort" feeling about it.

Admiral Duck Sauce 2018-04-03 12:07:52

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"Tannous is out, unless our other two leads are even less likely," Tim explains after wringing what he can from Mudar's conciliatory offerings. "And you guys are hung up on this scanner thing, but the vault has people accessing it daily and they're not covered by millimeter waves. What if we get them to do it for us?"

punkey 2018-04-03 14:57:03

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"Bribery or blackmail leaves more of a fingerprint than breaking and entering," Mason says. "And doesn't give us a chance to pin the blame on Rol."

(Mason uses Military Science to look for more...direct sabotage methods.)

He points at the electromagnets in the unit. "We patch in a sneak circuit between the the high voltage transmitter circuit and the magnets, remote start with a garage door opener, that'll break it just fine. Guards let us in, we disable them, plant some evidence pointing out the local Rol group, and leave it at that."

skullandscythe 2018-04-04 23:21:19

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Blake arches an eyebrow as Mason lays out his idea. "We're going in as a group," he says, half question and half incredulous statement. "Then you're proposing we go as the manufacturing reps after all?"

MikeS 2018-04-05 00:32:57

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"Being invited in is usually better than breaking in," Luc agrees. "We will need a good excuse to be there. Probably get some access to the installation timetable, and show up right before or right after. Or maybe even replace the crew. If the vault security is hard to crack, how about the security of rapidScan? Change some names there, fake badge there?"