SEVENTEEN

"Man, you must have taken a wrong turn," said Kevin, stepping out of Matt's vehicle. "I thought you had been here before? Oh, well at least there's a Chinese restaurant. Let's go in and get something to eat."

"Hold it right there, buckaroo," said Matt, grabbing Kevin's arm, although Kevin was still moving. "First of all, we have business to do. Second, Chinese restaurants aren't open for breakfast."

"Why is that? Don't they eat breakfast? Pizza places can serve breakfast pizzas. Mexican places can serve breakfast burritos. What's wrong with breakfast egg rolls? Breakfast Kung Pao Duck? Or maybe just Rice Krispies?"

"OK Kevin, how about we focus a little on ... the business?"

"Sure, that's easy to do. Let's see, what do we know? Jack shit! All of this could be bogus, for real."

Matt and Kevin approached the entrance to Foundation Technologies.

"I don't think Doug lies," said Matt, knocking on the door. "Then again, maybe he does. Maybe this whole place is a lie, and really, it's all a front for Malorett's huge drug ring."

"Drug ring, I didn't know about that!" Kevin said. "Are you sure we have the right place? This looks like an old diner or something."

The door opened, and the same man who answered the door the last time was there again.

"Good morning, Matt!" the man said. "Please, come in."

Things looked different from the last time Matt entered the building. The furniture had been changed, and the carpet had been exchanged for a hardwood floor. Even the old magazines were gone, replaced with newer ones, although they were still a few years old.

"You guys have been doing some redecorating, huh?" said Matt, thumbing through *Newsweek* from just 19 months ago.

"Uh, sorry, but I'm sort of new here," Kevin said. "Isn't this supposed to be an office building of some sort? I realize your operation isn't huge, but where do you file your employees?"

"Sorry, I didn't tell him," Matt told the Keeper of the Waiting Room. At least that's what it said on his name tag, minus an actual name. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

"A surprise?" Kevin said. "Does it come with a fortune cookie?"

"Right this way, gentlemen," the Keeper of the Waiting Room said.

Matt and Kevin were led down the stairs and into the lower level of the operation. Once the doors were open to the underground lair, Kevin understood.

"This is pretty impressive," said Kevin, walking with the others to the middle of the room. "Why don't we have an office like this?"

"I think Butch had already rented out the underground model," Matt said.

The Keeper of the Waiting Room motioned for Matt and Kevin to be quiet as they entered the castle of cubicles. They walked past one of the smaller offices and emerged in front of the large conference room. Doug Morris saw them immediately and motioned for them to enter.

"Welcome, gentlemen," said Doug, scurrying over to greet Matt and Kevin. "Let me introduce you to the others. This is Blake Smith, with the FCC's Office of Engineering and Technology. And this is Rusty Snopek, one of the engineering managers."

Doug, Matt and Kevin took their seats around the table. Blake and Rusty were dressed sharply and appeared focused on the task at hand. Kevin, on the other hand, was contemplating additional items on the Chinese breakfast menu. A breakfast wrap with rice noodles, eggs and bacon would be good, he thought. Crab rangoons could probably pass for breakfast food already. Sweet and sour sauce could be just the kick for any item! Kevin then decided that maybe he should pay attention or Matt may never let him leave the office again.

"Matt, I know Doug has filled you in on bits and pieces of this project, but I'm sure there are still a lot of holes," Blake said. "I want to spend some time trying to fill in those cracks and also determine if your company is qualified

for the job."

"Qualified?" Matt said. "So is this like a job interview or something?"

"I guess you could look at it like that," Blake said. "As you may have guessed, this project is fairly large and will be extremely lucrative for those companies involved. If one piece of the puzzle doesn't fit just right, that could spell doom for everyone."

"I understand," Matt said. "Since I'm sure you know what our company does, why don't you explain what you're trying to do here."

"Fair enough," Blake said.

Blake stood and turned on the projector. Doug walked over to the light switch and dimmed the overhead lights. A map of the United States, with different color shapes located in numerous places, appeared on the far wall. Matt and Kevin figured these denoted cities, but there wasn't a clear pattern as to what the different shapes meant. There were red boxes, blue diamonds, green triangles and yellow circles. Kevin thought maybe they were Lucky Charms, but he didn't see any purple horseshoes. They did notice that Malorett was a green triangle.

"Here's the plan," Blake said. "The Super Information Portal will stretch across the entire continental US within an 18-month span. The four types of shapes denote the order in which the connection lines and hubs will be intact. The order is green, blue, red and yellow."

"So Malorett is slated for a first-run hub?" Kevin said. "I noticed there aren't too many green triangles up there. Actually the green triangles don't seem to stand for cities at all."

"They do," Rusty said. "It's just that some of the cities are pretty small. We didn't want to start out with too many big cities immediately. And the big cities we chose are within a certain range of somewhat smaller cities.

"For instance, you'll notice that Green Bay is also a triangle. This is because it will be within range of the hub located here. Baltimore will also be close to a group of hubs, plus it will be critical for government lines in and out of D.C."

"So what will a hub entail?" Matt said.

"The obvious next question," Blake said. "A hub will be nothing more than a server cluster. These will feed the new lines that are being put in currently

all over the country.

"New lines?" Kevin said. "Won't that take forever?"

"Actually, he should have said modified lines," Rusty said. "The majority of areas are just needing upgrades of their fiber-optic lines. There are some new lines that need to be added, but all of that will be completed by the end of this year anyway."

"Wait, this can't be," Matt said. "Most of the lines installed at least three years ago do not have the capacity to carry the bandwidth necessary for high-speed access. There must be some kind of mistake or ... "

"What you say is true," Doug interrupted. "But what you are missing is that these lines won't be carrying all the data packets."

"Uh, could you say that again," Kevin said. "For a minute, I thought you said ketchup packets. I'm getting hungry."

Rusty scooted toward the end of the table to the laptop running the presentation. He pressed a button, which generated an overlay on blue, yellow and black lines that were entangled across the country. Blake pulled out a laser pointer and walked toward the projector screen.

"You'll see the blue lines here, as Matt suggested, are the fiber-optic ones built not too long ago, but ones that do not have full bandwidth capacity," Blake said. "The yellow lines are the new lines being installed. You'll see they fill in some of the blank spots from the blue lines and have maximum capabilities. Of course, they do not overlap the blue lines, though.

"The black lines, which are the longest, are not actually lines, but bounce points from hubs. Using 802.11g technology, and server clusters as sort of checkpoints, this opens up another realm of data transfer. This will give us the ability to pass information from point to point and also bear some of the burden of the simple fiber-optic lines."

"This sounds really, really nice," Matt said. "How on earth will the data, if sent separately, understand when and where to go?"

"I told you this guy knows his stuff," said Doug, pointing at Matt while looking over at Blake and Rusty. "You're not going to get anything by him."

"Matt, to answer your question, this is actually a process we've been designing for awhile," Rusty said. "At the same time, it's a process that has been used to send data for years. By assigning a key to a data file, we can

break it apart, but still keep the key intact within each packet. The mini files can be sent through separate channels, but as long as we can keep them in order, we can piece them back together in the proper form.

"Basically, we are extending existing lines to T3-speed-plus lines. You will have your speed, on top of the bandwidth capacity of a T3. This should be 300 times faster for those people just on T1s, and seemingly an infinite time amount faster than those people on a 56k."

"OK, so let me get this straight," Kevin said. "You are saying that Joe Blow still has a 56k modem here in town. When he connects to the Internet, once this SIP system is applied, he'll have T3 speed, even though he still has his rinky-dink modem?"

"Yes, that will be the case," Blake said, "but not immediately. It will depend on his Internet carrier. The providers will be phased into the new system. America Online, EarthLink, Microsoft and Yahoo, the four largest national competitors, will usher in this project. The providers who are regional suppliers will get into the ball game soon thereafter, we would expect."

"So this will give a huge advantage to these national providers," Kevin said. "And it may cause some people to switch over to them."

"What are you looking at as far as pricing goes?" Matt said. "Doug originally mentioned that there would be a certain tax added to the Internet access."

"We've worked out the deals, if they were to happen today, as follows," said Blake, passing out papers with the pricing structure to the other members in the meeting. "You'll notice that the current broadband pricing for the four ISPs is on the sheet, with the additional upgrade cost. As you can see, the price won't increase that much, and almost certainly fewer than a couple dollars a year.

"And don't forget, these people will not be forced into the initial SIP upgrade," Doug said. "This will be for only those people who wish to boost their speeds substantially."

"But Doug, didn't you tell me that the other plans would be phased out eventually?" Matt said.

"True," Blake said. "We foresee this process taking a year or two to happen. This also includes the time for regional providers to be added to the

system."

"What additional fees will be added there?" Kevin said.

"These will be added on a case-by-case basis," Rusty said. "The rates will be standard, and the regional ISPs can handle the fees however they want. Of course, the engineers and planners who are building the system infrastructure are from the four service providers, so the pricing won't be to the smaller company's advantage."

Matt and Kevin looked at each other with perplexed expressions. Matt wondered how the coordination of this grandiose SIP could come to fruition in such a specific time frame. There had to be a lot of planning going on behind the scenes, he thought. They still weren't giving him all the details, but that really wasn't necessary for him to know anyway.

"Well, your plan does look innovative," Matt said. "There are specific details with which I have some doubt, but I also realize there are things that aren't really much of my business anyway."

"Here, Matt, maybe later you can take a look at this," said Rusty, sliding Matt a binder full of papers. "This shows more of a detailed look at the configuration of the SIP. I'm guessing that some of the answers might be in there."

"Thanks, Rusty," Matt said. "So let's get on with this. You need our help, but what is it that you need from us, exactly?"

"We just need a little data, in a nice order, and a bit of security on that data," Rusty said.

"You make it sound like a simple process, like putting a password on a spreadsheet," said Kevin in a cynical tone of voice. "Almost simple enough that you could do yourself."

Blake chuckled.

"He has a way of making the complex stuff sound like it's simple," said Blake, referring to Rusty. "But that's why we've brought this project to you. Doug has assured us of an expedient return on the more difficult junctures of the development."

"Whoa, hold on," Matt said. "You are giving me a time table before I even know what the hell is going on. Seriously guys, that doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe we should have gone to the Chinese restaurant," said Kevin, nudging Matt. "I bet they're open by now."

"I'm sorry Matt, we're not trying to assume anything here," Blake said. "But I know you guys have the ability to build the system we need. I've seen .comU, and there are many, many things that correlate to our project."

"For instance ... " Kevin insisted.

"The stored information, for starters," Rusty said. "A lot of this is similar material that will be stored for users of the SIP."

"Yeah, but it's the same information stored in a lot of systems," Kevin said. "It's not like we invented the database or anything."

"Your development company offers a lot more than just database functionality," Doug said. "This hasn't been spelled out yet, but you asked earlier why they, meaning the government, I presume, couldn't just build the system. That's just it. The government could, theoretically, build the system. But in this particular situation, as with many others, an outside contractor decreases development time exponentially. Your particular part of the project would take, by Blake's estimates, up to two years to complete by government technicians."

"Thank you, Doug," Blake said. "Also, keeping the project under wraps is of great interest to people above me. Situating in Malorett, Michigan, was perfect for that reason as well."

"I knew it would eventually come in handy to be in the middle of nowhere," said Kevin.

"This doesn't have to be something like Area 51," Blake said. "People need to know what's coming. But allowing the builders ample time, without being ambushed all the time with questions, will expedite the project just as much."

"Have you guys discussed this with anyone else, like your wives, friends, anything?" Rusty said.

"Wives?" Matt said. "No, we aren't married. And we haven't discussed it with anyone, not even people at work."

"Oh well that's good," Rusty said. "Just take it from me, it's better not to go around talking too much about it. At least our engineers can just tell people we are upgrading systems or correcting issues when they are out on

the job. If you told someone you were building a database or testing security on a system, they would surely ask about it."

"You keep mentioning security, but you've never really said what exactly we are keeping secure," Kevin said.

Rusty pulled up a flow chart on the screen.

"Through the SIP, we will be able to gain basic information on ... just about everyone," Blake said. "If all users with Internet access will be in the system, we might as well have a comprehensive database to list them all. I know what you're going to say ... this is illegal, right?"

Matt and Kevin looked at each other, then back at Blake and nodded.

"The US Code addresses confidentiality and privacy issues," Blake said. "But you'll notice in the SIP booklet that Title 13, which deals specifically with the census, outlines who can review this material. Basically, the data can be used only for statistical purposes; has to be in published format; and can be reviewed only by sworn officials within the census. This can be circumvented, however, by slightly altering the code so that government officials could allow any department or bureau to utilize the information, plus potentially allowing outside contractors — like the ISPs — to be considered as part of a specific agency."

"Could all that really be changed?" Kevin said.

"Most people don't even realize the US Code exists, let alone how it applies to them," Blake said. "Furthermore, by capturing the data online, it will be much, much faster and easier to collect. People will receive mail to go onto the website to verify information. If they don't do it, we still have their info regardless. We'll still have to do it the old-fashioned way with those people without SIP access, but this number will surely dwindle as time passes. Second, we fully expect legislation to pass so that it will become increasingly difficult for anonymous users to access the Web."

"Hold on a sec," Matt said. "I'm not sure that's going to be easy to do. Not allowing anonymous users on the Internet ... that's like asking for IDs when people enter Wal-Mart."

"I think what Doug means is through the SIP, all connections will be made in a fashion so that they are attributed to a record in the SIP database," Doug said. "Therefore, if people jump on the Internet through the public library, the

'user' will be the library. So there will still be plenty of anonymous users ... just fewer anonymous connections. And again, this is an indirect part of the scope of work from both Foundation and The Developers."

"Yes, we hope all security holes can be plugged," Blake said. "We don't want anyone to think we're Microsoft and have to create security updates every other day."

"Matt, that binder I gave you specs out the security that will be involved," Rusty said. "And the database schema is in there, too. Of course, we know you guys will have a good handle on that and perhaps create additional information."

"Yeah, we'll have Drew take a look at it when we get back to the office," Matt said. "He is our main database programmer."

"So Matt, what do you think so far?" Doug said.

"This is definitely an interesting project," Matt said. "You guys have mentioned many of the same things Kevin and I discussed a couple of days ago, so it seems like we're all on the same page. Now, it sounds to me like you are expecting this job to be done in the near future. Is this true?"

"With the collaboration between Foundation and The Developers, we would assume that within a month, you guys could compile a comprehensive report on where we stand and probably some demo work, and within two months maximum afterward, the job would be nearly complete, with the exception of full testing."

"On the database end, this seems reasonable," Matt said. "On the security end ... "

"Don't worry so much about that, Matt," Doug said. "Foundation plans to implement the majority of this and use you guys as more of a consultant. Obviously when we combine these two objects, we'll need massive overlapped testing."

"Even still, we have to account for the security within the database," Matt said. "There are certain things that need to be in place almost immediately, or else we will be backtracking if we wait until the end of the project."

"Also, what about the administration side of this SIP?" Kevin said. "I mean Blake said he's seen .comU in action, but he hasn't seen the administration side of things. It seems like that would be a major part of this system."

"Most definitely we would need an admin side," Blake said. "I guess I just assumed that would be part of the database development. How could you build the system without it?"

"Oh that's pretty simple," Kevin said. "We could just set it up so that you have no idea what information is being stored, and it's just sitting there, collecting dust on the World Wide Web. It's pretty fun, actually, because then you can go in and look at it sometime far down the road and reminisce about the good times you had building it."

"What is he talking about?" Blake said to Rusty.

"Blake, he's just joking," Matt said. "It probably has something to do with hunger."

"It has a lot to do with hunger," said Kevin checking his watch. "I mean, I've gone almost three hours without any grub. My metabolism doesn't allow me to do such things on a normal basis."

"OK, fine, I'll get Bo to go grab us some Chinese takeout," Blake said. He picked up his cellphone and dialed a number, apparently Bo's.

"Who is Bo?" Kevin said to the others.

"He's the guy upstairs," Doug said. "He brought you down here."

"But his name tag said 'Keeper of the Waiting Room,' " Kevin said. "If his name is Bo, why not put that on his name tag?"

"He just doesn't like unknown people calling him by his first name," Doug said. "Bo has this complex about anyone saying his name. It's OK for us to say his name, as long as he's not around. The doctors call it the Rumplestiltskin Effect. Apparently there's no cure, except by giving him a different name."

"But shouldn't you give him a normal-sounding name?" Kevin said. "So there isn't so much drama in what his name really is?"

"We could, but Bo really likes drama," Doug said. "That's actually one of the main syndromes of the Rumplestiltskin Effect."

Blake finished placing his order with Bo, while Kevin, Matt and Rusty tried to discern what Doug had just said about the Keeper of the Waiting Room. Fortunately, Blake wasn't paying attention and managed to get the conversation back on track.

"So as I was saying, the admin side was a given," Blake said. "Actually,

some of the reports and layouts are outlined in the binder you have, Matt."

"It sounds like there's a lot outlined in that binder," said Matt, glancing down at the SIP bible.

"There really is a lot of information in there," Rusty said. "I think some of the specifications of the process and development are a bit boring, but overall, that should give you a complete understanding of what this project really entails."

"But in general, it's pretty straight forward," Blake said. "I think after you glance over it, you'll be able to decide quickly whether you are in or out."

"So we're hired?" Kevin said. "The decision is ours to make?"

"I think we've heard enough," Blake said. "We have to move fast on this though. If you do decline, we'll be scrambling a little."

"Thanks for the pressure, Blake," Kevin said.

"When do you want a decision?" Matt said. "On top of that, what type of revenue are we looking at? We haven't really discussed it, and obviously, this will determine the amount of time we actually have to spend on a project like this. I mean we are still developing .comU right now."

"Of course I didn't think I'd get out of here without discussing your payment thoroughly," Blake said. "But in all honesty, I cannot really discuss the contracts with you unless I have a good indication that either you are definitely in, or, if you are contemplating being out, this discussion will not leave the room. In fact, if you guys are out, this conversation never even happened, and you, indeed, never even met us."

"What the ... " Kevin said.

"The way you make it sound, Blake, we don't really have much of a choice," Matt said.

"You definitely have a choice," Blake said. "There's a right choice and a wrong choice. It's just that the wrong choice, well, maybe you should think about making the right one."

Matt was pretty pissed off. While the discussion had seemingly been fairly good overall, there was an overlaying tone that Blake, and even Rusty and Doug, would be running the show. Matt didn't like to operate like this, which is one of the primary reasons he started his own company. Furthermore, it appeared that backing out, or even showing signs of disapproval, could

potentially make matters worse.

"I just want to make sure I understand what's happening here," Matt said. "You want me to decide whether my company should press on with a project that needs to be completed quickly, yet I have no idea how much time it will take, nor do I know what I will be paid? Surely I'm missing something because no one does business like that."

"Maybe we should approach this from a different standpoint," Blake said. "Normally if you go meet with a client, you can come up with a broad figure of how long it will take you to do a job, plus you probably attach a price to it, correct?"

"That's true," Matt said. "But it looks like I'm going to have to read this binder to determine much of anything."

"Do you, by any chance, have an audio book of the binder?" Kevin said. "I could listen to it when I sleep tonight and get back with you tomorrow."

"The info in there is comprehensive, including an amount of time necessary to complete the project, at least by our count," Rusty said. "Of course, our count is an approximation because we won't be building it. We assume you will dive in and investigate the time more thoroughly."

"I helped Blake and Rusty put together a safe boundary of hours," Doug said. "Not that I completely understand what you guys do all the time, but I think the buffer I built in is sufficient."

"Matt, go ahead and check out the last tab in the binder, labeled 'Schedule,' " Rusty said.

Matt flipped to the back pages. Sure enough, there were time estimates for the various sections of the project.

"Do you think that's workable?" Blake said. "Assuming that everything in the binder is succinct and there are few intangibles?"

"Yeah, I think the time is about right," Matt said. "Just like any business, sometimes it falls below the range, and sometimes above. So again, does this lead to our discussion about the price being placed on something like this?"

"We want you guys to work on this project," Blake said. "At D.C., they are pretty strict on what we can and cannot say when we are in negotiation for a contract. But obviously, this isn't a normal, cut-and-dry contract. We realize we are going to have to give a little. Matt, what if we tripled your current

hourly rate for development?"

Kevin's eyes lit up, thinking that was the most overpriced estimate ever given by The Developers.

"Triple?" Kevin said. "You can't be serious. You could acquire three other development teams and pay them far, far less."

"But are these other development teams any good?" Rusty said. "We are looking at only the best, and we are not as concerned with the price as we are with the quality."

"If it takes longer than the anticipated time frame to complete, then we're looking at paying you for the extra time," Blake said.

"There must be some mistake," Matt said. "Unless you are trying to buy out the system and not allow us to benefit from the profits you make on this."

"Matt, Matt, it's understandable you want to cover all the bases," Doug said. "All of us here realize how big the SIP will be. And none of us will be left out of the success."

"Precisely," Blake said. "The huge upfront cost should show you how serious we are, not that we are trying to snatch up the database you will build and run. In fact, we have some incentives built in that should make this even more tantalizing of a deal."

"I'm assuming these deals are also in the binder," Kevin said.

"Yes, they are, but I can tell you the logistics of them," Rusty said. "First off, if you meet the deadline, you will be given a $250,000 bonus. Secondly, as a system subcontractor, you will be guaranteed at least 5 percent of the profits generated. Now, what those profits will entail, we do not know just yet. And assuming all goes well, we will keep you on staff as a contractor for upgrades and technical support at double your hourly rate. Of course, this is dependent on the number of hours you will be doing development."

"Don't forget the best part, Rusty," Blake said. "A provision about your current .comU development that's not listed in the binder."

"Oh yeah, because the development of our database goes hand in hand with the development of .comU, we plan to be a major contributor of the site," Rusty said. "Through the Foundation, which we know has a substantial invested interest in the system already, we are going to match their total contribution."

Matt completely forgot the earlier tiff about not having enough information about the project and the project revenue.

"Well, I have to admit guys, I had planned to take this back to the shop and get everyone's opinion on what we should do," Matt said. "But I don't think anyone would want to back out of something like this. The idea of generating that much revenue will not only allow us to hire more team members, it will allow us to virtually do anything we want to do."

"I agree," Kevin said. "There's no way they would talk us out of this."

"So is it settled?" Blake said. "You guys are going to be our guys?"

"It appears that way," Matt said.

Rusty handed Matt a couple of contracts to sign, and as Matt read over them, the Keeper of the Waiting Room appeared with lunch. Kevin immediately grabbed a sack of food and found an order of sweet and sour chicken. Kevin started eating before the others had even made a move to the food. Kevin heard Blake and Matt discussing the contract, but he chose to ignore the talk because the food was so good.

"Man, do you have to eat all the time?" said Rusty, pulling out an order of beef and rice.

"I think this room makes me hungry," Kevin said.

Matt and Blake finished their discussion and began to eat with the others. While Blake had no trouble enjoying his food, Matt was already anxious to get started on the system. Even though Matt had anticipated this could be big, he never could have dreamed it would be as big as this. No longer was .comU the system that would put The Developers on the map, Matt thought. That was just to be the stepping stone that would leave his company as potentially the leading development firm in the nation.

@8) - Doug
@:) + **>:P** --> TTFN