

## EXIT 9

### *What Has Come Before*

IT HAS BEEN nearly eight months since humanity was rocked with the news of the Sage Flu outbreak in the Mojave Desert of California. The strain was particularly deadly, seeming to kill everyone who became infected. But before it could turn into an even larger problem, it mysteriously lost its potency and disappeared.

The world breathed a collective sigh of relief. They talked of remaining vigilant, but in most people's minds, mankind had dodged a bullet.

If only they'd known the truth, that this was merely a test performed by a group dedicated to giving the human race a restart, and that when this group moved out of the testing phase, things could become much, much worse.

There was, however, a band of people who did know the truth, who had dedicated themselves to trying to keep this horrific plan from becoming reality. But in the months since the test outbreak in the desert, they had made far too little progress.

Unfortunately for them, and for all of humanity, the ones behind the plan had not been experiencing the same problem. They'd been busy.

Very busy.

# 1

## I.D. MINUS 41 DAYS

“This just came in.”

Matt Hamilton took the piece of paper from the communications specialist and looked at the message.

MO KO EB PT TI HU JN RN MU ER UG YS UC ZR JZ CZ CN EN TS LV  
NA HS CG GU HC DV DO MO JN OB HN GU PH OM UI BC WF CU OF  
SR HP OV JG GJ TL OK YS XT KV XD ML CA

“Have you decoded it?” he asked.

An uneasy nod.

“What?”

“It’s from Heron.”

Heron. Their deepest mole, tasked with only one job so as to preserve his cover. A fail-safe.

A second sheet of paper containing the translation was held out.

It’s a go. Sometime in the next seven weeks. Project Eden calls it Implementation Day.

Best location BB n of sixty-six. Sci fac.

The paper slipped from Matt’s hands and fell to the floor. “Dear God.”

## 2

### I.D. MINUS 27 DAYS

THE COLD WAS unrelenting, its fierce bite intensified by the wind that sliced across the ice and snow. How anyone could ever choose to live above the Arctic Circle, Sawyer would never understand. Sure, the work done in most of the research stations that had been built this far north was important, but damn, the weather was brutal.

Of course, it didn't help that he and Napoli were not ensconced inside a building, sucking down hot coffee, and being warmed by heated air. Instead, they were lying prone on top of a ridge, under the near constant night sky of the approaching Arctic winter, as they observed the Brule Institute Outpost.

This was the fourth instillation they'd checked in the last eleven days—one in northern Greenland, and the other two on individual islands in a winding line stretching into Canada. Their current location was Yanok Island, an otherwise uninhabited piece of rock roughly five miles in diameter.

Sawyer and Napoli had been there for twenty-two hours, arriving on a modified, cold-weather fishing boat. They had anchored in a cliff-ringed bay on the side of the island opposite the station. They climbed to the top with the help of an old land slide, and not too far from there they had found a cutout in a small hill—not quite a cave, more an overhang that had kept most of the ground underneath clear from snow. Using tarps and some other gear they'd brought along, they walled it off, and created a heated shelter, complete with two cots, a hot plate, and a two-way, encrypted radio.

So far, the only report they'd sent in was similar to the ones they'd been transmitting since their assignment began: *No sign of unusual activity.*

"Number seven just came outside," Napoli said, looking through their tripod-mounted, night-vision binoculars. Over the course of their observations, they had given a number to each person from the outpost they'd seen, identifying them by some unique aspect of their gear—patches, color, type of boots.

Sawyer lifted his head a fraction of an inch as if he could see the man as easily as Napoli had, but at this distance in the darkness he had a hard time even identifying the main door.

Napoli moved the binoculars. “He’s heading up to the Gazebo.”

Like the numbers they’d given the people, they’d developed a shorthand to describe the facility. The Gazebo was a circular outbuilding, considerably smaller than the main structure. According to the specs they’d been given prior to arriving on the island, it served as the station’s warehouse.

Within the same group of papers was a description of the outpost’s purpose. The Brule Institute was a scientific research organization loosely associated with the University of Heidelberg in Germany. Their goal here was the same as those of most of the other places Sawyer and Napoli had checked—monitoring the effects of global warming on the arctic ice pack.

Napoli leaned back and rubbed his eyes. “He’s inside now.”

“You want me to take over for a while?” Sawyer asked.

“No. I’m still good.” Napoli looked back through the binoculars. “Could use one of those energy bars, though. As long as it’s not frozen solid.”

“I’m only here to serve you,” Sawyer said.

“Well, you’re doing a lousy job.”

With a sneer that couldn’t be seen under his mask, Sawyer crawled over to the pack to his left to grab a bar for his partner. As he opened the bag, he heard a thud. He looked back. Napoli and the binoculars were both lying in the snow.

“Nap?” he asked.

When there was no response, he moved back over.

“Hey, what have you been doing? Drinking on the job?”

Napoli was a bit of a clown sometimes, and Sawyer figured his friend was making a joke about the monotony of their assignment.

“Ha, ha. Funny,” he said, and pushed Napoli in the shoulder.

His friend’s head rolled to the side, and Sawyer saw the bullet hole just above Napoli’s left eye.

Immediately, he grabbed his gun, rolled to the left, then did a rapid, three-sixty scan

of the area. About thirty yards away, two shadowy figures were running up the slope, the nearest pointing a rifle at Sawyer.

“On your feet! Hands in the air!” the man commanded.

Sawyer’s gun was in his hand by his hip. He made a slight adjustment to the barrel and pulled the trigger, knowing the bullet would find its mark. Without waiting for confirmation, he switched his aim to the farther man, and shot again. This one was trickier, the distance and angle both having to be compensated for, but he’d trained for moments like this. It was why he had been selected. Survival of at least one of his team was paramount to their mission.

Even as the nearer man was falling to the snow, the second bullet ripped through the side of his friend’s head.

Staying low, Sawyer checked the area again, his gun tracking with his gaze. He detected no movement. He grunted to his feet, grabbed the pack, and looked back at his friend one more time, knowing he’d have to leave him there. “Sorry, Nap.”

He hurried across the ice and snow to a shallow valley a quarter of a mile away. Parked there out of sight was the specially outfitted motorcycle he and Napoli had ridden across the island on.

He swung his leg over the seat, started it up, and took off along the same path in the snow they’d created on previous trips.

Though they observed no vehicles at the outpost, he knew there had to be some. Snowmobiles, most likely, perhaps even a larger snowcat that could carry more than a couple people. Whatever they had, he was certain they would be coming after him.

There was no question in his mind who these people were. This was not some academic research station, or even a disguised military facility. If it were either of those, Napoli would have still been alive. No, this was something else entirely. This was what he and Napoli had been sent to find.

He now had one job, and one job only. A job he *must* fulfill: get back to the radio and let the others know.

He weaved through several hills, then up onto a wide, flat section that he knew ran for about a mile. Unlike earlier, though, when he reached it, he found himself in a dense cloud that hung tightly to the ground. If it weren’t for their earlier tracks, he would have

had to stop and wait until visibility increased. As it was, his eyes strained to keep the tracks in sight.

At the end of the plain, the road dipped down again, below cloud level. Immediately, he increased his speed, the snow flying up from under his metal-spiked tires and filling the air behind him. Their camp wasn't far now, just a few more minutes at most. The question running through his mind was: should he just grab the radio and make for the boat? Or should he report in first, then get off the island?

Go for the boat. That made the most sense. Once he was surrounded by the sea, it would be harder for them to get to him. At that point, he could radio in without fear of being interrupted.

As he sped toward the overhang, he carefully examined the surrounding area for signs that anyone else might be around. There was no way to know how he and Napoli had been discovered, but one of the possibilities was that the people from the outpost had run across their camp. Thankfully, everything looked as it had when the two of them headed out several hours earlier.

He parked the bike next to the entrance, and ran inside. He headed straight for the radio. It was the only important thing. He stuffed it into its carrying case, returned to the bike, and took off again.

When he finally reached the top of the path that led down to the bay, he stopped. He didn't even consider riding the bike down. That would be a great way to accidentally kill himself. He ditched the bike, and moved as quickly as he could down the makeshift trail. He could see the boat now, rocking on the water. There was something else, too. Even in the short time they'd been on the island, the bay was starting to ice over. Another couple of days and the boat would have been caught in it.

When he reached the bottom, he headed straight for the small Zodiac he and Napoli had used to reach the shore. The craft was right where they'd left it, lashed down and secured to the ground by metal pylons hammered into the ice.

Sawyer quickly undid the rope, and manhandled the boat as far out onto the ice as he dared. He climbed inside, and used one of the emergency oars to shove the Zodiac along until the ice cracked underneath and the boat splashed into the water. He started up the motor and dropped the propeller into the sea. Ignoring the freezing spray from the waves,

he twisted the handle, giving the engine more power, and aimed for the boat.

Every few seconds, he glanced back at the shore, sure he would see half a dozen men with rifles preparing to shoot at him, but the beach and cliffs remained empty. He was going to make it. Once on the boat, he'd kick on the modified dual engines that would have done many tugboats proud, and he'd be miles away in no time.

He brought the Zodiac around to the rear, lifted his pack and the radio onto the aft deck, then climbed aboard. With no time to bring the Zodiac on after him, he secured it to a cleat, giving it enough line so that he could tow it without it getting in the way of the motors.

Once he finished, he grabbed the bags and raced into the cabin, heading straight for the controls. He turned the key and pushed the button to start the engines.

Nothing.

He tried again. Not even a sound.

Had the batteries died? Had water gotten into the fuel line and frozen?

Both he and Napoli had been given crash courses on the ins and outs of all the systems on the boat, so they could take care of any problems themselves. Growing up on a farm surrounded by complex equipment, understanding the boat and its workings had come easily for Sawyer. For Napoli, it had been more of a struggle.

Angry and annoyed, Sawyer turned to head out to the access panels on the deck.

"Your engines are fine," a voice said behind him.

Sawyer reached for his gun.

"Not a good idea. You'll be dead before you lift it an inch."

Sawyer held his hand above the gun's grip for a second longer, then, reluctantly, he let his hand drop to his side. He couldn't allow himself to be killed. Not yet anyway.

Slowly he turned back around.

Standing in the cabin, just to the side of the stairs that led to the living quarters below, was a middle-aged man with close-cropped hair and steely eyes. Behind him at the top of the stairs was a younger man pointing a gun at Sawyer.

"Which one are you?" the middle-aged man asked. "Napoli or Sawyer?"

Sawyer kept his face neutral, hiding his surprise at hearing the names.

"You're probably Sawyer, aren't you? Yes, Sawyer. Napoli was shorter, if I'm not

mistaken. Sorry we had to kill him, but it was either him or you. He just happened to be in the wrong spot.” The man smiled. “Mr. Sawyer, we need your help.”

“Too bad.”

“Spirited. Nice. But I was only being polite. We’re going to get your help whether you give it freely or not.”

Were there more men below? Or was it just the two? If so, Sawyer thought he had at least an even shot at taking them out.

“Son,” the man said. “It would be better for you if you just cooperated. Trust me, you don’t want to go through what will be done to you if you don’t. Let’s save a lot of time, huh? All we need you to do is give us your confirmation code words.”

This time it was harder for Sawyer to keep his expression from cracking. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

*Confirmation codes? Jesus, how did they even know about that?*

The codes were an ever-changing set of phrases used to authenticate the user’s identity.

“I respect that. A lot more than if you had just given them over, that’s for sure,” the man said. “Unfortunately for you, respect is about all I can give you. You need to tell us, or we start ripping you apart. Simple as that.”

Sawyer’s eye twitched. “I’m not telling you anything.”

The man stared at him. “That’s disappointing.”

The boat rocked upward as a particularly large swell passed underneath.

There was no other time. It was now or die.

Sawyer shot a hand out, grabbed the handle of his backpack, and flung it at the man with the gun. Just as it hit him, the guy pulled his trigger, but the barrel had been jerked upward, so the bullet went harmlessly through the ceiling of the cabin. The man with the gun tumbled backward down the stairs.

Sawyer pulled out his pistol and aimed it at the older one.

“I told you I didn’t want to talk,” he said.

The man looked as calm as he had a moment earlier. “And I told you you’re going to talk no matter what.”

The window behind Sawyer shattered. Before he could even turn, he was hit in the

back twice, not by bullets, but by what felt like spikes or—

With a sudden jolt, he lost all control of his body and fell to the ground, his muscles contracting randomly, out of his control.

He had two coherent thoughts before he finally passed out.

The first: *I need to tell the Ranch that I found Bluebird.*

The second: *That's never going to happen.*

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DR. NORRIS TOLD Major Ross it would take no more than an hour to extract the information from the man named Sawyer. It actually took almost three, but this didn't surprise the major. He had seen the determination and drive in the man's eyes as they talked in the cabin on the boat.

No, Sawyer was never going to be easy, but he was always going to lose.

Codes in hand, Major Ross walked down the hall to the room where Sawyer's radio had been set up. The proper frequency had already been tuned in. Now it was just a matter of making the call.

He handed the list to Olsen, who was seated in front of the microphone. It had been determined he had the voice that matched Sawyer's the most.

The major pointed at the appropriate code. "You ready?"

Olsen looked at the list, then back at the script that had been written for him. He jotted in the code at the appropriate place. "Ready now, sir."

The major nodded.

Olsen leaned into the mic.

### 3

#### I.D. MINUS 21 DAYS

#### MUMBAI, INDIA

“HURRY! HURRY!” AYUSH yelled from the truck.

Sanjay ran down the street as fast as he could.

Ayush was leaning out the open back, one hand gripping the side of the vehicle, the other held out toward his cousin. “Faster!”

It was Sanjay’s own fault that he was late. It had been the carambola. It wasn’t that he particularly liked star fruit, but he couldn’t avoid stopping at the stall selling it, the stall Kusum’s family owned. He’d stayed only long enough to see if she was there. If she had been, Sanjay probably wouldn’t have even been in time to see the truck pull away, but the only people working that morning were Kusum’s mother and sister, so he’d continued on his way.

Now he was angry with himself. Ayush had promised to help him get a job today with a European company that was looking for workers. Sanjay should have avoided the market completely. There were so many different routes he could have taken, three of which were shorter than the one he’d chosen. But Kusum...he just wanted to see her, that’s all.

“Sanjay! Come on! You can run faster!”

Sanjay tucked his head down, and concentrated all his energy into his legs. With a burst of speed, he shot forward, and came within a foot of grabbing his cousin’s hand before the truck accelerated out of reach. He slowed, knowing he’d missed his chance.

“Tomorrow,” Ayush yelled as the truck grew more distant. “Don’t be late!”

“I won’t be,” Sanjay said in a near whisper, too winded to yell back, as he moved to the side of the road and watched the truck dwindle to nothing.

What an idiot he’d been. An actual *job* with a European company. According to

Ayush, they were paying more per day than Sanjay usually made in a week. If he had a job like that, maybe he could convince Kusum's parents he was worthy of their daughter.

*Tomorrow*, Ayush had called out. So there was still a chance. Sanjay wouldn't be late next time. He couldn't be. He'd force himself to avoid the fruit stall, and be waiting at the corner *before* Ayush arrived.

Tomorrow, he, too, would become an employee of Pishon Chem, but until then, perhaps a piece of star fruit wouldn't be such a bad idea.

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**13 MILES NORTHWEST OF  
SAN JOSE, COSTA RICA**

ERNESTO RIOS TRIED to move as little as possible. It was a skill he had perfected in the nine years he'd owned the garage on the road between the port in Puntarenas, on Costa Rica's Pacific coast, and San Jose. He had long ago discovered that if he found the exact right position in the airstream of his electric fan, he could almost pretend the humidity didn't affect him.

That wasn't true, of course. The tropical humidity affected everyone. There was just no way around it. But there, in his little office when he had no pressing jobs to finish, he did his best to try.

Of course there was something he should be working on today—the old Ford a customer had given him in lieu of payment. Ernesto had promised his wife he'd get it running and let her use it. So far, he hadn't been able to even turn the engine over.

*Later*, he thought as he closed his eyes. For now, perhaps a little nap wouldn't be a bad idea. Just a few minutes.

A...few...

An air horn blared.

Ernesto's eyes shot open as he sat up, dazed. He'd been so deep in a dream that for a second, he couldn't figure out where he was.

The air horn sounded again.

He jumped up, realizing what it was this time, and circled out into the main part of the garage. Just beyond the single large door stood two men. Parked behind them was a cargo truck with a third man sitting at the wheel. One of the men outside was dressed like

a typical truck driver in jeans and dusty button-up shirt. The other man, though, was wearing a suit, and looked like the businessmen Ernesto would sometimes see on TV. The man's skin was fair, his light-colored hair neat and trim. A foreigner, Ernesto guessed.

*"Hola, señor,"* the trucker said.

*"Hola,"* Ernesto replied. "What can I do for you?"

"We've got a leak in our water hose. Need to get it fixed. Can you do that?"

"Sure. I can fix anything."

The trucker glanced at the man in the suit, then back at Ernesto. "Need to do it quick, though. We have to keep on schedule."

Ernesto shrugged. A busted hose wasn't that big of a deal. He could do it blindfolded. "Let me take a look."

As he stepped out of the garage, he saw that there were three more identical trucks pulled alongside the road, their engines idling. "You all together?"

"Just fix the leak," the suited man said in perfect Spanish.

This surprised Ernesto. Since the suited guy had seemed disinterested, he had assumed the man didn't speak his language. That was obviously not the case, so the garage owner would have to be careful what he said.

The man who'd been behind the wheel climbed out and had the hood open by the time Ernesto and the other two arrived. Ernesto stuck his head inside and checked around. Sure enough, one of the hoses was cracked near one end and no longer able to hold a tight seal. He didn't know if he had the exact same size, but he was sure there'd be something in back that would work.

As he stood up, he smiled and said, "Fifteen minutes."

"Do it in ten, and I'll pay you fifty dollars US," the foreigner said.

That was more than double what Ernesto would have charged. He walked quickly back to the garage, grabbed the tools he would need, and went in search of a replacement pipe. He found three in his supply room that were about the right size. One of them would work for sure.

He replaced the hose with a minute to spare, and pocketed the fifty-dollar bill the suited man gave him. Standing in front of his garage, Ernesto watched as the four trucks

pulled out in unison and continued their eastward journey.

For a fleeting moment, he wondered what they were hauling, but then a drop of sweat ran down the side of his face and all thoughts of the trucks were replaced by images of the fan and the chair in his office.

Half a minute later, he was again perfecting the art of not moving.

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## **THE PORT OF FREMANTLE WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

THE MARY RAE arrived just before dawn, and was guided to the dock of the small harbor at the mouth of the Swan River. There, at exactly 8:30 a.m., the process of removing shipping containers full of food and clothing and other items commenced.

John Palmer's interest was only in the group of twenty-five containers his company had been hired to pick up. They'd first be taken to his warehouse in Perth, then, at a date yet unknown to him, trucked to specific locations throughout Western Australia. His understanding was that this was part of an expansion plan by a Dutch retailer. Apparently, an American competitor was planning a similar expansion, so the Dutch were hoping to get in first and gain a foothold prior to the other company's arrival.

The details didn't really matter. For Palmer, it was getting the business that was important. The years of global stagnation had been hard on his company. He'd had to release some good people, and even sell one of his distribution centers. But this was a big job. Not only were there the twenty-five containers today, but at least another hundred were on their way over in the next two weeks. Beyond that, his new client had indicated that similar shipments would continue on a monthly basis if everything went according to their business plan.

He sure as hell hoped it did. Palmer Transport & Shipping wouldn't be totally out of the woods, but the steady business would help. With any luck, other companies would also be expanding into the west.

By two p.m., all twenty-five containers had arrived at his warehouse and were being offloaded by his men.

As instructed, he called his contact at Hidde-Kel Holdings, the parent company of the retail chain.

“Mr. Vanduffel, John Palmer in Perth.”

“John, good to hear from you. How are you?” Mr. Vanduffel spoke English well enough to almost but not quite hide his Dutch accent.

“I’m well, thanks. You?”

“Very good. Thank you.”

Without even thinking about it, Palmer began doodling on the pad of paper next to his phone. It was an old habit, an outlet for the frustrated teenage artist still buried deep inside him. “Just wanted to let you know that your first shipment’s arrived, and at this very moment is being safely stored away in my warehouse.”

“Excellent news. How does everything look? Any sign of damage?”

“Checked the containers myself and they all look fine on the outside. Do you want us to open them up and do an inspection?”

Mr. Vanduffel paused as if considering the idea. “No, I don’t think that will be necessary. But thank you for offering.”

“Not a problem. If you change your mind, happy to do it.”

“Thank you. I should have the distribution plan worked out in the next day or so, and will send it to you then. My hope is to have the containers that arrived today already on their way to the different sites before the next shipment comes in.”

“That would be great but no worries. I have the room if that doesn’t work out.”

“Good to know. Thank you again. We appreciate your efficiency. Have a good day.”

“You, too.”

Palmer snickered at the drawing he created, a rendering of what he thought Mr. Vanduffel looked like. Not half bad, either, though the mustache he’d given him was a little cartoony for his taste. He tossed the drawing in the trash, and walked back out to the warehouse floor. He was happy to see that over half the containers were already stacked in place.

Yes, he thought. Things *were* getting better. He could feel it. The worst was behind them.

Next year would be great.

**HAWKINS UNIVERSITY  
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI**

JEANNIE SAUNDERS SHUT her book. “Okay, I’m done.”

Corey Wilson smiled, but kept his eyes on his laptop’s screen. “You finished all five chapters?”

“Four.”

“Thought you had to do five.”

From the corner of his eye, he could see her scowl. “I’ve read enough for today. Come on. Let’s go get something to eat.”

This time he did look up. “Don’t know if you noticed, but, unlike you, I haven’t finished yet.”

“That paper’s not even due until the end of the semester,” she argued.

“Because it’s a *research* paper. Meaning I’ve gotta do a lot of research first before I write it.”

“Ugh!” She leaned back in her chair. “What am I supposed to do? Just sit here and wait?”

“Go get something to eat.”

“How much longer are you going to be here?”

“At least another couple of hours.”

“Come on, Corey. I’m hungry.”

“Go. I’m not stopping you.”

The scowl reappeared. “Fine.” She stood up. “Want me to bring you back something?”

“Banana?”

She came around the table, leaned down, and gave him a kiss. “You’d better still be working when I come back.”

As she walked away, he returned his attention to his computer. The research paper he was working on was for a class called Business of Agriculture 523. Ag business also happened to be the emphasis of the MBA he was working on. The assignment was to pick out a particular agriculture-associated company and do a detailed analysis of their business model, strengths, and weaknesses. Corey had chosen Varni Gen-Sym, a seed

company specializing in genetically enhanced produce. The reason he went with Varni was because it was the same company that had been providing seeds to his uncle's farm for the last several years.

What he hadn't expected was to find that the company was basically boring. There was no real meat to sink his teeth into. Not only was it a family-run business that only sold seeds, but it didn't even develop its own product. Instead, it licensed its seed designs from others, and had no research arm of its own. Even its profit was steady but unremarkable.

He'd decided that morning he was going to look around and see if he could find something more interesting. The big problem was, the obvious companies had already been snatched up by his classmates. He needed to find something different, perhaps a little unusual, a company no one else would have even thought to claim.

So far he'd come up with a couple of different possibilities. Top on that list was Komai Produce. It was a regional company in the Pacific Northwest, so not well known to the students of Hawkins University. What Corey liked about Komai was that it was considerably more diverse than Varni. It had started off as a produce distributor, but had since entered several other areas including produce display, where it had a division that created consumer-friendly bins and storage units that kept produce fresh by means of micro-temperature control and automated misters.

Corey particularly liked the fact Komai was expanding while a lot of other organizations were holding pat. That afternoon he was working his way through articles about the company, starting with the earliest he could find and moving forward.

The story he'd been reading when Jeannie interrupted him was from six months earlier. He finished that, then moved on to the next one, but after only a few paragraphs he looked up, frustrated. Turned out Komai had been purchased outright five months earlier by a company called Hidde-Kel Holdings.

That was a bummer. He'd really liked the small-guy-against-the-world aspect, and was far less interested in recounting the successes of a larger conglomerate.

Having already spent so much time on Komai, he read some more, wanting to understand the original owners' motivation for selling. Though the details were kept private, it appeared as though the three friends who started Komai had come out of the

deal considerably wealthier than they had ever expected. They had created a good company so Corey wasn't particularly surprised. He noted one odd thing, though. None of the three founders was asked to stay on beyond the date of final purchase. Wasn't that pretty standard practice, to ensure stability and continuity for an organization as it moved forward? Apparently Hidde-Kel had decided it was unnecessary in this case.

Maybe there was something here of interest after all—what happens to a regional food business after it's purchased by a larger company.

*Yeah, that might work.*

In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. He could even get a little bit into the parent company and show why the two were a good fit—or not. This could be a huge paper if he wasn't careful, but that thought didn't scare him at all. It was more like a challenge.

*The Effects of Hidde-Kel Holdings on Komai Produce.* A no-brainer title.

He didn't need to look any further. This was it. This was what he wanted to do. Sure, it was a slight spin on the assignment, but it wouldn't take much to talk Professor Nesbitt into okaying it.

With renewed enthusiasm, he hit the Web. First up, find out more about Hidde-Kel and see what else they might be into.