

SSH and keys

Network Startup Resource Center
www.nsrc.org



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Passwords are bad!

- A large proportion of security failures are due to passwords
 - Users choose poor passwords
 - Users write them down or share them
 - Passwords can be guessed or brute-forced
 - Passwords can be sniffed or key-logged
 - People hate forced password changes and password complexity tests, and will work around them

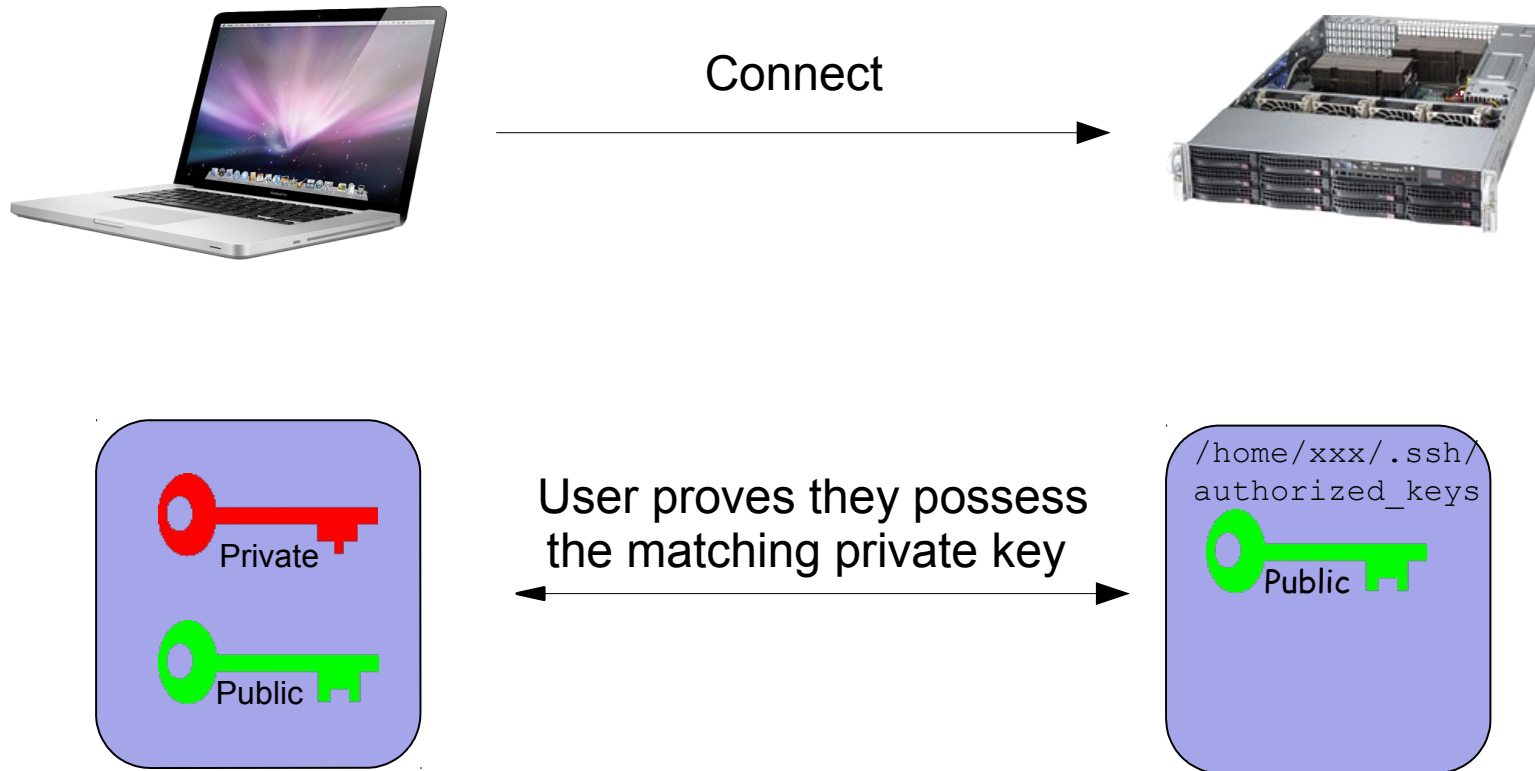
SSH and system administration

- SSH gives you remote command-line access to systems
- Therefore a very attractive target for attackers
- Traffic is **encrypted**, which at least makes it hard to sniff passwords off the network
 - Much better than telnet
- But in addition, SSH allows you to use **cryptographic keys** instead of passwords

Using crypto keys with SSH

1. Generate a Private/Public key pair
2. Copy the public key onto each of the systems you want to be able to log into
 - It goes into `$HOME/.ssh/authorized_keys`
3. Log in with ssh, using your private key to prove your identity to the other system, instead of a password

User authentication with keys



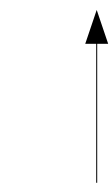
Generating a key pair

- This is a one-time operation
- For Windows/putty: use **puttygen.exe**
- For Linux and OSX: use **ssh-keygen**
- There are four different key types
 - rsa (v1 obsolete), rsa (v2), dsa, ecdsa
- We recommend you use RSA version 2 with a key length of 2048 bits (-t rsa -b 2048)
- You get a private key and a related public key

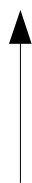
OpenSSH public key looks like this

- One very long line of text

```
ssh-rsa AAAAB3NzaC1..... you@yourmachine
```



Key type



Key data



Label
(identifier)

- Safe for copy-paste (but beware line wrap)
- puttygen has a different native format but can also export the above format

Understand the difference!

- Your **private key** is like the Crown Jewels
- Your **public key** is like a photograph of the Crown Jewels
- Which of these would you be happy to send via the postal service? :-)
- Never give your private key to anyone else
- Never send your private key via E-mail
 - Should you need to transfer it, do so via a secure channel like scp or sftp

Keeping your private key safe

- Keep it on the machine where it was generated
 - usually your laptop
 - plus a secure backup, e.g. USB key in a safe
- Protect it with a strong **passphrase**
- The key is actually stored encrypted on your hard disk; the passphrase decrypts it
- So an attacker would need both to steal the key file **and** know your passphrase
 - "2-factor authentication": something you have, and something you know

Disabling passwords over SSH

- Once you have key authentication working, you can disable fallback to password auth

```
# editor /etc/ssh/sshd_config
```

```
PasswordAuthentication no
```

```
ChallengeResponseAuthentication no
```

```
PermitRootLogin without-password
```

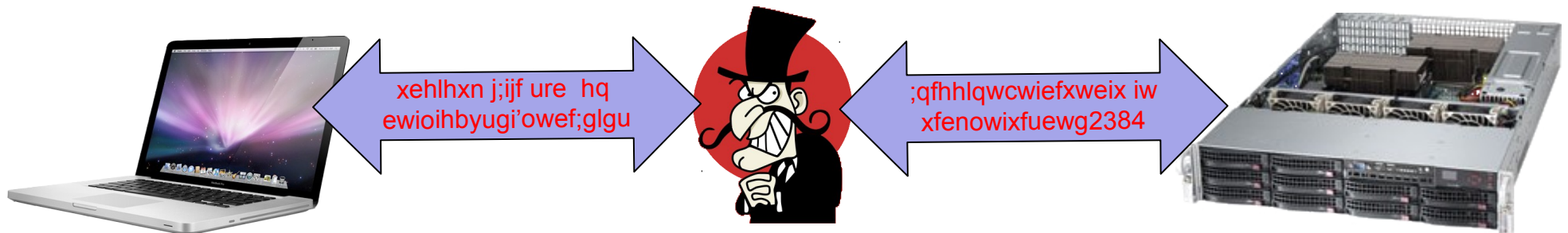
```
-- or --
```

```
PermitRootLogin no
```

```
# service ssh restart
```

Man-in-the-middle attacks

- How do you know you did not actually connect to someone else, who is decrypting your traffic and re-encrypting it to the remote host?



Host keys

- Solution: the host you are connecting to, also has its own key
- The host proves its own identity to you each time you connect
- The first time you connect, you will be shown the host's "fingerprint" (hash of public key)
 - If you've ever used SSH, even with passwords, you will have seen this prompt
- Future connections will check that the same host key is seen

Host key verification

- If later there is a man-in-the-middle, on connection your ssh client will see the MITM's key instead of the host's key
- It won't match, you will get an error and the connection is dropped
- Questions:
 - What happens if you reinstall the host's OS?
 - What effect might this have on your users?
 - How are you going to deal with it?

Questions?

- Now do the exercise: SSH with public key authentication

SSH Agent

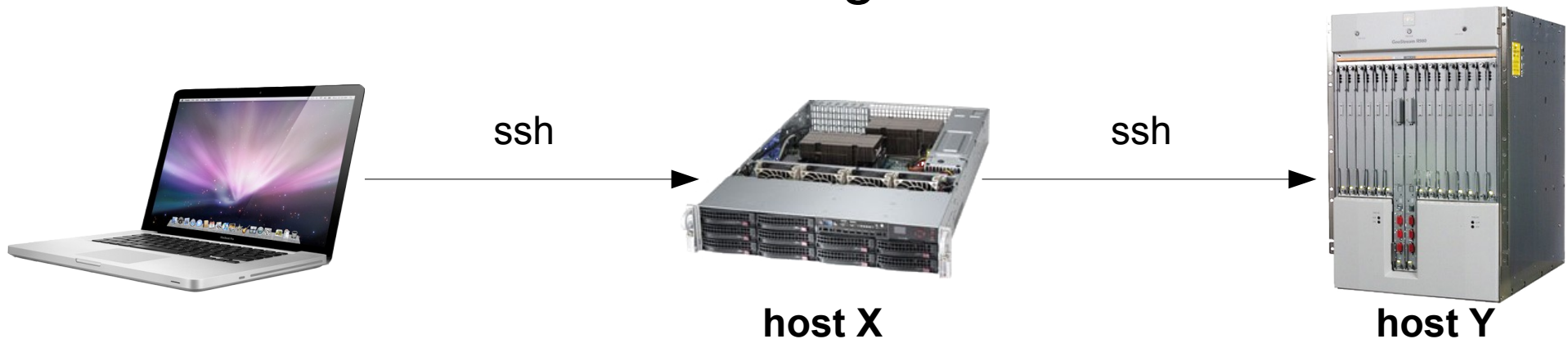
- Having to enter your passphrase every time you log in is tedious
- However there is a simple solution to this: the SSH Agent
- Once you have decrypted your private key once with your passphrase, the Agent keeps the decrypted key in RAM
- Subsequent logins don't prompt you at all
- This makes SSH + keys **very convenient!**

Installing SSH agent

- For Windows/putty: download **pageant.exe**
 - Start it
 - Select your private key file
 - Enter your passphrase
- OSX: already has it
- Linux with Unity/Gnome/KDE: already has it

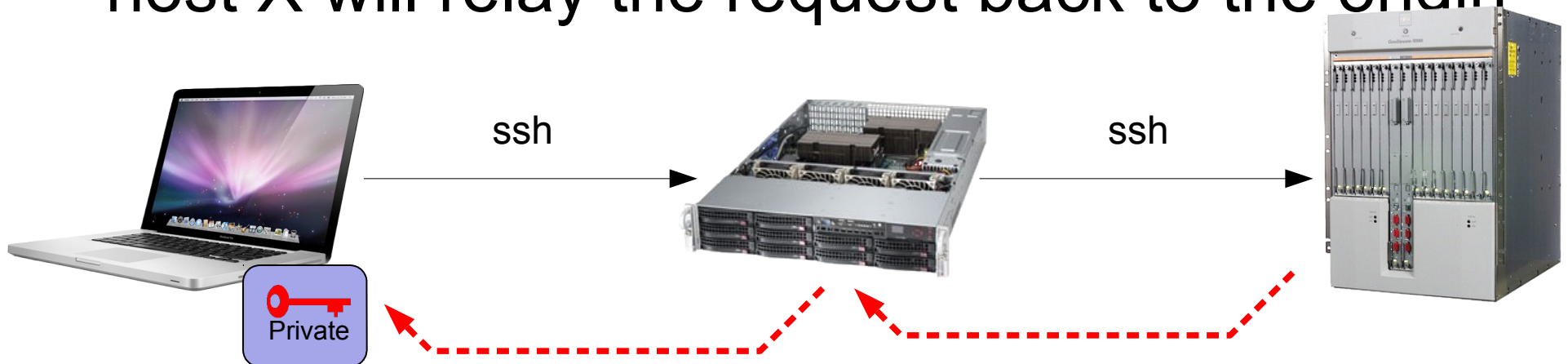
Multi-hop authentication

- Sometimes it is necessary to ssh into host X, and then ssh from host X to host Y
 - e.g. due to network ACLs
 - or because host Y is on a private IP address
 - or because you are running some sysadmin tool on host X which needs to log in to host Y



Agent forwarding

- You may be tempted to copy your private key from your laptop to host X, but DON'T!
- There is a better way: turn on Agent Forwarding when you connect to host X
- Host Y will try to authenticate from host X, and host X will relay the request back to the origin



Summary

- SSH + key is **very secure**
 - Disable password authentication to get max benefit
- SSH + key + agent is **very convenient**
 - Type passphrase just once at start of day
 - No need to type passwords each time you login
 - No need to regularly change passwords across many hosts
 - Agent forwarding permits multi-hop logins
- *You need to deploy this!*

Questions?

- Now do the exercise: SSH with agent