

Wanting

At 10 pm, Paris time, Professor Gilad Tal, conference chair of the *International Congress on Computer Applications 2009*, and Professor Jean-Paul Quinio, local-arrangements chair, walked into a secluded room on the second level of *Hotel République*. A security man inspected them and opened a concealed door. They entered a suite of offices with a glass-walled command and control room in the center. It had a long table with chairs on each side and one chair at the head. Someone already sat at the head and three others sat to his left on one side of the table. The table was bare, except for six glasses and a jug of water. Gilad noticed a control device on the small table beside the person at the head. It probably operated the wooden panels hidden behind plain small curtains. The panels would be rolled down over the glass windows when needed. Gilad wondered what other devices were hidden in this room.

The senior person stood up and introduced himself as Edouard, a captain in the French internal security department. His two subordinates and the hotel security officer remained in their seats, silently. He invited Gilad and Jean-Paul to sit to his right.

Edouard opened in flawless English. He greeted Gilad and explained the purpose of the meeting: to get to know each other and go over standard procedures. It was a routine matter for any event involving more than five hundred participants. He then proceeded in French in a calm and authoritative voice. In answer to Edouard's question, which Gilad could not understand, Jean-Paul looked at the conference brochure and talked about the main events. Gilad gathered that Edouard was interested in the program for Tuesday morning. Jean-Paul and Edouard mentioned the UN Secretary General's name several times.

Gilad decided the conversation in French had gone on too long. Using his silver pen, he tapped on his glass,

waited and then asked why he was invited. Edouard looked at Jean-Paul, who nodded with closed eyes. Edouard swallowed and apologized. From now on it would be English only.

Gilad asked if late-night meetings were routine. Edouard explained it was a safety precaution. The riskiest event in the conference was the appearance of the UN Secretary General. There would be another security meeting on Monday devoted to her visit in which they would go over several terror scenarios. Edouard wanted to ensure that the organizers were aware of the emergency exits and potential escape routes, which he called 'Edward Edward'. These escape routes would be coordinated with the hotel security officer for each event. There would be several possible Edward Edwards for the Secretary General's visit on Tuesday morning. In case of an actual emergency, Edouard would determine in real time which one to use.

The talk of terror surprised Gilad. Moving about in his seat, he asked whether there were any specific warnings. Edouard assured him there were none. There was one more thing though. In case of emergency, Gilad had a special role. It would be his job to calm the participants, prevent panic, and give them clear instructions on how to act. Edouard would guide Gilad, but it would be important that the conference chair do the talking. Edouard stood up, shook hands with Gilad and Jean-Paul and remained standing silently until Gilad reached the door.

“How long have you known Professor Ali Bandar?”

Gilad stopped and turned slowly to face Edouard.

“Over fifteen years. Why?”

“How well do you know him?”

“He's like a brother. I asked why.”

“Because he's an Egyptian activist in a country plagued with terrorist gangs and you are an Israeli in a

country fighting terrorism every day. It's a coincidence I have to look into." Edouard sat down and turned to his subordinates.

Alone in his room, Gilad poured a small bottle of whisky into a glass. He sat on the couch, thinking about terror. For the last few weeks, he had been worrying constantly about what could go wrong. He was told the new computer systems would do more damage than good, cautioned that the French hosts would be impolite to Americans, advised against his plan to have the social event in the Opera house away from the main venue, and warned that the logistics around the UN Secretary General would be a nightmare. But this unexpected meeting about terror overshadowed the rest.

The questions about Ali troubled him. Did Edouard know about the peace initiative Ali and he were trying to advance? They had approached the United Nations with a bold idea to exploit the hi-tech conference to initiate a training program for underdeveloped countries in North Africa. The project's goal was to reduce computer illiteracy by eighty percent within five years, but it would also generate cooperation between Arabs and Israelis under the auspices of the UN. Gilad dreamt of cultivating these seeds of peace into ongoing cooperation between Arab and Israeli academic institutions. The project now waited for the UN's approval.

The Paris conference would serve as a model of how to conduct similar educational conferences in major North African cities. Much of the field training in the vast African territories would be implemented by teams using computer communication systems rather than meeting face to face. Some of these systems would be used during the conference to transfer knowledge from the conference to remote locations, demonstrating the project's feasibility. The UN Secretary General had indicated that she expected to see these systems work

before incorporating them into any UN project. A terror act would kill the chances of the peace initiative in the near future.

He got into bed and closed his eyes. He had been running on pure adrenalin and generous portions of caffeine for the last 48 hours. It was time to sleep, but sleep did not come. He tried to escape his worries and concentrate on good things. Outside, light snow was falling slowly and quietly. Illuminated by the yellow and blue lights, the snowflakes were a pretty sight, but all he could see was his conference: two thousand participants sitting in the huge dining hall. At the head table, to his left and right, were the guests of honor, his good friends Ali Bandar and Sheila Bullinger. Around the tables, people were talking about lectures they had heard and friends they had met and about their plans for the evening. At least two hundred participants he knew personally and hoped to hear their adventures. He felt the excitement rush from his chest to his head.

He looked up at the ceiling. Like all the deluxe suites in Hotel République, the ceiling had a reproduction of a nineteenth-century romantic painting. It was a picture of people socializing in a country setting. The picture reminded Gilad of a painting in Musée d'Orsay but he could not remember the name of the artist. Some people were dancing, some sitting and staring at each other, and others engrossed in their own thoughts. Disorder was everywhere in the picture, but so was happiness. Scores of people doing as they pleased, moving wherever they wished, uncontrolled, were interacting happily.

Gilad wanted the conference participants to be happy. There were bound to be adventures when two thousand people interacted for four days in one venue. There was no telling what these interactions would produce and there was no way to manage them. He wanted the conference to succeed. It had to succeed. The regional conference he had chaired two years previously had

failed because the local computer network collapsed, ruining several lecture sessions. It had cost him the deanship of the School of Computing at UC San Francisco; someone had communicated the fiasco to the dean's search committee. Another flop would eliminate any chance of an administrative job. His research was going nowhere and his personal life was in a shambles. In the back of his mind was the thought that the success of this conference was about proving himself. Proving to *her*. He buried the thought quickly.