

MICHAELBRENT COLLINGS

# DDOS OF THE DEAD



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# DDoS OF THE DEAD

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« kentik

The network observability company

## DDoS OF THE DEAD

First in a Kentik novella series

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*We dedicate this story to all those  
who labor over our networks,  
ensuring that we stay connected in  
an increasingly remote world.*

*We appreciate all that you do,  
and may this tale of network terror  
provide respite from the DNS issues  
you're currently fixing.*

## *D-DDoS PROBLEMS*

“Kinsey? Earth to Kinsey! Calling Roland Kinsey!”

I blinked and looked over at Mr. Dennis. My supervisor stared at me from the entrance to my cubicle, eyebrows up in that smug, fake-concern expression he always wore right before he sighed and pronounced one of his “wisdoms.”

“You with us, Roland?” he said.

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Mr. Dennis took off his glasses, pinched the bridge of his nose, then wiped his glasses clean with a handkerchief. “Most people would be happy doing what you do, making the money you do, living like you do.” He put



his glasses back on. They distorted his eyes, making him look (as always) like an owl with indigestion. “Happiness lies in finding the good, you know?”

“Yes, Mr. Dennis,” I said dutifully, because that was the best way to get Mr. Dennis to move on after he’d repeated whatever trite little thing had gotten him out of bed that morning.

But Mr. Dennis didn’t move on. He sighed again. “What is it, son? You upset working on Halloween?”

I shook my head, then surprised myself by answering truthfully: “Just bored.”

Mr. Dennis smiled, but his eyes flashed with something—anger? “Not digging the night shift?” he asked. “It’s where everyone starts, here at IntSec.” He cleared his throat then added, “*At IntSec Defenders, your security is our priority. IntSec! Your one-stop shop for any problem, no matter how big, how small, or how strange!*” in tones of exaggerated cheer.



It always creeped me out when Mr. Dennis went full-corporate zealot, and this time was no exception. Nervousness made me run my mouth off again. “Sorry, Mr. Dennis. It’s just, well...when I started, Eileen said I’d impressed everyone and I’d be training for the A-team, I thought—”

“You thought you’d be hunting down Bond villains? Maybe every once in a while the FBI would bust in and shout, ‘There’s a bomb downtown and you folks are the only way to find it!’?”

A flashing light on my monitor saved me from having to answer. “I better check this ticket,” I said.

Mr. Dennis nodded. “Give ’em the IntSec best!” he said, then ambled away.

I looked at my screen. Just another help request. Another small website that hadn’t updated its firewalls, was in the mire, and needed help. The fix was a simple one, five minutes and done. I had another ticket waiting for me by the time I finished, and nor-



mally that was fine: best to keep busy. But for some reason I couldn't explain, I felt like I'd rather do anything—*anything*—than answer that ticket.

I went to the bathroom. Just stood up and walked away. Didn't even check in with Mr. Dennis as I left. I figured if I did that, there was a good chance I'd run my mouth off again and end up without a job by the end of the shift.

The sound of clacking keys followed as I walked down the aisle between cubicles full of people just like me. I hated the sound more with every step. Mr. Dennis was right: I'd expected more from this job. Maybe not saving the world, but *something* more than endlessly catering to small-time mom-and-pop businesses who couldn't even be bothered to install updates, then screamed and shouted when their websites crashed.

*Klickety-klack* went the keys. They sounded empty and hollow. Just like me.

When I came back, everything was differ-



ent. The office cubes were empty. The monitors were blank. The only exception was a single light coming from one cubicle. I stiffened when I realized it was Kara's.

Kara was one of those people who can stop you with a look. Her eyes glittered with intelligence, and she walked into every room like she owned the place.

And there was the way she looked at me, like she knew the punchline to a joke no one else would understand. The other desk jockeys had ranged from "business polite" to "schmoozy friendly" when I arrived a month before. Not Kara. She hadn't spoken a word to me, and the one time I finally screwed up my courage to say hi to her, she just stared at me like I was something she'd found clogging the toilet.

I was in my twenties. I was glorified tech support, working the night shift at IntSec Defenders. I hadn't had a date in months, which explained why everything odd about the scene—the empty silence, the lighting—



fled from my awareness, swept away by a flood of pent-up hormones the like of which I hadn't felt in years. Kara was the only person in here, so she'd have to talk to me, right?

I crept around the empty cubes, coming up behind Kara's workspace. Her cubicle was as mysterious as she was: tucked off in a corner, totally alone even though everyone else shared walls with at least one other person. It was Spartan: no cat pictures, no memes printed out and taped to the carpeted wall, no old Dilbert cartoons, no pictures of family. Just a computer setup, a chair, a desk.

And the box. It appeared to be a metal cube bolted to the floor. No one I'd asked about it knew what it held.

I was just a few feet away now, close enough to see that Kara wasn't alone in her cubicle: Mr. Dennis was there too, both of them bent over her monitor.

"Check the IPs," said Mr. Dennis.

Kara responded—the first time I'd ever heard her voice. "Already did," she said, the



words tense but controlled. She pointed at the monitor.

I looked where she was pointing. Blinkered. The field she had indicated should have shown an IP address. Only instead of being written in the alphanumeric and figures I was used to (and which I'd seen so many times I was literally dreaming about them these days), I saw a bunch of symbols I'd never seen before.

Mr. Dennis cursed under his breath—another first. “Lazarus attack?” he said.

“More likely a DDDoS,” said Kara.

“That’s too many Ds,” I said.

I didn’t mean to; it just kind of popped out. Mr. Dennis wheeled around. The sight shocked me. My boss’ softness was gone. He looked like a drill sergeant, perhaps some CIA handler. Someone tough and effective, ready to kill or be killed at a moment’s notice.

“I thought you cleared the room, Dave,” said Kara.



“So did I,” Mr. Dennis growled.

It was all so surreal. So weird. Again, I defaulted to what I always do when nervous: I said the first thing that popped into my head. “What are we even doing handling a Fancy Lazarus attack?” I asked. “I thought they mostly attacked broadband access and transit IPs in western Europe. IntSec doesn’t even—” I faltered suddenly. The IP field on Kara’s screen had changed. The characters were still strange—off-putting on a level I couldn’t really explain—but they were now *different* than they had been.

More important, they were *floating a half-inch off the screen*.

“IntSec handles *all* security threats,” Mr. Dennis intoned. Then he turned to Kara and said, “Told you Roland was smart.”

“And yet not smart enough to leave when you clear the room,” Kara said.

“I had to use the bathroom,” I said numbly, still looking at the strange “IP address” that rippled strangely as it floated through



the air. It turned orange, then purple, then seemed to catch fire. The flames burned the symbols out of the air and when the smoke dissipated, Kara's computer screen was covered by arcane symbols that flickered through every color of the rainbow.

Kara stood and went to the box attached to her desk. She lay her palm atop it. There must have been some kind of biometric scanner hidden there, because I heard the *thunk* of a lock disengaging.

"Can you get me the specific location?" said Kara.

"Two minutes," said Mr. Dennis, sliding into the chair she'd just abandoned. He began typing, his chubby fingers flying at shocking speed over the computer keyboard.

Kara pulled the top of the box upward, reached into the space below, and brought out a case that looked like something an olde-tyme doctor would carry. "Come on, rockstar," she said, and walked out of the office.

I just stared until Mr. Dennis growled,



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“Well? Follow her, Kinsey!”

I did, following Kara to the elevator, where she hit P2. The doors opened to the parking garage thirty seconds later and Kara beelined for a black Dodge Charger. “Get in,” she said.

I did. The engine was already thrumming. “You’ve got a nice ride,” I said lamely.

“Not mine,” said Kara. “I’d have picked something with more pep off the block.” She shrugged. “But the company favors the classics for things like this, ya know?”

“Things like wha—*augh!*” my question dissolved into a shriek as Kara peeled out, exploding onto the mostly-empty street behind the IntSec building.

When I came up for air, I realized that the dash of the Charger was...unusual. The usual dials and readouts, sure, but buttons and levers and screens I’d never seen before dominated the space. A curved hi-def LED screen showing the IntSec Def logo covered most of the dash. As I watched, the logo flickered



and was replaced by a GPS map showing a route to the nearby port.

“That where we’re going?” Kara asked tersely. “The port?”

“How should *I* know?” I demanded.

“I’m not talking to you, Roland,” said Kara. Then: “Well, is it?”

Mr. Dennis’ voice emerged from a hidden speaker. “Yup.”

Kara cursed. “I hate the merwork assignments.”

“It’s *near* the port, not *under* it.”

“Better be,” Kara said darkly. “Merwork sucks.”

“We’re a one-stop shop,” said Mr. Dennis brightly. “We do what we have to.”

“Um, what’s happening?” I asked.

Kara’s only response was to slam her foot down. The Charger leaped forward. The speedometer edged north of 100 mph.

“There was no extra D,” said Kara suddenly.

“What?” I asked.



“It was the right number of Ds,” she said.

Still feeling numb, I shook my head. I tried not to think of what I’d look like if a tire blew at 110 miles per hour. “No, it’s DDoS: **d**istributed **d**enial-**o**f-**s**ervice.”

“Sure, that’s one thing IntSec handles.” Kara yanked the wheel to the side. The Charger shrieked around us and I felt the right wheels briefly leave the pavement. “But it also handles *DDDoS* attacks.” Another turn. Again the wheels went airborne. “What’s a DDoS—just two Ds?” said Kara. “And how fast can you run a mile?”

“Uh—” I shook my head, trying to keep up with the conversation while simultaneously not blowing chunks as the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen hauled on the steering wheel again. When the Charger’s tires stopped shrieking, I gasped, “DDoS is a cybercrime in which the attacker floods a server with internet traffic to prevent users from accessing connected sites and services, using bots—”



“Zombies,” said Kara.

“Sure,” I said. “Bots, zombies, whatever. Numerous individual computers or systems are coopted to create a botnet that can overwhelm—”

“A definition right out of the IntSec Defenders manual,” said Kara. “Good. And the other thing?”

“Other thing?”

“The mile. How fast?”

“Uhh...six minutes? Maybe?”

“You’ll have to get faster. Biking’s good for cardio too. I love biking around Santa Monica. But running’s critical.”

I glowered. “Why? What’s *your* best—”

“The extra D is for Demonic,” said Kara. She spun the wheel. The GPS flashed. She slammed on the brakes. The Charger shuddered to a stop in front of a small, warehouse-style building. The city port loomed large behind it, but somehow the bright lights of the equipment failed to illuminate the area around us. I tried not to shiver.



Kara reached back and brought the old doctor bag forward. “Final location confirmation, Dave?” she said.

“Confirmed,” Mr. Dennis said on the speaker.

“Size?”

“Minimal.”

“RoE?” asked Kara.

“Status: IntSec Black. Confirm.”

“Gloves off, confirm,” said Kara. She killed the engine. The car went dark. She fished around in the bag until she came up with a USB stick, which she handed to me. “What’s this?” I asked.

“Stick it into a port on one of the zombie computers,” said Kara.

“Which are in this building?” I asked. Kara nodded. I frowned. “That doesn’t make sense. And even if it did, how am I supposed to know which is the right computer?”

“Any zombie computer you find will do,” said Kara.

“How am I supposed to know which is a—”



“You’ll know,” Kara interrupted. “Trust me on that.”

She got out of the car, still holding her bag. I followed her to the warehouse’s front doors. They were locked, a high-tech keypad set into the locking mechanism. Kara reached into her bag and I half-expected her to pull out some ridiculous “hacker” device like in the movies: a bunch of leads she would use to plug into the keypad, watching the attached red LED screen until it blinked the right entry code at her.

Instead, she pulled out a short crowbar. She wedged it into the crack between the door and the lock, grunted, and the door popped open with a ping.

“Come on, rockstar,” said Kara, and entered the dark building.

I didn’t know what to do. I’d complained of boredom, sure, but that didn’t mean that I thought breaking into some rando place was a good—

I heard a small scream—Kara! I rushed



into the building. Found nothing in the first room—just a reception desk, a few chairs. I hustled through the open door at the back of the room. Beyond it I found Kara, grappling with someone in the darkness. She twisted and the other person—pretty big, probably a guy though it was hard to tell in the dark—flipped over her, slamming to the floor. The guy’s head hit the corner of a desk and I heard the crack of bone shattering as his neck broke.

“What did you do?” I gasped.

Kara was panting, staring at the body on the floor. “The job,” she answered.

“You just killed—”

Kara pointed. “He was already dead.”

I followed her gesture. Saw the guy. I felt the world swing around under me, like I’d wandered onto some ginormous carnival ride.

The guy on the floor was dressed in clothes that looked like they’d seen their day in the 1970s. Weird enough. Weirder still was the



guy himself—if it *was* a guy. Hard to tell when most of the skin was missing, showing bones and black cords of muscle that twitched slowly.

The skull was almost completely bare, save a single ear that hung at a bizarre angle.

No doubt that the guy's neck was broken—his head cocked off to the side at an impossible angle that, even without the rot and ruin of the rest of him, would have guaranteed death. But as I watched, the guy—the *thing*—shuddered. The head pulled back to its “proper” position.

The guy/not-guy/thing sat up.

Trying for the second time tonight to keep from puking, I said, “Wha...wha...wha—”

“I told you already,” said Kara. “We’re here to cut off a demonic distributed denial-of-service by shutting down zombies. Speaking of which—” She had the crowbar in her hand again, and with a single quick motion she jabbed the business end through the thing’s forehead. The body on the floor



stopped moving instantly. Kara looked at me. “Still got the USB?”

I nodded. “Uh—”

Kara looked around. We were in a break room startlingly similar to the one at IntSec Def, complete with a fridge, a circular table, and the general feeling of despair that is a required part of every corporate break room.

“No computers,” she said. “Come on.”

Then she was gone. I looked at the body on the floor, knowing the smart thing would be to leave. But I didn’t. I followed Kara as she walked through another door on the opposite side of the room.

The door led to a small hall, which turned and emptied into what I assumed was the main part of the warehouse: a big floor covered in what I *thought* were computers. Couldn’t be sure, though, because I’d never seen computers that looked like they’d been built out of bones and flesh and teeth. Each screen flickered with strange lights, the same bizarre characters I’d seen floating above



Kara's screen covering these otherworldly workstations.

The second I stepped into the room, two things happened. First, a giant metal door slammed down from the ceiling, trapping us. Second, every person at every cubicle in the big room turned toward us. Only they weren't people.

"Zombies," breathed Kara.

The screens in the room all flashed bright red and I thought—insanely—that some big emergency ticket had just come in. Then I realized the thought wasn't insane. An emergency *had* come in: us.

The zombies were ten feet away. Kara turned toward me. "Get that USB stick into one of the computers," she said, thrusting her still-dripping crowbar at me.

Then she ran. She dropped the bag, but not before pulling out what looked like a sawed-off shotgun. She started pulling the trigger, screaming a strange, nameless shout. *Boom-boom-boom!* went the weapon, and zombies



started disintegrating before her.

I felt hands on my shoulder. Felt something spinning me around. I came face to face with one of the undead *things*. Like the one Kara had dispatched in the break room, it was mostly void of flesh. Its lipless mouth opened wide and it lunged for me, obviously intending to clamp its rotten teeth on my neck.

I reacted instinctively, bringing the crowbar up and forward. The thing slumped as it impaled itself on the pointy end of the iron bar.

The next few seconds—or maybe hours, or days, or *eternities*—were confused and hard to remember. There was lots of screaming. Lots of *boom-boom-boom!* as Kara continued mowing down the undead.

So much goo. So much.

I finally got to one of the “computers.” It looked like someone had glued together a bunch of human ribs, packed the space tight with circuitry, then slapped a screen over



it. But there was nothing resembling a USB port of any kind.

“Get the USB in!” shrieked Kara. I looked toward the sound and saw her simultaneously blasting one zombie with her shotgun, flipping another over a desk, and jamming some kind of crucifix dagger into the neck of a third. It was awesome to see, but the zombies kept coming and coming.

“DOWN!” she screamed suddenly. I ducked just as a zombie reached for me. I felt something slice through the air at my cheek, and the zombie’s head snapped back, what looked like a ninja throwing star jutting out of its forehead.

I fell, which I would later argue was the deciding move of the night and which saved us. Because I realized that the rib-cage-monitors were just *part* of the demonic computers, and each desk also hid a tower below it. Sure, the tower looked more like a piece of roadkill that someone had jammed lights into than anything, but I knew it was part of



the computer system. I knew it in my bones, just like I knew that the puckered hole at the back was the closest thing to a USB port I was likely to find.

I felt fingers close on my collar. I smelled rotten, fetid breath as a zombie tugged me away. I reached for the port. Shoved the USB stick in. The zombie hauled me back. Slammed me down on the floor. I screamed as its weight fell on me, as its disgusting teeth yawned wide. I felt the teeth on my neck. I felt its fingers clutching at me, grabbing me. I screamed, knowing I was about to die.

*At least I won't have to listen to Mr. Dennis' "wisdoms" anymore, I thought. Crazy? Sure. But you try going down under a pile of undead flesh and see how coherent your thoughts are.*

I stopped screaming as something slapped my cheek. I blinked. Kara was standing above me, her hand raised to give me a second smack. I stopped screaming and she turned the smack-hand into an outstretched



one. I took it and she hauled me to my feet. I turned a slow circle, surveying the damage.

Most of the zombies were in pieces—Kara’s work, I surmised. But some just lay there on the floor, mouths wide open, eyes unblinking as they stared into eternity. “What happened?” I asked.

“The USB had a quantum liturgical firewall,” she said. Off my blank look, she shrugged and said, “Think of it as a networked exorcism. It took down all the zombies at once, and cut off the demonic computers’ communication capacities. No more DDDoS.”

“No more DDDoS,” I repeated. After a moment, I said simply, “Why? How?”

Kara shrugged and grinned. “At IntSec, your computer security—”

“Is our priority,” I finished.

“You got it,” said Kara, then she cocked her head. “What’s the smile for?”

I shrugged. “Just I’d kinda given up on what Eileen said.”



“Eileen from HR?” asked Kara. “What did she say?”

“She said my tests were off the charts, with indicators that I’d be specially suited to some of IntSec’s most difficult jobs.” I wagged my eyebrows at Kara, feeling cocky. Who could blame me? “I guess that was why you picked me for this.”

Kara thought about it. Then she shook her head. “Nah. I had no idea about your scores.”

“Then why did you ask me to come?” I demanded.

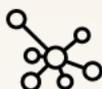
She shrugged. “You were there. And you said you’d already gone to the bathroom, so I figured there’d be less likelihood of your messing your pants when things got real.” Her eyes flicked down. She sighed. “But I guess we can’t have everything.” I blushed. Kara laughed and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, rockstar. IntSec has excellent laundry facilities.”

“Your one-stop shop for every problem,” I muttered.



Kara laughed and said, “No matter how big, how small....”

She waited. I sighed, then finished: “Or how strange!”



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“DDoS of the Dead” was written for Kentik by Michaelbrent Collings. Collings is an international bestseller, multiple Bram Stoker Award finalist, and was voted one of the top 20 All-Time Greatest Horror Writers in a vote of 15,000 readers by Ranker.com. Get several of his books free at his website, [WrittenInsomnia.com](http://WrittenInsomnia.com), or go to [bit.ly/mbcfree](http://bit.ly/mbcfree) — and keep on reading!

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