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“See Jeremy Prince.”

“Excuse me?” Chip, the front desk clerk was first startled by the harsh tone, then by the speaker’s menacing look.

“See Jeremy Prince.”

“Oh, you want to see Jeremy?”

There was no response.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Can I tell him who’s asking?”

“Nyet.”

“Umm...give me just a second to find him, OK?”

There was no response.

The visitor stood at the desk, arms crossed, emotionless.



“Hey, Dad, I’ve been doing some research on an app to help us manage inventory. It would be a small investment, but I

really think it would pay off in the long run. Come take a look.” Jeremy Prince gestured to the monitor.

“An app, huh? You know, I’ve been using these spreadsheets for years, and they work fine.” Not moving from his chair, Walter Prince stroked his chin.

“But just come and look, Dad.”

Walter sighed and walked slowly to his son’s desk.

“You can tie this in with all our suppliers, and the app actually tells them when we need more product. We don’t even have to place an order; the app would do it for us.”

“Really? I spend half my day filling out orders.” Walter took a couple of steps away from the computer and then looked back at Jeremy, his head cocked. “Jeremy, I want you to know how happy I am that you’re here at the store working with your mom and me. This is...well...this is good.”

Chip approached the entrance to the Prince’s Hardware business office. “Hey, Jeremy, there’s a guy out front to see you.”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know, but he’s a stocky older guy. He’s got a weird accent; and get this—he’s wearing an eyepatch.”

A short stocky guy with an accent and an eye patch? Jeremy knew that could only be one man—Andrei Ovchenko, the head of Blackforce, the enforcement arm of Mouse Trap—the deadliest department in the world’s deadliest organization, which Jeremy thought had been disbanded and scattered to the winds and which was Jeremy’s former employer.

“Umm...did he say what he wanted?” Jeremy asked

pensively.

“Nope, he just asked—well, actually demanded—to speak to you.”

Jeremy tried to process the possible reasons Ovchenko had traveled to the small town of Abingdon, Virginia, just to see him. He was surprised at how many possible reasons his mind could conceive. The logical answer was revenge. Jeremy helped authorities arrest Mouse Trap’s founder and leader, Victor Youngblood, whose demise was the lead domino in a long line that had affected Ovchenko and his Blackforce team. But if it were revenge, why would Ovchenko enter the hardware store in broad daylight? No, Ovchenko would have sent three of his Blackforce assets in the dark of night to do whatever it was they were ordered to do.

Maybe he was there to thank Jeremy for freeing him from working for Victor, who was a demanding boss. Maybe Jeremy’s efforts allowed Ovchenko to finally get away from Victor. No, that’s crazy. Ovchenko loved what he did with Blackforce.

Jeremy shook his head as if trying to awaken from a bad dream. He knew the only way to know why Ovchenko had come was to face him head-on. He strode confidently from the office to the front of the store.

“Yes sir, welcome to Prince’s Hardware. How may I help you today?” Jeremy asked in his most helpful tone.

“Thirty-two million seven hundred fifty-thousand dollars,” the man said in a thick Russian accent.

Ovchenko’s brusque approach caught Jeremy off guard. “Excuse me, sir?”

“Thirty-two million seven hundred fifty-thousand dollars,” Ovchenko repeated.

“I’m...not following.”

It was a complicated situation. Jeremy had never actually met the man standing in front of him, but he knew all he needed to know about the lethal Andrei Ovchenko and Blackforce. Manned almost exclusively by former Soviet and Russian military personnel, Blackforce was called upon whenever Jeremy’s former boss, Victor Youngblood, needed to handle a messy situation. Jeremy knew a Blackforce engagement always meant one thing—death.

“You sent email.” As Ovchenko spoke, he slapped a piece of paper on the counter, the only thing standing between Jeremy and certain peril.

“An *email*?” Jeremy was still confused.

Ovchenko grabbed the paper and read.

“Mr. Ovchenko, Victor Youngblood has been arrested. Mouse Trap is closed for good. The services of Blackforce are no longer needed. Thanks to Mr. Youngblood’s meticulous documentation of Blackforce activities, each mission your organization undertook is recorded on video. You and the members of Blackforce should consider leaving the country.”

“Your email,” Ovchenko stated bluntly pointing a cracked and grease-covered stubby finger at Jeremy.

Although it was true that Jeremy had written the email as one of his last acts as a Mouse Trap team member, he had used an unattributed email address hoping it couldn’t be connected to him. Jeremy’s hopes obviously hadn’t been

realized. Not knowing how to respond, Jeremy was silent but knew he needed to remain steely-eyed or Ovchenko would sense fear and pounce.

“Thirty-two million seven hundred fifty-thousand dollars. Victor owes me. Victor in jail; you were number two; so, now *YOU* owe me.”

Jeremy’s well-planned scheme had landed Victor in jail in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, for the murder of a U.S. senator. The scheme also caused the downfall of Victor’s Mouse Trap empire—at least that’s what Jeremy had hoped.

“I don’t have—,” Jeremy started.

“Thirty-two million seven hundred fifty-thousand dollars,” Ovchenko stubbornly repeated, this time in a booming voice.

As Jeremy searched for a response, Ovchenko’s increased volume prompted his father, Walter, to enter the conversation.

“Is there a problem, Jeremy?”

“No, Dad, everything is good. This gentleman was just asking for directions. Let’s go outside, and I’ll show you the road you need to take.” As Jeremy spoke, he attempted to nudge Ovchenko toward the door. He could have more easily pushed a 100-year-old oak tree; the Russian didn’t budge. Almost 70, Ovchenko was well beyond his prime but was still a hulk of a man, albeit a short one.

“Thirty-two—”

Before Ovchenko could finish, Jeremy interrupted, “Yes, it is about 32 miles. Come on out, and I’ll show you the road.” Jeremy was at the front door holding it open for his

unwelcome guest. After a scowl that would terrify a pit bull, Ovchenko reluctantly followed Jeremy out the door.

Jeremy walked briskly toward the parking lot trying to distance himself from the store. Finally reaching the back corner of the lot, he said, "Look, I don't know what you think—"

Before Jeremy could finish, Ovchenko put a hand over Jeremy's mouth and snarled, "We complete seven missions for Victor that we receive no pay for."

The contrast in the two men couldn't have been starker. Although Jeremy had caught Victor's eye and experienced an inconceivable meteoric rise to be the second-in-command at Mouse Trap, he was only 24 years old and not even three years out of college. Ovchenko, on the other hand, had been a general in the Soviet army. He had navigated the shark-infested waters of the Soviet Communist Party, fought in Afghanistan, lived through the Soviet Union's hellacious fall, and then moved to the United States to lead a team of battle-hardened mercenaries who had executed hundreds of American citizens. This conflict was truly a David vs. Goliath battle of wills.

"OK, here's the deal; yes, I worked for Victor and Mouse Trap, but I don't any longer. There is no Mouse Trap; and, as you said, Victor is in jail. I'm here working in this small town with my parents. I don't have any money or any access to money. I am sorry if Victor didn't pay you, but I'm not the guy you are looking for. I can't help you."

Jeremy's boldness caught Ovchenko off guard. He was unaccustomed to being told "no." In the brief moment he

tried to formulate a response, Jeremy decided to fully embrace the role of victorious 'David.'

"So, we're done talking! Don't come back here and bother me or my family again!"

Before the stunned Ovchenko could respond, Jeremy had wheeled around and was walking briskly back to the store. Although he tried to stride with boldness, he was thinking, "I hope he's not following me." Shockingly, he wasn't. The 24-year-old had won this round against his formidable opponent, but it was only the first round in what would be a long and difficult fight.