

New Recruit

by Roderick D. Turner

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"Anything else you want to add to the list?" Ted Bronson leaned back in his chair and smiled sarcastically. "This makes it fifteen active projects, all due in the next three weeks. I'm sure I could handle another four or five before I'm committed. They say Weston Mental Hospital's really improved since that riot last year."

"Hey listen, Ted. I've been telling you for months you need a holiday, and what have you done? Kept working. You're a workaholic. I can't force you to take a break."

"You know what a workaholic is, Sylvia?" Ted shot his superior a quizzical glance. "It's someone who spends every waking moment focused on work, but gets virtually nothing

actually done. Kind of like spinning your wheels in a car on one of those dynamometers. Plenty of activity, but no results. You think that's me?"

"Alright, so I chose the wrong word. Everybody knows you produce more flawless code than all the other developers put together. But you need some perspective. I didn't assign those fifteen projects to you, and you know it."

"True. But put yourself in my shoes. Our little group has say ten major software packages to generate in a given year. There are eight of us, including you. And for the most part you don't count, because between Ballista Techno and our little Software Technologies offshoot, you spend all your time running around the world from meeting to meeting. That leaves me and six worthless monkeys who can't type their own names. So how do you think the work gets done around here?"

Sylvia sighed and looked contemplative for a moment. "You're saying I'd better spend more time looking at what's happening inside the group, and less time trying to find customers and keep them happy?"

"Sylvia, I know you're not stupid. If you were back down here in the trenches with me I know you'd pull your weight. But right now this department is on the verge of going under. How more direct can I put it? I can't hold up the temple all by myself."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence. If I had the choice

I'd be back in the trenches, as you say, rather than spending my days in stuffy conference rooms and cramped airline seats. But someone has to do the running around, and I know it's not for you either. So what do we do?"

Ted slapped his hand against the desk. "I get it. I've got to hand it to you, Sylvia, you've really learned the politics of management over the past year. You play stupid and get me to make the suggestion, then if it backfires you can say it was my idea. And I can't deny it, 'cause it's true. That's brilliant."

"Ted—"

"Let me give you just one example. Markus had a month to write the graphics interface for the new database, right?"

"I remember he did a great job, too."

"Ok, so let's get the facts straight. I checked on his progress two days before deadline, and he still didn't have the screen formatted properly. The code was so fragmented that when compiled it used the same memory we had available for the entire software package; and there were more bugs than in the average anthill."

"So you finished the job for him?"

"Finished it? Yeah, I finished it alright. Flushed it down the toilet where it belonged. And spent the next two days and nights writing a new interface. From scratch. That's the one you sold to our Far-East distribution network."

Sylvia stared at him blankly for a moment. "How long has

this been going on, Ted?" she said at last.

"Which part? My covering for everyone else in the place, or you pretending not to notice a problem?"

"If I had known, I'd have had it out with Markus right away. He always seems to be working hard when I'm around."

"You've just got to learn to recognize good acting when you see it, Sylvia. Or look a bit harder. Some people make it their profession to be the best paper shufflers in the business. That guy can look busy in an empty ten by ten room." He stood up, walked to the door of his small office and closed it quietly. Then he turned to face her, his back to the door. "I'm sorry I've been so long-winded. I guess I just needed to spout off a little. The short of it is, Sylvia, you may as well have no staff here at all other than me. I carry every project, one way or another. So if I took a holiday, you'd have nothing coming out of this place at all. I guarantee it."

"Are you suggesting...."

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm telling you. We need to get rid of the cretinous crew, and hire someone who actually knows something about programming. I know they're all nice and cheap, but I'm telling you that with one decent programmer in place of the entire bunch we'd not only save on salary, but may even be able to keep up with the workload. And flunkies like me might actually get a holiday now and then."

"I can't just up and fire the entire department, Ted. I'd

need justification. And I'd need to have a backup plan. You know damned well it's almost impossible to hire decent programmers today for anything less than a King's ransom."

"Sylvia, you always were better at politics and sales than at dealing with staff. None of them are doing anything now, so getting rid of them won't make a scrap of difference. And I can help you on the other things too." He crossed to his paper-strewn desk and pulled a battered file folder from the bottom of a pile. "This is the hardcopy. I have it all documented on disk, too. Clear examples of utter incompetence on the part of everyone in this department. Yourself and myself excluded, of course." He put a hand on Sylvia's arm and frowned. "There's more to it than that, though. Do you remember a couple of years back when it was only you and me working on code together? And human resources wouldn't let us have anything to do with selection of new people?"

Sylvia nodded slowly. Her eyes suddenly went wide as if she'd had a revelation. "And soon after we'd hired the first three new people, the workload went off the scale. I stepped up to manage the group, and handled all the inside and outside sales."

"And you were incredible at it. Ballista Software Technologies took all the business away from the competition. Armana and Mercator software houses are almost shut down today because of what you did for our private sales. But at this point

I'm so close to burn-out I got smoke coming out of my ears. And if we do nothing, Ballista Software is doomed. We won't even be able to handle inside work for Ballista Electro. Dead in the water, Sylvia."

"We've been set up," Sylvia whispered. "Someone in HR must be a plant."

"Exactly. Human Resources picked all our new recruits, and none of them know a floppy disk from a pop tart. I checked the HR records. It was Rick Albert that hired all those worthless duds. Every one of them. I figured he had to be on the pay of another company. Maybe Armana, or Mercator. It didn't matter. But I knew then that the only answer was to speak to the big boss, old Bob Ballista, and blow this whole thing open."

"I don't get it. Rick Albert has been with Ballista forever. He's manager of technical hiring. He makes ten times what we make. What's the draw?"

"I only just pieced that one together in the last few days. Been thinking for a few months about who might be able to step in here and carry some of the load. One or two names came to mind, but no answers. Then a few weeks back I got a call from Diana Lostoff."

"No, Ted. You're not thinking of getting her in here. Even back in university she was breaking into every system in sight. She's nothing but trouble. I won't allow it."

"Hear me out. She's on some job in Malaysia, pirate work as

is usual with her. She called to tell me she's hacking into a small company's database down there, and comes across a reference to Ballista. She probes a bit more, and it turns out this is a payment record to one Alberto Ricardo, made through the small company as a front for some other organization."

"And?"

"And the small company is in armaments. Chiobo Exports. She says she was on mercenary contract to some middle-eastern terrorists, looking to steal equipment. But Chiobo is definitely syndicate, and it's part of a chain of similar production centers. Ballista's sales are all for manufacturing and building automation, but Rick Albert is getting money, probably big money, for making some kind of inside deal with the syndicate."

"Ballista's self-learning automated systems could easily be used in military applications. Right?"

"Mr. Albert is not going to go down so easily. He's doing the inside work here to shut down our software division so the syndicate-controlled software houses can thrive. You and I are a threat, because he knows we can't be corrupted."

"So you really think that Bob Ballista will believe all this? How can you prove any of this stuff? He's going to think you're already Psychiatric hospital material."

"Not if we do things right. You fire Markus through normal channels, just enough to free up some cashflow. Then before we fire the rest or approach old Bob, we hire someone who really

knows the illegal side of software. Mercenary style. Someone who can do the digging we need to get the dirt and help clean out the system. Safely."

There was a sudden knock at the door, and it made Sylvia jump.

"Come in," Ted called.

The door opened and in strode a small, dark-haired woman wearing green coveralls and black army boots. She sported a hands-free headset with the boom mike swung up above her head like an antenna. In her hand she carried a small portable, the hard-shell case much battered. She smiled at them both, showing a perfectly crafted set of teeth.

"Sylvia. Ted. Long time no see." She swung the portable up, and looked quizzically at Ted. "So, man. Where you want me to set up?"