

## Crucial Intel

Masta Rasta sent Hawke a sheepish grin. "I bet PDX will pay some serious money for this!" his voice was trembling with anticipation of the untold riches which would be his when the job was done. Hawke just nodded and gave the hacker a confirming mumble in return. When he was back out of this wretched building, he would find Dazza and demand a good explanation of why the most annoying little punk of a hacker had to be hired for this assignment. "I hear they're planning to send an operative into the restricted levels of this place to steal something. These plans will be a really valuable piece of intel! We're gonna be friggin' rich when we're done here." He hadn't stopped talking since he'd hooked up his laptop and established a connection to the WorldCorp network. If he didn't shut up soon, Hawke seriously doubted that his self-control would suffice to stop him from giving the guy a new nostril.

"There's no way this can go wrong," the hacker chuckled, "I'm already past their logon routines, this is so easy! You'd think a company this big would have decent web security, huh?" Hawke flinched. Unless this guy was far better than Daz had indicated, lack of difficulty in hacking the WorldCorp network couldn't possibly be a good omen. Hawke stopped wearily checking the closed cantina for signs of danger long enough to glance at Masta. The slim black man was crouched on the slippery tiled floor, his fingers moving rapidly across the compact keyboard. A program called *HaCkMaStA 3.405* was running on the monitor.

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> access \\660.243.35.1\root\security
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A confusing amount of information scrolled across the screen and Masta quickly scanned it for a code of some kind. When he seemed to find it, his body gave a small jump and he let out a little cry of joy – presumably out of pride over his own abilities. He continued to give the prompt more commands:

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> extract \\intranet\closedftp\serverpackage.dat h:\temp\servpkg
Extraction complete.
> cd ..\..\temp\servpkg
> run allaccessupdate.exe -mastah::beanstake -hax0r -proxy00
Installing...
Installation complete!
> copy \core\classified\schematics\wchqfloor2_blprt.dvi
> paste c:\images
Done.
> copy \core\classified\schematics\wchqfloor3_blprt.dvi
> paste c:\images
Done.
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Hawke received another wide grin from the hacker as the computer displayed the message "Logging out". Hawke assumed this was a good thing, but he still felt it necessary to double-check the ammo in his silenced assaultgun; the clip was still reassuringly full, being that he had yet to discharge a single round of fire. The cafeteria was a decently sized room with wooden tables spread across a checkered marble floor. A large part of the room had been enclosed behind reddish glass panes in wooden frames and contained nothing but two wood tables, presumably a sort of kitchen was supposed to have been there. Obviously Scara B. King had closed the cafeteria kitchen to force his employees to bring their own lunch and save money on the kitchen staff. The two DXA operatives had snuck in here looking for net sockets, and strangely Masta had found what he was looking for behind the coffee machine in a small dark niche in a corner of the room. Hawke had no idea why a coffee machine needed intranet access, and he wasn't really sure he cared.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His eyelids jerked open again as a strange gargling sound emerged from the man at his side. Masta fell backwards and seemed to have a seizure of some kind before falling quiet, his hazy eyes fixed on the ceiling. For a moment, Hawke was frozen. His eyes moved to the monitor which was displaying some sort of error message evidently involving a security program. Then an alarm rang out through the deserted cafeteria. Hawke cursed under his breath as he hurriedly swept a multitool and a couple of empty floppy discs behind the coffee machine, grabbed the laptop with his left arm and tore the net cables from their sockets. He made it a few paces through the room before slipping and falling painfully on his back just as the sound of gunfire pierced the annoyingly monotonous chime of the alarm and a bullet dug its way into the wall behind him where his head had been a moment ago. With a great effort, he tossed himself behind a table, squeezing off a few rounds from his rifle without hitting anything other than the ceiling. Quickly getting his bearings after the fall, he saw the laptop on the floor in the middle of the room with its cables lying around it like the arms of a wounded octopus.

He pulled off his damaged shades which were digging into his nose and tossed them over the table in the general direction of the wide double-doorway. Without thinking much, he activated his targeting aug and threw himself sideways out from cover and sprayed a burst of bullets at the WorldCorp security guy who was taking cover behind the door frame. His nano systems guided his arm in the right direction and the security guard staggered backwards clutching his bleeding shoulder; unfortunately for the wounded guard, he collided with the low metal railing with such force that he toppled over it and fell the 8 feet to the floor of the lobby.

Hawke wasted no time in getting back on his feet and securing the laptop from the floor. Sprinting out of the cafeteria, he was narrowly missed by several bullets from two other security guards who had stopped half-way down a flight of stairs. He stumbled briefly as his legs impacted with the lobby floor next to the groaning security guard he'd hit before, then he continued his dash towards the other side of the lobby. It was symmetrically designed room full of symbols of power and intimidation. Half-way across the floor to the other side, Hawke activated his speed enhancement and barely made the jump to the raised walkway, clutching the railing and heaving himself up unto the ledge. As soon as he'd regained his balance, he hurled himself into the stairwell he knew would lead him to the parking garage below and hopefully past the two ruthless military robots which would be patrolling the WC perimeter at this time of night.

Hawke quickly reached the bottom of the stairs and emerged into the empty concrete hallways of the parking garage. He stopped there for a moment, taking the time to survey his surroundings while trying to steady his breath. He found no possible threats in the vacated hall, and hearing muffled shouts for backup from the lobby rather than footsteps on the stairs, he decided to take the time to set up a proximity LAM on the inside of the doorframe. When the end of a small series of beeps told him the device was armed, he picked his assault rifle and Mastah's laptop back up and jogged down the sloping parking garage floor to the ramp leading to the top level of the garage.

It was with some satisfaction that Hawke heard a loud explosion below him as he reached the exit tunnel which would take him out into the city. The fresh night wind caressed his face and seemed to infuse him with new vigor as he reached the exit and paused for a moment to make sure no nasty surprises were in store for him. But he found no guards waiting to ambush him and there was no sight of the patrolling milbots. Feeling more or less secure in his own successful accomplishment of the mission now, Hawke walked down the asphalt at a quick pace and reached the sidewalk where he stopped to look for Dazza. Sure enough, he spotted the black DXA van waiting around the corner and waved his arms at it. The engines of the van started with a roar and it swung out into the street. The van stopped a few feet past Hawke, and one of the doors in the back of the van opened to reveal Dazza's smiling face. "Hey Hawke, it's good to see you made it out with the laptop," Dazza welcomed him with a heavy Australian accent, "I take it Mastah didn't make it?" Hawke just smiled and moved towards the van.

Just then, a shot rang out through the night and Hawke felt a sharp jab of pain in his left shoulder. With a groan, he slumped to the ground. Dazza let out a cry of shock and jumped out to drag Hawke into the van, then he closed the doors as the van screeched out onto the street and made it for the nearest checkpoint.

On the roof of the WorldCorp headquarters, a dark-haired man in a long green trenchcoat lowered his sniper rifle. He'd been standing while he fired his shot, having just made it onto the roof in time to see the intruder about to enter a getaway vehicle. Most people might consider it quite an achievement to hit anything at all from a standing position just after running up four levels of stairs, but for this man it was a bad shot. He'd been aiming for the head, and a miss was a miss. He cursed at himself while he followed the leaving van with his eyes. Then he turned off his targeting augmentation and faded back into the shadows.