

# Critical Care



PW SINGER + AUGUST COLE

THE STORY WITHIN IS FICTION; IT HAS BEEN PRODUCED WITH THE AIM TO SPARK DISCUSSION AND CREATIVE INSIGHT WHICH MIGHT CHALLENGE ESTABLISHED THOUGHT.

*The following cautionary narrative is drawn from threat reports and interviews with corporate cybersecurity SMEs. It is designed to help visualize the issues and stakes involved in ensuring cybersecurity priorities are kept in the forefront of major transition projects.*



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It was the most uncomfortable airplane ride of Dakota Alexander's life. Yet it wasn't due to the 30 inches of legroom and a seat that wouldn't recline.

"I know why we have to do this for appearance's sake, but did Sara really have to put us in the last row by the bathroom?" said Arnie Weir.

Weir had equity stakes that were probably worth as much as this entire airline, which meant he hadn't flown on a commercial carrier for over a half century, let alone in coach class. Yet he still remembered the first name of the booking agent in the corporate travel office. It was the kind of attention to detail that had gotten him all the way to chairman of the board of their corporation.

A flight attendant hovered over them.

"Would you like something to drink?"

At least he was wearing gloves, maybe for health safety, maybe just because of how sticky everything was back here.

"What scotch do you have?" Weir asked, then pointing to the commuter jet's mini drink cart. "You carry any Macallan in that thing?"

The attendant gave him an amused smile. "I'm sorry, we only have coffee, soft drinks, or juices."

"Pass then."

"How about you, miss?" the attendant asked.

She was the CEO of a company with billions in annual revenue and she still got a "miss."

But today wasn't the day to fight that never-ending battle.

"Ginger Ale, please."

He poured the remainder of an already open can into a small plastic cup and began to pass it over. Then he paused. As the flight attendant scanned her face, his smile broke. Instead of the corporately instructed cordial delivery, he set the drink down without an "Enjoy" or anything like that.

For that matter, neither did the members of the House Committee that she had been called to testify in front of later that day, hence the terrible seats. That had been another part of the crisis management playbook. Don't make the same mistake of CEOs past and have an image of your corporate jet splashing about social media.

Hell, she thought, the toxic mess of social media was where this had all started.

It had been both a needed technical migration and a cost-savings move, timed around a comms strategy to excite the market right before the third-quarter analysts call. But just around the same time that Alexander had revealed on Twitter that the company would be migrating to a cloud-based infrastructure, a system administrator had touted his own good news on LinkedIn, announcing a new job at the company. All it had taken was a single opened spearphishing email to that new administrator, posing as an invite to a corporate family barbeque for new IT employees, and the hackers were inside the company's enterprise network. And so, as Alexander did the media and shareholder circuit over the next weeks, talking up the new post-Covid-19 model of remote work and "doing more with less," the hackers had worked their way through the corporate network, monitoring traffic, and then moving laterally from one system to another.

The rush to migrate all the systems by the end of the fiscal year had meant a mad dash, with Alexander herself driving the team to the edge of what was possible. There was grumbling about the new CEO making people work weekends, but in the end they'd made it. And the market loved it. Weir had even called her from the sidelines of a squash match to congratulate her for what was going to be a signature "win" for her career.

The logs that the CISO later showed her revealed the hackers had achieved a different kind of win that very same date. During the transition, they'd harvested the cloud credentials.

And then they had dropped the hammer.

She had been on her spin bike when the news had broken. Her daily 5AM routine was being yelled at by an online instructor, while she snuck peeks at another screen playing CNBC. That morning, her heart had literally skipped a beat, though not from the girl with pigtails and a Maori tattoo screaming "Pump HARDER!"

The hackers had dumped tens of millions of files of customer data onto the web. The lawyers had probably started drafting the class action lawsuits a few seconds later. Shares in the company instantly tanked 24% in pre-market trading.

Yet none of them – the media, the lawyers, the market- knew about what she'd learned just 5 minutes later, taking the call while still sweating in her workout clothes. It was the CISO, careful to use a personal cell phone. Before she even had a chance to scream at him, he let her know the news was even worse. The hackers had left a message in his inbox, sent from inside the network. The public dump had just been a proof case. Unsaid was that it would also keep them off balance, busy putting out fires while the real operation kicked in.

The hackers messaged that they had the ability to lock down the entire R&D team's data with ransomware. At that, she merged the CFO into the call, to help assess the risk; plus, he'd ultimately have to be the one to funnel any payments to eliminate it. The CFO estimated it was well over \$120 billion in future revenue at stake. They could maybe restore and replace the files, but given how deep they were in, they couldn't be 100% on that. And, if they did get it back up, they couldn't be certain that nothing had been corrupted in the weeks the hackers sat in there, the zeros and ones inside tests, records, or product designs unknowingly altered.

At that, \$60 million in bitcoin was a downright bargain. They could maybe even write it off as a project in researching encrypted payment platforms. The corporate general counsel was next brought into the call. She said paying them off was in a gray area of the law, so that it was better that she not put that opinion in any formal memo.

At least the hackers hadn't gloated. They'd been professional about the whole thing, treating it as what it was, a transaction between two enterprises. After they transferred the funds, the CISO said they had even left his team a helpful note on how to reconfigure access to keep it from happening again.

That was the absurdity of all this. Her team would have to trust the very people who'd hacked them. They would have to take their own attackers' word that they had not copied the research and sold it off to a competitor. Or, that they hadn't left a wiper that would zap it all anyway if they didn't pay up a second time. Or, worst of all, that they'd release the chat logs, leaking out the transcripts of the negotiations for the whole world to see.

Alexander looked over at Weir. He wouldn't be appearing before the

He was there to work the political side of the problem, to glad-hand their way out of the mess.

"Next time, instead of flying coach, they'll probably make us take a rideshare car all the way," she said jokingly back to him, restarting the conversation.

"There better not be a next time," said Weir tersely.

"There won't be a next time," she agreed, this time in a more serious tone, showing him that she got it.

But that was a lie. There would be more attacks. At her company. At others. And they would get in.

When she took the CEO job just over a year ago, this isn't how she'd imagined it. Certainly not sitting in coach class and second guessing these kinds of decisions.

An NCAA Division III All American shooting guard, she knew the internship that had first got her in the door had been as much about serving as a ringer for the corporate-league basketball team, which made the legroom in the seat today even worse. Once in, however, she'd proved that she belonged. Twenty-eight years after Alexander had faxed in her resume, she had moved from customer support to business development to the top, all the while embracing each new round of technology transformation. It was what you needed to do now. She even had an Instagram account. And ran it herself.

Now, she knew it's not what you do that matters when you finally get in that chair, it's what you don't.

In her head, she played out all the 'what-ifs?' Men of Weir's era thought being a corporate leader was all about managing topline growth and earnings-per share. Today's questions were different. What if she had hired a different CISO? What if she had asked the right questions in their quarterly meetings? What if she had met more than quarterly? What if she had cracked down on organizational silos, or decided a different outcome when the DevOps and Security teams had clashed? What if she hadn't pushed the timeline? What if they had run a wargame before all this, laying out scenarios and what to do, instead of deciding everything on the fly, as hackers breathed corporate ruin down their necks?

What if..

She drained the incredibly small cup in one sip. Some exec like her had probably made a similar decision to compromise between priorities in a way they'd never guessed they'd one day be doing. She imagined them calculating out on a spreadsheet customer retention vs. the cost savings of dehydrating the bumpkins in the last rows.

The ginger ale burned as she swallowed. The biggest "what if" took her mind all the way back to business school. It had all played out on new tech, but none of it had really been a technology issue. It was actually all about strategy. What if she'd made sure the whole organization focused on getting the basics down first, rather than the theater of transformation? And at that she could see her old business school professor from "Management Essentials" nodding his head somewhere.

"That's exactly the tone to take," said Weir, snapping her mind out of the questions.

"Regretful, but not apologetic, to protect our flank from the lawsuits. No formal culpability. Then shift the focus to the real villains in all this. You'll have to thread the needle up there, but follow the script and we'll be fine. You work your magic and I'll work mine."

While she was going to be under the klieg lights, he'd be doing office visits with a pair of ex-Senators. Then a lunch at the Metropolitan Club with the board member who just happened to be a former cabinet member, the one who could make the right calls.

"People are pissed," Weir continued, "But I'll make sure they know we get it. And that it won't happen again to us. Like they say, 'You don't have to outrun the bear, only the other guy running from it.'"

That wasn't true either. She knew that now. It wasn't about keeping a step ahead of some other company, so that some other CEO would be the one to fly coach. When you have something valuable, the bear will just keep running after you.

She'd learned that lesson too.

Her finger tapped the cup's thin rim, thinking over what she'd have to do, in order to be the one that actually got to implement these hard-earned lessons. Then she picked the cup back up, trying to get at the last drops of ginger ale left at the bottom. Yet, as her hand grasped the emptied disposable cup, the pressure cracked the thin plastic crack.

Strong from one angle, fragile from another. Maybe the crisis management plan would work. Maybe it wouldn't. The next hours would decide.

She set the cracked cup back down and looked over her opening statement script one more time.

It might well be the last time she said anything in public without the adjective of "former" in front of her job title.