

AVS & KILTECH

Summary

Indicators of Compromise is a story by Stefan Burden that focuses on the story of Kay, an auditor who finds himself in too deep during an audit at an electronics business called KilTech.

Focus of World

This world appears in a story titled Indicators of Compromise. The story takes place mostly within the KilTech premises.

Major Locations

KilTech

Kilverlay Technology, or 'KilTech' for short, specialise in electronics assembly for off-the-shelf and custom items, along with sales and sales support of the assembled products, along with their shipping and dispatch. They sell printed circuit boards and various related components according to a variety of product specifications.

KilTech as a whole has 500 employees. The workers there span a wide range of ages and mostly work on day shifts, although the hours worked tend to span further than the general full-time standard of 9am - 5pm.

Boardroom

The auditors and KilTech's representatives occasionally visit this room.

Main Production Building

This building is mentioned in chapter 2 onwards. It has high security arrangements, appropriate to the storage and production of the electronics that KilTech produces here.

Main Offices

These are higher up in the building. They are light, airy, clean and tidy, and quite formal in their decor.

AVS Auditing

AVS is less fancy than KilTech but still has a modern edge to its branding and offices. The business is smaller than KilTech too. It is situated within the heart of the city, which gives it a smaller, more 'squeezed' feeling than KilTech, which boasts offices on the outskirts. AVS' hierarchy of power is Owner > Line Manager > Senior Auditor > Auditor.

AVS stands for Audit Vertex Services ('Vertex' meaning apex or the highest point), however the company's name is usually shortened to simply AVS, even among the company's own employees.

[Apex Vetting and Service Auditing]
[Admired, Valued, Stable Auditing]

The Hotel

Kay and Max, the auditors, stay at a hotel for the duration of Indicators.

A&E

There isn't much to say about the hospital except for the fact that it's over-stretched at the time Max is sent there, and that this impacts the amount of time that can be spent investigating the root cause of his black out, especially as he recovers when he gets there.

Geography

Climate

Indicators of Compromise takes place entirely within the UK.

It rained for most of the week that Kay and Max were present to complete the KilTech audit. Other than that, the location has little significance to the story.



The cast of Indicators of Compromise comprises two major groups of people: the auditors and the KilTech employees. The main individuals who we see at KilTech are the Directors or their higher-up aides, while the main AVS cast are auditors.

Auditors

The story follows two auditors, Kay and Max, who work for AVS.

Max Williams

Max is in his 30s and has been an auditor for 5 years. He works well with Kay and they consider one another as friends, to the point where they have had the occasional falling-out, which they have considered it worth the effort to patch up for the sake of their friendship. Max is the more outgoing of the pair. He specialises in networks.

Kaiden Seeker

Like Max, Kay (short for Kaiden) is also in his 30s and has also been an auditor for around 5 years. Although he is quieter and more reserved than Max he is more than capable of standing up for himself. He also takes a more direct approach to the more difficult questions that inevitably arise as part of the auditor role, and tends to ask these when Max is reluctant to.

During his younger years he used to experience anxiety. Max knew him during this time and stood by him when he needed support. Kay went to see a therapist to help with his anxiety and Max gave him the space and support to make the best use of that therapy.

While Kay was in the earlier stages of this therapeutic work, he had an unpleasant experience at work. A manager was celebrating his birthday and Kay had been feeling particularly lacking in confidence that day. Max had taken the time to convince Kay to be there. A notably unpleasant employee caught Kay unawares, scared him, and that put Kay into fight or flight mode. He cursed the colleague out, shoved him out of the way, and stormed off - and in particular, he stormed past Carl.

Carl recognised this as out of character for Kay and turned a blind eye to this, and Max went after him. Kay had found an office to hide in and, although he wouldn't let Max in to talk over what had happened, he offered support in the best way he could.

After that, Kay and Max became firm friends. Their bond came as a result of Max helping Kay through his hardest times and that continues to be a strong aspect of their friendship.

Another element of the strength of their friendship comes from the fact that their personalities and working styles contrast so much. This means that they can cover a lot of ground while working together, while their friendship means that they are able to communicate well and accept, and compliment, each others' different approaches to work. For this reason they have become a great team.

Carl

Carl is Max and Kay's line manager. He prefers an informal approach to any given problem if he can, however he is perfectly capable of being severe when the situation demands it.

Carl is wonderfully non-judgemental. A few years prior to the Indicators story, when Max approached him with concerns for Kay's well-being, he ensured that he did the best he could by Kay, by signposting him towards Tony (see below) and then supporting him, including for the period of time that Kay temporarily found that his condition got worse (Carl was well aware that this is a common feature of counselling and anticipated it in Kay).

Tony

Tony is a counsellor with a contract with AVS. It was him who Kay was sent to see when he had a particularly difficult time with his anxiety, several years before the events of the Indicators story. Kay was granted a certain number of sessions with Tony, subsidised by AVS. However, Kay found the counselling so effective that when the subsidisation ended, he continued to see Tony to continue his work.

Tony agreed to work via Zoom (an encrypted equivalent of Skype frequently used by counsellors) with Kay to avoid making Kay travel to him.

KilTech Staff

Indicators of Compromise features several individual KilTech members of staff, and several teams.

Eric Richardson

One of the three Directors of KilTech, he is the one to show the auditors around. He is overweight and ageing, and quite genial in a formal kind of way. However, he does not like to be pushed about certain aspects of KilTech.

Daniel Raleigh

The second of KilTech's Directors. He shows up later in the story. Daniel is Irish and likes to go on holiday to hot destinations and has the tan to prove it. His father founded KilTech and bequeathed a large amount of equity in the business to Daniel.

The youngest of the three Directors, he is only a few years older than Kay - 35 - and often clashes with Eric over their differing approaches to how to operate the business. As far as Eric is concerned, he has far more experience with running a business at this level than Daniel does, and feels that Daniel lacks the experience to run it well. Perhaps it was inevitable that they would butt horns. Ultimately Daniel is the majority shareholder so he has final say, which only adds to the friction.

Kiera

KilTech's Security Consultant, she got an apprenticeship at KilTech after leaving school. Ever the optimist, she accompanies Eric as he shows the auditors around in order to keep an eye on the situation - security is her line of work, after all. She is non-confrontational in the workplace so whenever Eric feels pushed she normally leaves him to fend for himself. For the purposes of Indicators of Compromise, she holds back from defending Eric for a second reason: she has something of a soft spot for Max.

Max has come to KilTech for several audits in the past and their friendship built over the course of those few visits, possibly even leading to a romantic connection. Whether or not that is true, Kiera often regales Max with tales of her elderly Indian parents trying to work modern technology, to both of their amusements. She is much more conversational than Eric, and has near-perfect English due to immigrating at a young age.

Susanne

KilTech's Head of Marketing and KilTechn's third and final Director. She has less of a hands-on role than Eric and Daniel and instead gives counsel and makes up the voting party. She prefers to be on the marketing side of things and to keep the marketing and PR of KilTech running smoothly.

She can be blunt at times and prefers to use money to get someone's attention, but is amicable enough to deal with clients when required.

History

Indicators takes place over a few short days, however the story makes more sense if you know the history of the businesses involved. Here are a few key details about the events prior to the story.

Major Events

KilTech is externally audited twice a year, on a routine basis. Internally they run audits on a quarterly basis. During an external audit, Max and Kay require access to the previous internal audit reports, in addition to checking previous external reports.

Audit 1

Prior to Indicators of Compromise, an audit was carried out by two other AVS employees in relation to KilTech's sales paperwork, including checking records of customer complaints and the reasons for them.

Audit 2

The audit that occurs during the events of Indicators of Compromise is in relation to security (both physical and logical), paper trails relating to suppliers and similar threads of enquiry, and ensuring that compliance requirements are met.

Max detects the presence of a wireless security network in action which he does not believe should be there. It raises questions about KilTech's security so he and Kay investigate it as a potential security breach.

Max's Blackout

When Max discovers the energy spike, he and the auditing party agree to take a brief coffee break before settling into the task of investigating it. Although he asks for decaf (he cannot tolerate caffeine due to a case of supraventricular tachycardia) he is given ordinary coffee, and it causes him to black out.

Max remains out for 5-10 minutes and is taken to hospital. He comes around when he gets there, however he is still not fully himself and has no further reason to stay at the hospital as they are too over-stretched to run tests on him, so he returns to the hotel while Kay returns to KilTech to continue the audit alone.

Kay would have preferred to have stayed with Max, however with waiting times in the hospital so unpredictable, he couldn't afford to potentially spend so long away from his posting. After his day at KilTech he returns to the hotel to type up their notes and observations, as he waits for Max to update him about his condition.

Max is undermined enough by the black out that he stays away the following day too.

This leaves Kay feeling uncertain about KilTech's approach to his and Max's well-being, but he cannot prove anything due to Max's pre-existing sensitivity to caffeine.

Max knows that he is overly sensitive to caffeine due to the sometimes dull nature of his job. Every auditor has taken the occasional dose of caffeine tablets to help them get through longer, more arduous auditing projects. Max subsequently learned that, rather than making him feel alert and eager to continue, he felt light-headed and weak.

Subsequent to this, Max mentioned his wooziness after taking caffeine tablets to AVS' First Aider, which was then noted down in the First Aider's records. In the run-up to KilTech's second audit, this information was found and used by KilTech.

Kay does his best to continue with the audit in spite of Max's medical episode. He finds this rather difficult, not only due to his deep concern over his friend (indeed, even after Max returns to the hotel and they settle down for the night he has difficulty sleeping), but also due to the fact that his audit does nothing to allay his concerns that something untoward is happening at KilTech.

During an evening half way through the audit, Kay goes down to the bar for a drink without Max, and meets Daniel, who has just returned to the country. Neither man knows who the other is and by coincidence, they get talking to one another.

At the end of the audit (but before the Endgame scenario below), Kay and Max join the Directors in the boardroom to discuss their findings. Kiera is also present to listen to their report. This is when Kay sees Daniel and realises who he really is; he loses his ability to concentrate and goes into a mild panic. Max notices this and steps in to take over. Eric, on the other hand, is visibly uncomfortable and stays quiet.

There is a list of non-compliances to be discussed, and Eric becomes noticeably uncomfortable and quiet when the agenda reaches these. Each item on the list has possible recommendations for correction or improvement, and there are enough orders of business to discuss that the meeting is broken into two parts with a break half-way through.

During this break, Daniel, Kiera and Max go off together, and Kay goes his own way to get a coffee, find a quiet place (he finds a deserted side office), and does a little more work while he waits for the second half of the meeting.

Endgame

Kay's solitude at KilTech leads directly to the endgame of the Indicators story.

Eric finds Kay in the side office and attempts to bribe him to the tune of two years' wages, saying: "Whatever you make in a year, I'll double it and pay you right now to clear your report.". Kay refuses, although the situation escalates to the point where Kay feels that Max is being threatened.

Daniel happens to pass by at this time and hears the raised voices in a side office that should, at that time, be empty. He enters to see Eric and Kay having a heated discussion - more particularly, Eric getting heated with Kay, and Kay standing his ground with some difficulty. Both stop and look at him as he enters so he diffuses the situation by saying, "What is this, the 1950s?" This ends the confrontation and soon afterwards, they all go into the second half of the Endgame meeting.



Corporate culture takes centre stage in Indicators of Compromise.

KilTech

The culture here is centered around quality. KilTech has been around for a long time and uses this to leverage a sense of being trustworthy.

In addition to this, KilTech's staff have a clear sense of hierarchy, which can be easily noticeable, even to visitors.

The mood at KilTech is rather lower than that of AVS. As an electronics company, and as a bespoke manufacturer of goods (not to mention the efforts going on that are being covered up in the Endgame scenario) the company keeps a lot of secrets, whether they're patents or unethical cover-ups. The staff are overseen far more closely to ensure that they do not leak KilTech's secrets, and this impacts staff morale.

AVS

The culture of AVS is quietly studious, sober, and sensible by nature. While it's not necessarily austere, it can become so depending on the employee and the situation.

Often the general culture is mild-mannered and curious. However, unlike KilTech, the staff there have a certain amount of freedom to work in the way that fits them best. Although confidentiality is an important part of employment at AVS, the secrets that the staff uncover do not weigh on their consciences. In addition to this, the smaller payroll headcount means that the staff of AVS get better, and the smaller workforce is conducive to the power structure being less rigid.

To put it simply, people are friendlier at AVS.

Handling of Differences/Bigotry

Two businesses are central to the Indicators story, and their approach to the fair treatment of their staff is a background detail to the story. If you're interested in the character development in Indicators, this information is well worth knowing.

KilTech

The culture at KilTech is predictably corporate, with an HR department, observance of Equal Opportunities laws, and so on. With that in mind, it is something of an open secret at KilTech that Eric is homophobic. He is wise enough to corporate culture to keep this under wraps and only rarely makes a snide comment, usually in response to a news report or similar.

[The work being done in secret in the heavily-guarded room may or may not be to a given individual or demographic's detriment but we're not sure yet. We'll return to this when we feel ready.]

AVS

While there is little to say on the subject of observable bigotry within AVS, some members of staff are known to have something of a superiority complex. Working at an auditing company - a company that holds so much power over other businesses - has rather gone to the heads of some members of staff.

From time to time Max makes jokes to this effect, but not often, and he doesn't expect to be taken seriously.

Overall however, the employees of AVS are generally notably benign, and Max and Kay's manager is known for caring about his team members.

Social Politics

Although Indicators is the story of a corporate scandal, there are several relationships that are integral to the story and without which the story would be far less rich. The most notable ones include:

Max and Kay

In addition to being colleagues, Max and Kay are friends. Max tends to be the more outgoing of the two, but is also more reluctant to rock the proverbial boat, while Kay is more prone to keeping to himself but will ask the difficult questions when needed.

Daniel and Eric

Discussing any relationship between Eric and anybody else can be somewhat tricky as Eric keeps his cards close to his chest, so it can be argued that few people see him as he really is. However, the person Eric is the most honest with is Daniel, as the pair of them have worked together far too much and become passionate about far too many subjects (although that has been mainly the wellbeing of KilTech) for Eric to have kept his intentions entirely secret.

Daniel inherited the business from his father but has a very different view of how it should be run to Eric. Eric, given his upbringing in a certain generation, is prone to certain points of view that look very bigotted to Daniel. The two tend to butt horns quite often.

Law

There are multiple examples of potential law-breaking in Indicators of Compromise.

[The Endgame of this story is still somewhat uncertain, however we may wish to revisit the extent of KilTech's non-compliance with their security requirements.]

Eric's Bribery

Eric's bribery of Kay towards the end of the story deserves a mention here as a failure to prevent a bribery from occurring, courtesy of The Bribery Act 2010. Eric bribes Kay with twice Kay's annual salary (which would add up to £100k).

Economy

[Do we want to specifically say that the story of Indicators of Compromise happened in the run-up to Brexit?]

Endgame Scenario

[The inducing factor for the endgame scenario continues to be uncertain, however it may have been prompted by the state of the economy as of 06/10/19, as we expect that the UK's economy will go into recession due to Brexit. Most likely KilTech were either testing for a new product or service, finding a way to undermine the competition, or

rendering their clients more dependant upon themselves (and therefore to make sure they spend more with KilTech, or at least continue to spend without wandering off)]

Medicine

Max's Caffeine Sensitivity

Max is sensitive enough to caffeine for it to affect his well-being. When he reached the age of 30 he developed a minor heart condition, and when this happened, he developed an adverse sensitivity to caffeine. He found that caffeine made him feel light-headed and tired, and mentioned this to his First Aider at work.

This information was discovered by KilTech prior to his project there, and exploited to render Max unable to do his part of the auditing task.

KilTech learned of this as a result of a conversation between themselves and Max's line manager. They asked whether Max and Kay had any particular dietary requirements, and Max's line manager revealed the information on the basis of this being a hospitable gesture, not a request for medical information.

Kay's Anxiety Counselling

During the earlier days of Max and Kay's friendship, Max noticed the extent of Kay's anxiety. It caused Kay a significant impact on his quality of life, but he didn't seem able to do anything about it. Out of concern for Kay, Max approached their line manager to ask for help on Kay's behalf.

This led to Kay receiving subsidised counselling for a short period of time. He found it helpful, and continued work with the same counsellor, paying for it himself when AVS ceased funding it.

Distribution of Goods

Dispatch and Shipping

This is part of the audit that Max and Kay are employed to audit, and they find it to be very badly maintained and in a big mess. The level of disorganisation was so great, and so incongruent with the orderliness of the other trails they had to audit, that between them they suspected the disorganisation to be deliberate obfuscation.

Credits

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~Hayley, The Character Consultancy