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Gang War in Cyberspace

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The whole story starts in 1989, months before the Martin Luther King Day crash of AT&T, months before Mark Abene and Paul Stira even know each other's names. The whole mess, which will grow into a world-class electronic gang war fought by hackers from New York City to Texas, starts back before Paul even knows what a switch is.

If you want to trace it to one night, to one single instant when you can say the whole story really begins, you will see this image: Paul in the dark, peering into a garbage dumpster.

The early summer evening is warm on his skin when Paul Stira, 19, leans over the edge of the dumpster as far as he can. This is one way to become a computer hacker. It's the way Paul has chosen. He tries to snare one of the five or six invitingly swollen bags that sit in the bottom of the dumpster. It's not enough to be 6 feet tall, because Paul still can't reach the bags, not until his stomach becomes the fulcrum for his body and his feet actually leave solid earth. He dangles, the blood rushes to his head, he gets dizzy. And yet there's nowhere he'd

rather be than here, climbing around in this dark alley in a dumpster full of phone company trash, looking for computer printouts.

He came for the documents. But he also came for adventure. Right after scarfing down a quick supper earlier in the evening, Paul mumbled goodbye to his mom, who was still getting used to the fact that his dad had all of a sudden died. Then he hopped a bus to the end of the line. He got off in Jamaica, Queens, at Parsons Boulevard and Hillside Avenue, an intersection in a neighborhood hot with bodegas, bars, and beeper-rental joints. He stood for a while, afloat in the dwindling stream of commuters flowing from the subway. And then, a black Supra full of teenagers pulled up to the curb, and the dark-eyed guy driving checked him out, smiled. Paul got in.

"Let's go trashing," somebody in the back seat said. "There's a C.O. in Astoria." Paul finds it cool to be talking in a kind of hackers' code. The word "trashing" means climbing around in garbage, where you hope to find computer printouts that list secret passwords and logons. And C.O., as everybody in the Supra knows, means central office. As in New York Telephone's central office, in Astoria, Queens. Somebody broke out the Ballantines and the Olde English 800s, and Paul took one. He knew only one of the other guys in the car - his best friend, who calls himself Hac. Until tonight, Paul had never physically met the driver, Eli Ladopoulos. But he had known him by his handle: Acid Phreak.

They reach Astoria, and even the building itself thrills Paul: this big, filthy, red-brick monster takes up most of the block. Across the front, chiseled over the door, it reads "Telephone Building." Like on a board game or something. Does the park across the street have a big sign that says "Park" over it? No way. This building was built back when there was only one telephone company, Ma Bell.

They sidle up to it. There are bars on all the two-story windows and through them, a vast, loftlike, fluorescent-washed space. Imagine a library, hushed and eerie, but instead of books, all the shelves are filled from floor to ceiling with rack after rack of circuit boards. That's called the frame. There are even rolling ladders, with signs that read, "Caution. Look up before climbing." Like what kind of doofus wouldn't look up before climbing?

Upstairs in the building, connected to all those wires, is the switch. The switch is the biggest computer you ever saw, and its job is to control every phone line in Astoria. When a phone-company customer in an apartment over the Tae Kwon

Do martial arts studio on 31st Street wants to order a pizza from around the corner, the phone call travels on copper cables to the switch, which funnels it to the pizza parlor's line. Multiply that by a couple-hundred thousand lines in this part of Queens, and millions of phone calls a day, and you see what we're dealing with.

Now, if you or your friends knew how to program a switch, or even knew a password to log on to a switch, you could start exploring. Go deep enough, learn your way around, and you could be pretty powerful. Because then, you could control everybody's phone service. You could create an unbillable number for yourself or your friends. You could listen in on phone calls. And best of all, you'd really know how all this fabulously complex electronic circuitry works. That kind of omnipotence is beyond the ethical reach of the CEO of New York Telephone. But maybe not beyond the reach of some teenage hacker tenacious enough to scrounge around in the garbage until he finds a password.

This alone makes the trip worthwhile. For a carload of teenage hackers, the opportunity to gawk through the big plate-glass windows at the matrix of electronic circuitry is better than being Dorothy at the gates to the Emerald City. These teenagers are not central casting's idea of computer nerds. Not a plastic pocket protector in the bunch, nobody squinting myopically through thick lenses. In fact, no one here wears glasses, and Paul and Hac, at least, are as muscled as the first-string running backs who graduated with them from high school last year. If they weren't so jumpy, they could toss around the 30-pound bags like Nerf balls. Look at Paul - he's the pale silent one. He's always quiet in a crowd. Because he's a big kid, his silence is intimidating, whether he means it to be or not, as he stands staring with flat, Slavic eyes. Those eyes take in everything and return nothing. Eli is his physical opposite. He's the one the girls like, the hip-hop guy, the cool one. Eli has a slow smile that starts like a conspiracy and spreads up to his eyes and pulls you in. His eyes are black as blueberries. His hair is as black as his eyes.

This is Paul's first time trashing, and frankly, if you knew him, you'd be shocked to see him here. He is, after all, the valedictorian of Thomas A. Edison High School's class of 1988. Winner of the all-city computer-programming competition. A boy with a future.

They start going through the garbage. Paul hoists a bag over his shoulder, over his head, and hands it up to Hac. Then Hac hands it down to the sidewalk. That's the

routine, with Eli playing lookout on the street below. But just as Hac's about to hand off the final bag, a man comes out of the telephone building and pauses a second longer than he should. Then he gets into a car, rolls down the windows, and just sits there. The boys freeze.

"What's he doing?" Paul whispers.

"I don't know. He's just sitting in his car."

Paul and Hac stand there, crazed alley cats, backs high, ears cupped, tensed on tiptoes. And then the worst happens.

In the distance, they hear a siren. It's not an ambulance, whose aural signature Paul would recognize. But it's definitely a siren, and it's getting louder. Closer. It's a banshee now, and it's just around the corner, and Paul, for one, has had it with the dumpster diving. He climbs over the fence, as fast as he can, and follows a retreating Hac to the sidewalk. The siren's just about upon them, and they dash madly across the street, bags in tow, past the guy who's sitting in the car, now wide-eyed, watching the kids come leaping over the fence. Their sneakers hit pavement, and with barely a second to spare, they dive into a dark, safe spot in the park.

Just as a fire truck blazes past.

They look at one another, their hearts pound. They can see the outline of the Triborough Bridge through the leafy trees. The green and white lights along its suspension beckon like a distant Ferris wheel, and it's an adventure again. They kneel on the handball court and rip the sacks open, and paper printouts spill like entrails. The night is hot and the streets are hopping and you can probably even see stars. They don't look up.

A few days later, Eli and Paul haven't given up; they're in need of an expert who can help them really navigate the phone system's computers. Eli says, "I know this guy...."

But it turns out that Eli is not talking about just any guy. This is the dude. Eli's talking about Phiber Optik, says he's even encountered Phiber while roaming through cyberspace. Eli's never met him in person (but then, who has?), but Eli knows enough about Phiber Optik to know that he's the man with the answers.

He's in the Legion of Doom, isn't he? He's the gang's phone guy, for god's sake. The Legion's exploits are legendary. The Legion is rumored to know how to break into ongoing phone calls. The Legion is rumored to have hidden its own private bulletin boards inside corporate computer systems. The Legion's archives are rumored to be the repository for the best technical information in the underground.

Paul doesn't know anybody in the Legion of Doom, doesn't even know who's in it - though he's heard of the gang founded by a notorious hacker named Lex Luthor. Eli says that if Phiber Optik got into the Legion of Doom, then Phiber Optik must be good. You have to be a little brave to even suggest calling a guy like that. You have to be pretty sure of yourself, not afraid at all that the guy is going to hang up on you, or worse, listen to what you say and then ridicule you. You have to have a lot of confidence in yourself.

"Let's call him," Eli says.

Paul says OK.

What do you want?" the voice demands. "I'm Phiber Optik of the LOD."

If you heard it, you'd think it was the Wizard of Oz himself, standing behind his curtain and making steam hiss and fires roar. Phiber Optik of the LOD. Both Paul and Eli hear it, the outrage in the thunderous voice that has answered the phone.

Now, Eli once "met" Phiber Optik on a bulletin board. But that's little comfort now, not with a real live member of the Legion of Doom on the other end of the phone, thundering and aggressive. A guy like that doesn't like you, he can turn you into a toad - or at least turn your home phone into a pay phone. Every hacker has heard the stories, heard of some poor rodent whose mom picks up the phone in the kitchen to call Linda next door and instead of a reassuring tone hears the recording, "Please deposit 25 cents." Explain that to your mom. Not that Phiber's response is totally unexpected. How does he know that he's not talking to a couple of lame wannabes on the phone? He gets these calls all the time. Ever since word spread that he's in the Legion of Doom, his phone number has been disseminated in the underground.

What do Eli and Paul want of Phiber? It's obvious. They heard he was the dude who was into phone company switches. But that's the simple answer. They really want much more, don't they? They want him to teach them not only about the

phone system, but also about all the sophisticated computers he's cracked, about the rare commands he can type, about the way his mind works. They want what any two boys with a little knowledge and a great curiosity want. They want a leader to show them the way.

Phiber loves to teach. "You want to get together?" he asks.

And Paul thinks, Who is this guy?

They soon learn Phiber's real name: Mark Abene.

There are wannabe cyber gangs, and then there are real cyber gangs, whose members crow and scrawl their proud graffiti over electronic bulletin boards. No gang is more real, more revered, than the Legion of Doom. Its founder is the legendary Lex Luthor - a mysterious leader who lives somewhere in the South. His protégé is a brash Texan tyro, who uses the handle Erik Bloodaxe, a name infinitely more memorable than his given name, Chris Goggans.

The Legion of Doom is the best of the best from the 50 states. How does one become a member? It isn't like you have to prick your finger and swap blood with Chris Goggans. Gang members on the electronic frontier don't live in the same state, wouldn't recognize each other if they were standing shoulder to shoulder on the bus. Here's how Mark Abene got into the Legion of Doom in the first place. Although Mark swears he never spoke to Chris before joining LOD, here's how Chris remembers it (Mark, typically, says Chris is all wrong): one day a few months ago, down in Texas where he was a college student, Chris noticed that Mark Abene had started signing his postings, "Phiber Optik of the LOD." And Chris thought, Who is this kid?

He immediately phoned north.

"Hi, is this Mark?"

"Yeah."

"This is Chris - Erik Bloodaxe," said Chris. "Why in the hell are you signing your name LOD? You're not in LOD."

Mark thought for a second, then said solidly, "I'm in LOD."

"No one is in LOD unless we all vote on it," corrected Chris, who explained the "rules," among them the necessity of a unanimous vote.

Then, for some reason, the tone of the conversation shifted to what both teenagers really cared about: hacking the phone company. And Chris realized that Mark really did know as much as people had been saying, maybe more. This guy was good.

The actual vote came a few weeks later. Mark was in.

Just like any schoolyard pack of boys born in the shadow of The Dirty Dozen, Hogan's Heroes, and Mission Impossible, the LOD members all fancy themselves specialists in some dark art. One kid might know how to make a wicked blue box, a device cobbled together from top-secret Radio Shack parts that simulates the tones of coins dropping into a pay phone. Another might be an expert in programming Basic. And Mark? He can trace the route of a phone call from New York to Paris, detailing in loving techno-babble each photonic hop. He can describe, in detail, the different kinds of computers that run different aspects of the phone company's business. He knows the meaning of the phone system's every English-language-mangling acronym: MIZAR, COSMOS, SAG, LMOS. He can explain the phone system to anyone. Indeed, he loves to, in eye-glazing, brain-fogging, overdosing detail.

And in 1989, Mark has just turned 17.

To tell the truth, a few members soon get a little sick of the new prodigy. He is brash and has what some out-of-state members recognize as New York attitude. And he doesn't give a rat's ass who thinks so.

If Phiber Optik graces a bulletin board with comments about this or that phone company secret, then other hackers spread the word: Phiber's on. This place is hot. A crowd congregates. The phone lines are all busy. Hackers desperately call, using the redial feature, trying anything to get through, trying to get past a busy signal as implacable as any nightclub bouncer.

Phiber seems to revel in belittling blustery hackers who post misinformation. He loves nothing better than trapping some nitwit who thinks COSMOS is some double-secret key to the phone company kingdom. (Duh, the name sure sounds important, doesn't it?)

People are starting to notice. Like Chris Goggans. One day in 1989, he and a friend, Dr. Who, are hanging out on a hot bulletin board called The Phoenix Project. Who do they run across but Phiber Optik of the LOD, eviscerating some poor pretender.

And this was what Chris thought about Mark: a real arrogant, smart-ass punk.

Mark and Chris never settle their difference. Mark gets kicked out of the Legion of Doom.

He has a disagreement with Chris, and Chris starts bad-mouthing him to the rest of the members of LOD. Word of Mark's expulsion leaks out, all over the underground. How did it happen?

Some kind of a fight. Chris says Mark screwed him out of some information, Mark says Chris doesn't know what he's talking about. Who knows? But it's posted on bulletin boards from here to Germany. It's the talk of the hacker élite: Phiber Optik got into a feud with Erik Bloodaxe, and to hear Erik Bloodaxe tell it, Phiber Optik lost.

Eli has been thinking.

Maybe the Legion of Doom is élite simply because it exists. If it's not the only gang out there in the underground, it's certainly the only one that boasts a decade of history and dozens of members nationwide who answer to a Texas leader. It's the biggest. It's the baddest. (That we know of so far.) But if another group of hackers challenges the Legion's superiority - well, who knows what might happen?

There's an idea he's had for awhile, it turns out, and one day in the summer of 1989 he tells Paul on the phone.

"MOD," Eli says.

"Mod?" Paul asks.

"M-O-D," says Eli, spelling the letters out.

So what is it?

"We should call ourselves MOD," Eli says. It's like a joke. It's a finger in the eye of LOD. He explains that it's an allusion to LOD, the Legion of Doom. From L to M, the next iteration, the new "kewl dewds" of cyberspace. The boys from New York are the opposite of the boys from Texas. How better to define themselves?

The boys from New York can figure out who they are simply by opposing the Legion of Doom and everything it stands for. Mark will love it, right? Whatever it stands for. That's not important right now. What is important, Eli says, is the joke: MOD. It stands for nothing. It stands for everything. Masters of Disaster. Mothers on Drugs. Masters of Deception.

The Masters of Deception don't know it, but in the summer of 1989 they already face a threat far greater than the Legion of Doom. By getting together in Eli's bedroom for late-night hacking sessions that lead to carousing in computers owned by the phone company, they have attracted the attention of two of the finest lawmen on the frontier of cyberspace: New York Telephone investigators Tom Kaiser and Fred Staples.

Kaiser, who has been monitoring some of the teenagers' phones for months, awakens early one morning in August 1989 and thinks, Today could be the day that we nab the hackers. He already feels the summer heat through his shirt as he leaves his house on Long Island to make an early train to Manhattan. This morning he will tell the Feds about the case.

Having reserved the big conference room, Kaiser finds it full of phone company people and their invited guests - investigators from the New York Police Department special frauds unit and the US Secret Service.

Knowing that the technical aspect of the case might make it difficult for non-technicians to grasp, Kaiser and Staples explain the case in general terms.

"We may be coming to you with this case we have, and how should we do that?" Kaiser inquires.

"What have you got?" asks one of the federal investigators.

"We have three hackers," Kaiser says.

Mark, Paul, and Eli.

Many months will pass before anyone gets indicted.

There comes a time in any good history where the plot twists unexpectedly. Life is moving along, developing its own routine and rhythm, when all of a sudden, something - or someone - intervenes, and the pace accelerates, faster, and faster still. And the story hurtles off in a new direction.

One day, in the fall of 1989, Eli is cruising the familiar territory of cyberspace and decides to check out reports about some hot hacker in Brooklyn.

The Brooklyn hacker calls himself Corrupt. He's rumored to be a specialist. MOD can always use another specialist, and Corrupt supposedly knows more about the ubiquitous and powerful corporate computers called VAXEN (the plural for VAX) than the founder of the Digital Equipment Corporation. Which would be some feat, considering that Digital manufactures the damn machines.

An expert who understands the intricacies and nuances of running VAX computers could really widen MOD's power base. A VAX master could help the other MOD boys navigate through some computers that for now seem tantalizingly obscure. Not only is VAX a type of computer prized by hackers, who love the versatility and power of the machine, but VAXEN also are indispensable to universities, corporations, small companies, database archives, and libraries all over the country. Oh yeah, and the government owns a lot of them, too. The government keeps a lot of its secrets hidden on VAXEN.

And Corrupt can crack them. Sign him up!

Now, there's plenty that Eli doesn't know about Corrupt. He doesn't know, for instance, that he lives with his mom in a third-floor walk-up apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant (that's Bed-Stuy; you've heard of it as surely as you've heard of Cabrini Green and East LA), one of New York's toughest neighborhoods. Eli doesn't know that Corrupt will need no introduction whatsoever to the concept of MOD, because Corrupt is intimately acquainted with gangs. Out in the real world, out on the streets where you measure distance with your feet instead of your modem, Corrupt used to belong to a gang called the Decepticons. One thing Eli quickly learns: Corrupt's real name is John Lee.

John Lee dials "0."

It's early 1990 now, and John Lee is in MOD. The hacker leans against a bank of pay phones in the atrium of the soaring Citicorp building in midtown Manhattan.

He's much too cool to check out his reflection in the plate-glass window of the Italian restaurant at the edge of the open space.

All around him, teenagers peck at phones like sparrows at a bird feeder, dialing and hanging up, trying random phone numbers. About 50 teenagers are hanging out, swapping information on how to break into computer systems, forming energetic clusters. Kids dial a number that someone said would connect to a New York Telephone switch. The number worked last week. The hackers had materialized out of nowhere at around 6 o'clock, just when the office drones fled the Citicorp building for the subway. The kids come every few weeks, on the first Friday of the month. No matter the season, they wear beat-up fatigue coats, baggy jeans, clunky-soled shoes, thick-thick black belts with square metal buckles weighing up to 5 pounds. They sport peach-fuzz mustaches and slicked-back buzz cuts. You can't miss them. The gathering is their "meeting."

John Lee's induction into MOD is only natural, because of his intense thirst for computer conquests; all he wants to do is penetrate new systems. He's learned so much about hacking and cracking in the one year since he got his modem that he's caught up with the rest of the MOD pack. He'll do anything to get into a new computer. He breaks into a network, then turns over the information to the other MOD members. He's the scout; they chart the territory.

On the pay phone, John connects to an operator. "Hey, I'm up on a pole here," he says, using his deepest, most authoritative, most adult voice. If only the operator could see John, a tall, 20-year-old black kid in stubby dreadlocks, white T-shirt, and khaki pants so baggy they could hold a friend. He doesn't look at all the part he's playing - a white, middle-aged, tool-belted lineman doing a service check. But he sounds the part.

And maybe that's enough. Just maybe the operator will fall for his smooth line of techno-babble and give him an open line.

"Yeah, I need - damn."

Disconnected.

John hangs up.

Meanwhile down in Texas, the guys in the Legion of Doom are part of the mad rush of excited hackers who all jump onto one open phone line at once, crowding into a conversation like it's a rush-hour subway. Chris (aka Erik Bloodaxe) and a friend named Scott Chasin have been friends since the mid-1980s, when they both were coincidentally logged onto a Midwestern-based under-ground BBS called World of Kryton. Scott and Chris discovered they had a lot in common: both were babies conceived on the cusp of the 1970s, then raised in the secure style afforded the white middle class in Texas. They share the same hobbies: both do conference bridges, as they call them.

The phone line used by the Legion of Doom belongs to - well, let's say it has been temporarily liberated from a local phone company, allowing anarchic hackers to engage in huge transcontinental conference calls that bridge across this city, and through that state, as one kid after another gets onto the line. If you are on the line, and you have three-way calling on your phone, you can invite a friend to join the conference call, too. Simply hit the flash button that disconnects a call, then call your friend, then flash again. Your friend is three-wayed in now. And if he had three-way calling, he could recruit yet another caller to the conference.

These daisy-chains last for hours, for days, for marathon amounts of time that adults can't even imagine. There is so much to say. Bridges are a great way to get acquainted. You can take a tour of the world on a bridge, talking to one hacker in Holland at the same time you converse with somebody in New York City. In fact, a couple of mysterious New York newcomers named Corrupt and Outlaw brushed up against Texas kids pretty often during conferences. Chris and Scott have never actually met the New York boys, but they've heard of them. Vaguely. They've heard that Corrupt and Outlaw come from a place they dismiss as the "inner-city ghetto," but the New York boys seem to know their stuff.

One night in 1990, on a bridge, about five or six hackers - all kids from Texas, you understand - are hanging out on the line. What are they talking about? Random stuff. Chris isn't on, or so he later claims. Scott is on. Suddenly, another voice calls in to the conference, joins the group in midsentence. The unknown newcomer does not have an accent common to these parts.

"Yo, dis is Dope Fiend from MOD," the newcomer says in distinctly non-white, non-middle class, non-Texan inflection.

One of the Texans (who knows who?) takes umbrage.

"Get that nigger off the line!"

The newcomer is silent.

In fact, the whole conference bridge is suddenly silent, all the chattering boys brought up hard and cold against the implacable word. You might as well have slapped their faces. Interminable seconds pass. Who wants to fill that void?

That's it. As simple as uttering one ugly word. The racial epithet instantaneously moves northward over hundreds of miles of cable, ringing in the ear of John Lee, who sits at his Commie 64 in his Brooklyn bedroom way at the other end of the line.

That word hits John like a billy club.

"Get that nigger off the line!"

Then the newcomer speaks with a different accent, and the words he says to the white boys from Texas are these: "Hi. This is Corrupt."

Who had bleated that word? It's immaterial at this point; nothing will ever be the same again. Not for Chris and Scott, not for the boys from MOD, not for the loose-knit community that makes up the hacker underground.

With that one word, war has been declared.

Chris Goggans is John Lee's enemy - will be forever. But at this point in mid-1990 and after the fateful confrontation, John doesn't even know his nemesis by the name "Chris." He just knows Erik Bloodaxe.

But John has decided to make his enemy's life miserable. So first John must learn Erik Bloodaxe's real name. Chris is so notorious in the underground that it doesn't take John long to get the information he needs.

And it's a good thing, since you can't exactly call directory assistance in Texas and ask for a listing for a resident named Bloodaxe, as in "axe" with an "e." So John bypasses directory assistance altogether. Instead he calls a Southwestern Bell computer, from there logs on to a switch and simply looks up Chris's phone number for the three-bedroom, suburban-type house he was renting in north Austin.

Then the calls start.

Sometimes John uses his street accent to harass Chris. The phone calls are constant. It doesn't help to hang up. The receiver is barely down before the phone rings again. And again. And again. Chris has to take it off the hook, and leave it off the hook for hours. Sometimes, when they prank Chris, the callers say, "Here, talk to your friend," and then before Chris can hang up, he hears a click, and then Scott is on the line, too, three-wayed into the call against his will, and he's saying, "Hello? Hello? Who is this?"

In Chris's mind, this type of harassment definitely falls into the category of Behavior That Is Unacceptable. It's the kind of harassment he could help prevent, in fact, if he were to open his own computer security firm. He's had the idea for such a company for a long time, but now the plan starts really taking shape.

He and Scott talk about the situation a lot, and they even come up with a name for the company they want to create. Comsec Data Security is the full, stuffy name, but neither of them ever think of it in that formal way. For Chris and Scott, the venture would always simply be known by a shortened name, Comsec.

One day during the winter of 1990, Chris gets hold of a copy of The History of MOD, the "phile" written by Eli to commemorate the birth of MOD. Chris feels he has been teased and provoked enough; the MOD boys have logged into the Southwestern Bell switch that controls his phone service and switched his long-distance carrier from Sprint to AT&T. Chris doesn't know this has happened until he tries to dial long-distance. He doesn't hear the familiar click. So then, of course, he has to call up the phone company. Try explaining the situation to a clerk in the business office, and you'll know why he's so annoyed.

Chris figures that John is the one who switched his long-distance carrier on him. He also believes, incorrectly, that John is the author of a manifesto the northern boys call The History of MOD. So Chris gets hold of the Boswellian tale and decides to pull a little mischief.

Chris has an old computer program that will translate any file into a new "language." When he feeds The History of MOD to the program, out pops a "jived" version of the document. The translation program simply searches for certain words or word forms, and replaces them with others.

In goes the original language: "In the early part of 1987, there were numerous amounts of busts in the US and in New York in particular..." Out comes, "In de early part uh 1987, dere wuz numerous amonts uh busts in de US and in New Yo'k in particular..."

Using the jive program is the electronic equivalent of appearing in blackface - a crude, minstrel show in cyberspace: "Some nigga' name Co'rupt, havin' been real active befo'e, duzn't gots' some so'kin' computa' anymo'e and so ... sheeit, duh."

Chris doesn't consider himself a racist. He has black friends at work, he says. Ask him why he jived The History of MOD: he says it just seemed funny. Hilarious, he says. If you're out to get someone, you're going to do anything you can to make him mad, Chris says. Anything. He didn't have a translation program to turn the MOD boys' prose into, say, a Lithuanian accent or something, he only had a jive program.

So what was he supposed to do?

If you lived in the state of Texas, you'd understand, Chris says wryly: "Down here, we all have boots and hats. We all ride on the range."

John sees a copy of Chris's handiwork in early 1991.

He's sitting in front of a computer system that looks like it was cobbled together from junkyard parts. He has a big old TV console for a monitor, a messed-up keyboard and his old Commie 64, bandaged with electrical tape. His computer is a street box, a guerrilla machine. Grunge computing.

And there it is on the screen, The Jived History of MOD.

"De legacy uh de underground 'clandestine' netwo'k continues and so's duz de war (and ridiculing) against all de self-proclaimed, so-called 'elite.'"

John can't believe it at first; it's too outlandish. He reads through it, slowly, amazed.

John finishes reading, then sits for a minute, staring at the screen, staring away from the screen - just kind of staring. And he thinks, This guy really doesn't like me. This is aimed right at me, and only me.

Comsec opens its doors in May 1991, and the partners quickly make themselves at home in the airy Houston headquarters. Comsec has a huge vaulted ceiling with skylights and faux gas lights in the two corridors. Some days, Comsec's founders skateboard down the long empty halls of the vast space and roll around in chairs. Chris is living in the back of the building, in an apartment with a big, white-bellied alley cat named Spud.

But there is a problem. Comsec has zero clients.

The officers of Comsec hold weekly staff meetings, which they all attend. They decide to distribute press releases advertising the availability of their security services. But to whom? As professed ex-hackers, they compile a list of likely clients. They scan the "philes" on underground bulletin boards to find the names of businesses whose computers have been infiltrated, then call the companies to offer their services.

The press releases do the job, because in June 1991, less than a month after Comsec's official *début*, Time runs a story about the hackers.

The very next day the office phone starts to ring. And ring. You can't buy advertising better than Time. Comsec has clients! One, a consultant representing the telecommunications industry, orders up some research on recent regional Bell company crashes. The client pays US\$5,000 up front.

Of course, the publicity in Time has another effect.

Up north, the MOD boys are reading the stories.

John Lee has an ingenious idea for pranking the Texans. Why didn't he think of it before?

He puts his plan into action during that long, hot summer of 1991. It keeps his mind off the lack of air conditioning in the brownstone apartment on Kosciusko Street. His plan is to spy, and it's fairly simple. John logs in to the Southwestern Bell switch that controls Comsec's phone service in Houston.

Then John types commands to ask the switch if any of Comsec's phone numbers are engaged.

If they are, then John will know that a conversation is underway right now. A phone line is in use. So he issues another command, just like an operator would,

to seize control of the line that carries the call. That easily, he splices himself into the ongoing conversation.

There's a quiet click on the line, but it's not the sort of noise you'd notice unless you were waiting for it. And no one at Comsec has any reason to believe that calls are being tapped.

John eavesdrops routinely. That's the way to find out what the enemy is up to, a way to anticipate the Texans's every move before it is made. So here's John, listening in on Comsec's lines one afternoon when the security firm gets a call from a world-famous hacker, Craig Neidorf.

It is safe to say that no hacker is more famous than Neidorf in 1991. That is because Neidorf beat the federal government at its own game a year earlier. In the months since, his legal fight has become legend. (And for years to come, wary prosecutors considering indicting hackers will caution one another to make sure their cases are airtight, so they can avoid "pulling another Neidorf.")

The co-editor of the electronic magazine Phrack, Neidorf had gone on trial in Illinois in the summer of 1990, charged with fraud. The alleged crime: possessing and publishing a supposedly proprietary phone company document in an issue of Phrack. The government argued that the information was worth thousands of dollars, based on estimates from the phone company. But midway through the trial, the defense showed that the document's so-called proprietary information was publicly available; Bellcore sold the information to anyone who had \$13 to pay for a technical article. Stung, the federal prosecutors in Chicago dropped the charges before the case reached a jury. Yes, Neidorf was a hero to some hackers. But his notoriety also made him a target for any denizens of the underground determined to make a name for themselves in cyberspace.

Now in the middle of a workday in summer 1991, Chris Goggans has answered the phone at Comsec and Neidorf is on the other end. (John eavesdrops noiselessly.) The phone call is just a friendly chat, but today Neidorf is frankly annoyed. The problem is that anonymous callers have been phoning him at home and harassing him over the line. He thinks he knows who is responsible, but he wants the prank calls to stop.

"Sounds like they're doing stuff along similar lines to what they're doing to us," Chris responds.

"Someone just called up my dad's house in Virginia," Neidorf says. Chris is not surprised, but he's outraged on behalf of his friend. He even has a theory about who might be behind the calls.

"Sounds like Corrupt," Chris says, recounting his suspicions that John Lee has also been pranking him in Houston. "It sounds like something he would do." At that moment, a second phone line rings in Houston, another incoming call for Comsec. Chris asks Neidorf to hold on a minute, then answers the other line. The voice on the second phone line says to Chris, "Yeah, that does sound like something I would do."

Chris is so mad he can't think straight. John Lee has been eavesdropping! On Comsec's private phone calls! For how long? How often? What has he heard? What has he told his little friends up there in MOD? If this gets out, Comsec will be a laughingstock!

Would you hire a computer security company that can't keep its own phone lines secure?

Chris calls the FBI, unaware that for months the government, relying on evidence of intrusions gathered by phone company investigators Kaiser and Staples, has been building its case against MOD. Whether Chris's calls affected the timing is not known, but the indictment against MOD is announced in July of 1992.

The indictment has 11 counts and charges Mark, Paul, Eli, John, and another MOD member with illegal computer intrusion. Each count is punishable by at least five years in jail. Each count carries a maximum fine of \$250,000.

The case is so big, so sensational, so groundbreaking that the US Attorney himself calls a press conference in the lobby of St. Andrews Plaza, site of his Manhattan headquarters. He wants to announce the indictment to the media. It's a little off-putting, the rows of folding chairs hastily arranged with their backs to the metal detector and the bullet-proof US Marshal's booth. A stream of New York's finest - finest press corps, that is - slouches in and starts bitching for handouts. The indictment is a 23-page document dense with facts, counts, and legalese. The press release that explains what the indictment is trying to say is eight pages long. And then there are charts that Secret Service Agent Rick Harris arranges on an easel. This was before Ross Perot, remember, and the charts are a novel idea.

The basic point the prosecution is trying to get across is the national scope of the computer intrusions.

"This is the crime of the future," says US Attorney Otto Obermaier, a tall, patrician man in a dark suit. He points a finger to underscore his distaste for computer crimes. "The message that ought to be delivered from this indictment is that this kind of conduct will not be tolerated."

The MOD members are being charged with the most widespread intrusions of the nation's largest and most sensitive computer systems ever recorded. The government has decided to make an example of these teen-agers from the outer boroughs. The message, which is what Obermaier calls it, is zero tolerance. If you're a hacker thinking of following in the footsteps of the Masters of Deception, think again.

There is hardly room behind the podium for all the authorities trying to get a piece of this one. There are the prosecutors. Then there are the agents from the FBI and the Secret Service, and there are the investigators from the US Justice Department's Computer Crime Unit.

Obermaier tells the press corps all about the crimes. He tells them the boys' intrusions have cost companies thousands of dollars in security personnel salaries and lost processing time. But he doesn't tell them that the dangerous hackers are, in effect, just a bunch of teenage boys who got to be friends because they shared a hobby.

The story makes the NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw. It's the piece Brokaw ends with – a forward-tilting, something-to-think-about piece. There's a close-up of Mark teaching a computer class at the New School for Social Research in Greenwich Village. The piece closes with Mark talking to the NBC reporter on a dark and rainy street. Mark says that he's definitely the victim of political persecution.

Had there been a trial, well, then the MOD conspiracy case could have set a precedent for the entire country, could have established a benchmark by which the government could track down other so-called computer criminals.

But there wasn't a trial, because all the MOD boys had pleaded guilty over the course of the year. They had all given up. What was left after that? It was up to the prosecutors to recommend a certain sentence and up to the judge to mete it out.

The hackers who arrive at the Citicorp building on the first Friday of February 1994 wear heavy hiking boots, and thick-soled turf crunchers, and kicked-around, black-leather shoes that lace up, up, up their calves. Of course, if it were July, they wouldn't be dressed any differently. This is the uniform.

Tonight's meeting is the first gathering in nearly five years at which no one from MOD is present - Mark, Paul, Eli, and John are all in prison. Dozens of hackers are here, ranging in age from 14 to 40, far more attendees than in the days of early 1989. The world has changed since that heady time when Mark and Eli and John somehow found each other, somehow coalesced.

In fact, it's as if the rest of the world has caught up. What the MOD boys did for fun - recreationally cruising across continents of wires - has become a national pastime. "Net surfing" is a bigger fad than CB radio ever was, and people everywhere are buying their first computers and hooking up to online services that connect them to the world and one another. My mom. Your mom. Everybody's entranced.

So it's no wonder that the new members of an eager generation are filling the Citicorp atrium. Tonight, there's a hole where Mark used to be, a spot by the pay phones where he liked to stand patiently while a group of respectful protégés would gather to ask him highly technical questions. Tonight you will not see his familiar blue-and-white bandanna, you will not hear the boom-and-heave of his voice. Tonight, Mark is far away. He arrived at the gates of Pennsylvania's Schuylkill County Prison late at night in January 1994, right after a snowstorm, and was whisked inside before his friends could say goodbye. He won't get out until November. The sentencing judge said that Mark, by his actions, chose to be a messenger for the hacking community. And so the judge said he had no recourse but to send a message back.

After six months of shock incarceration camp, John comes out thinner, more muscular, in fact in the best shape he's ever been in. In the fall of 1994, he heads back to Brooklyn College, where he's enrolled in the film-studies program. He's got lots of ideas for films he wants to make.

After doing time in federal prisons in Pennsylvania, Paul gets out in the spring of 1994. Mark is scheduled for release around Thanksgiving. For both, their days of hacking turn out to be good job training: Paul works for a company that traces missing persons through public databases. Mark keeps the computer system

running at Echo, a Manhattan-based online service. Mark is so beloved among Echo's computer users for his smooth and efficient troubleshooting that the Echoids set up a fund while he is in jail so they can buy him a new laptop after he gets out.

The Legion of Doom and Comsec are just memories now. Comsec went out of business, and Chris Goggans is working for a large clone maker in Austin, researching advanced wireless networks. With other LOD members, he's also assembled thousands of messages - flames, gloats, electronic graffiti - from various elite bulletin boards in the 1980s and sells the collection through a company called LOD Communications. He sells T-shirts, too: at the December 1992 Ho-Ho Con, a hackers convention in Houston, the T-shirts are emblazoned with "The Hacker War" across the chest, along with a map of the United States depicting Chris's version of major battle sites, mostly Houston and Austin and New York.

On the back it reads: LOD 1, MOD 0. And there's a quote, attributed to Corrupt, which Chris says he got from a secret MOD database: "It's not just winning that counts, but making sure that everyone else loses."

Identities

Paul Stira (Scorpion). He chose his online name in junior high school after he cracked some software copyright protections. "This game cracked by Scorpion" sounded more glamorous than "This game cracked by adolescent in outer borough."

Mark Abene (Phiber Optik). Perhaps the best-known hacker of the late 1980s, and a true expert in telephone company arcana. He switched handles from Il Duce to Phiber Optik, an homage to that most capacious of information conduits, fiber-optic cable.

John Lee (Corrupt). The nickname was John's when he was in a New York City street gang known as the Decepticons.

Eli Ladopoulos (Acid Phreak). A playful double entendre on the word "freak," a phreak being someone obsessed with hacking the phone system.

Chris Goggans (Erik Bloodaxe). A Legion of Doom leader, based in Texas, he took his online name from a book he read in sixth grade about a race of Viking warriors with magical powers.

Scott Chasin (Doc Holiday). The hero of the Old West was always a favorite of LOD member Chasin.

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