Worse than Stuxnet

A drama in three Acts

By

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CHARACTERS

Andrew little, 19

Jake garcia, 23

General matthias, 50

Contractor, 25

President Haynes, 45

Secretary of defense smith, 40

Secretary of state Kim, 37

Secretary of energy Zhao, 33

National Security Advisor Matthews, 35

President’s bodyman, 21

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Kelly, 40

Chinese president li Han, 45

PRC Minister of National Defense Yan, 40

Yan’s replacement, 43

Time

This play takes place in the not-too distant future. Act 1 continues on a two-month period prior to a problematic cyberattack on China and allows us to watch the immediate aftermath. Act 2 takes place immediately following Act 1 over the course of several hours at the beginning of a confrontation between the United States and China. Act 3 takes place immediately after the period in act 2 but in China.

PLACE

Act 1 takes place at a computer room at Fort Meade. Technical equipment is everywhere, but it is kind of strewn. This is a place run by hackers. It is cluttered and chaotic, but there is a weird method to the madness. Maybe the Art of Computer Science is on the floor or a poster of Einstein is hung up, but it is clear that this is a place where smart people work around the clock solving hard problems.

Act 2 takes place in the war room of the Pentagon. The characters in the act are sitting around a large table A large map of the world is on the wall behind them. Everything is immaculate and well put-together. This is a place run by professionals. An air of importance, seriousness, and busyness permeates everything. Everyone is anxious about the looming threat.

Act 3 takes place immediately after act 2 but from the Chinese perspective. A large People’s Republic of China flag hangs in the background.

Scene I-1: The whiteboard stage

(ANDREW and Jake are sitting in the bullpen of an office. They both have laptops and desks, but they are sitting together away from them. A red digital clock sits behind the two. The office is relatively barren and sparse. It is the typical government office. Andrew dresses in business casual and is clean cut. Andrew is a typical government employee. Jake is wearing a hoodie and has stubble. Jake is an archetypal young hacker.)

JAKE

We have 60 days--

andrew

60 days to design the most complex piece of software ever developed.

jake

60 days to build, test, and implement an exploit never envisioned in the history of hacking.

andrew

60 days to save the free world.

jake

60 days to perform a miracle.

andrew

60 days to rewrite the rules of computer science.

Jake

There’s no way we can get this done in time.

andrew

It’s impossible.

jake

Are you thinking what I’m thinking?

andrew

I think I am.

Jake

(The following two lines should be said simultaneously.)

We should take the rest of the day off.

andrew

We have to get started right away.

jake

Andrew. You have some bedrock misconceptions about federal government employment.

andrew

This is an important assignment. This is why I joined the NSA!

Jake

Look, I understand that you’re young, impressionable, and naïve, but listen to me very carefully! This is the federal government. You clock in. You clock out. In 40 years, you get watch recognizing your service and a pension. If you do well enough, you get to go to heaven—Which in this case is a job as a defense contractor.

(CONTRACTOR walks in and sits at a desk nearby to the two employees. He puts over the ear headphones on and starts coding at his computer.)

andrew

Speak of the devil.

Jake

(JAKE corrects Andrew.)

Not technically the devil. Just works for the devil. The devil’s contractor.

andrew

Speak of the demon.

jake

Better! Look at him code. He’s so focused.

andrew

I’ve seen his programs. They’re sloppy. They have no heart. They’re the sort of thing you’d get at an assembly line. They’re the exact reason I didn’t want to work in the private sector.

jake

Yeah. And we all know that your code is so brilliant.

andrew

I write poetry. My last subroutine could have won a Pulitzer.

jake

If anyone outside of this building ever saw it…

andrew

Why can’t you support me on anything?

jake

I supported you in hating the contractor.

contractor

(CONTRACTER points to headphones)

You know these are just for show, right? They help me focus. They’re not actually playing anything.

andrew

That’s good because we need your help.

jake

Need is a strong word. His help is a want at best.

andrew

Jake, we are on a strict deadline. I don’t like him either, but we need him.

contractor

(CONTRACTER takes off headphones)

I don’t even know why I wear these. So, what’s the ask?

Jake

Do you have any experience performing miracles? Maybe you did a stint working for Jesus before you came here?

Contractor

Shit job, huh?

andrew

It’s a great opportunity. Really exciting!

contractor

You seriously prefer the kid to me?

jake

His optimism will go away with enough time. Your pay will always be higher than ours.

contractor

He looks like he just got out of diapers. I swear these programmers get younger and younger.

jake

Hey! He’s not that young. He just got out of pull ups, thank you! He wears big boy pants now.

andrew

Shut up!

jake

We’re just playing with you.

contractor

Maybe you were…

andrew

Can you two focus for one second?

jake

Why? It’s not like this project will ever see the light of day. I have seen it a million times before. The higher ups demand the world. We work our asses off to deliver it. Then at the last second, some suit gets cold feet, and suddenly the project is killed without a second thought.

contractor

I plan on giving the client wool socks for Christmas this year. Maybe that will help things a little.

jake

Must be nice to have contractor money.

andrew

Enough! Listen! We have sixty days to execute the gamble of our lives, and I want to throw the dice here.

Contractor

Okay. Okay. You’re not paying me to stand around. Again, what’s the job?

andrew

You know how China is trying to develop a semiconductor industry? They want to make a ten year leap this year. We’re going to set back their progress ten years.

contractor

No shit! Really? How?

andrew

You know ASML Holding?

Contractor

Sure. Dutch company, right?

jake

Largest photolithography company in the world.

Andrew

Basically the only game in town for the equipment China needs to build the next generation of semiconductors. Well, ASML is selling China a massive shipment of the newest generation of photolithography machines. The sale goes through exactly sixty days from today. We’re going to add a vulnerability to the machines that will make them malfunction. It will slow down development dramatically.

contractor

I can see why Jake called this ambitious.

jake

I think my exact word was impossible.

contractor

If China can develop the next generation of chips, that’s bad news for the United States, but the Dutch don’t care. They just want profit. How are we even getting our code on the machines?

Andrew

ASML won’t know we messed with their tech. We have a man on the inside at ASML. One of their most important quality control workers will upload a virus onto their secure network. From there, it’s just a hop-skip-and a jump from infecting all the machines.

contractor

Won’t China know we infected the machines when they start acting up?

Andrew

These machines are so delicate and require so much accuracy to work, it could take weeks for anyone to figure out the problem isn’t just user error. A thunderstorm can throw them off. The first guess from the Chinese will not be malware.

contractor

But eventually, the Chinese will figure it out though.

jake

Which is why the suits will eventually decide this way too risky for them and cancel the project anyways. There’s no way China won’t put two and two together.

andrew

If we do it right, they won’t.

(ANDREW turns to the contractor.)

That’s the most important part. Once the machines are in China’s factory, the virus will use a series of zero-day exploits we purchased to enter other machines in the factory. One by one, they will cause problems for the Chinese engineers until failures mount and the project is cancelled.

contractor

All this code on all these different machines. No way we aren’t found out.

andrew

Once the virus moves to a different machine, it’s designed to delete itself. The machines will look like a campsite after the Boy Scouts stay there, spotless.

contractor

Did he really just use a boy scouts metaphor?

jake

Yeah, you’re not helping us see you as any older Andrew.

contractor

But seriously. This is crazy. There are so many moving parts, and if it all fails, there could be serious repercussions from the Chinese.

Andrew

They hack us all the time. I don’t see why this is any different. You think that semiconductor plant would succeed at all if the Chinese hadn’t stolen American plans?

contractor

What if something goes wrong, and we get found out?

Andrew

When something goes wrong and we get found out, we get blamed. We’re always the ones who get blamed.

Contractor

And never the ones who get the credit when it goes well.

andrew

We have to make it work! We have to do this!

jake

Why?

Andrew

Because someone has to do something. They steal our tech. They profit on our ingenuity, steal our intellectual property, and implement misinformation in our elections.

jake

Let me ask you something Andrew? Have you thought about what happens if it all blows up?

andrew

Blows up?

contractor

Yeah, what’s your worst-case scenario?

andrew

The Chinese find out that we did this, and it escalates.

Jake

Does that cause a war?

andrew

No. Things will get sorted out like they always are. Things happen much less often than they don’t.

jake

Then it’s not the worst-case scenario.

andrew

What? Are you about to say that the worst case scenario is nuclear war?

(ANDREW pronounces the word nuc-lear.)

contractor

It’s pronounced nuclear. And that is exactly the worst case scenario.

(CONTRACTOR pronounces the word nuk-u-lar.)

andrew

Draw a line for me… Draw a line for me between shutting down a semiconductor factory and dropping the bomb.

Jake

Have you heard of Stuxnet?

andrew

I’m sorry?

contractor

Kid doesn’t even know Stuxnet! Ridiculous! Do they hire these people at elementary schools?

andrew

I know Stuxnet. I just don’t see how it applies here.

Jake

Stuxnet was a virus created to shut down Iran’s nuclear program. It was state-of-the-art at the time. Lots of bells and whistles. It would make turbines spin too fast and cause the Iranians to lose confidence in their work. It worked for a while…

contractor

Until it got out and started causing problems in the real world. The Iranians blamed Israel. Caused all sorts of issues.

andrew

Nothing close to a war though. Nuclear or otherwise. Even if this is like Stuxnet…

jake

If this gets out into the real world starts causing damage in China, it could be far worse than Stuxnet.

contractor

That’s why we have to be cautious. We don’t want that to happen.

Andrew

So we won’t let it. We make sure protections are built in to stop something like that.

Contractor

I guess we should get started then.

andrew

You can work on figuring out how to take down different machines. Jake, you should work on how the virus hides its presence. I’ll focus on moving the virus between machines. I want first Github commits by the end of the week.

Jake

That’s optimistic.

(They work for a moment. GENERAL Matthias walks in.)

General matthias

Well, how are you men feeling about the assignment?

Andrew

It’s… It’s a lot to process.

contractor

It’s a lot that can go wrong.

Jake

It’s a lot of top brass bullshit.

General matthias

What was that Garcia?

Jake

This will never work sir. It’s a crazy hail marry to stop the inevitable.

General matthias

This is the only way we maintain our military and economic edge over China. It’s the only way to win the great power competition.

jake

With all due respect sir, I refuse to commit myself to the project the way you want to.

General matthias

You won’t work on it?

jake

Sure, I will work on it… But I am not coming in early and staying late. This Is going to be a clusterfuck. I don’t want to take the blame when it all comes crashing down.

General matthias

(MATTHIAS turns to Andrew.)

Do you think you can make it work without Jake’s dedication?

andrew

It will be hard. If I could have a few more men, it would be very helpful.

General matthias

I can’t do it. For this operation to succeed, we need absolute secrecy. The larger this circle gets, the less possible secrecy becomes.

jake

If secrecy is so important, why is a contractor working this job?

General matthias

I chose you three because you have expertise in your respective fields. For your information Andrew, Robert, our contractor, has ten years of prior experience in the semiconductor and foundry industry. He’s the only one who can design the exploit to attack every machine in those facilities.

contractor

Thank you sir!

General matthias

Look, I know this is a rough mission, but it’s only sixty days. It will be over December 20th.

jake

I have use or lose leave throughout pretty much all of December. I’m only coming back for the Christmas party.

General matthias

I’ve gotten special approval to delay any use or lose leave. You don’t have to come in early and stay late, but when you’re set to be here, I want you to focus every moment on the project.

andrew

It’s not much time.

General matthias

It’s the amount of time we have.

Contractor

There’s a lot of moving parts.

General matthias

And you are to keep track of every single one of them. This is about the security of the United States.

andrew

Well, I guess let’s get to work.

General matthias

That’s the spirit Little! I knew I was right to hire you!

jake

Okay… I guess this is what we’re doing…

contractor

The overtime will be a nightmare.

jake

Don’t rub it in.

General matthias

I’ll cover whatever you charge Robert. Just don’t go too far overboard. And as for you Garcia and Little, when this is all over, you can expect a relatively sizable bonus. Especially you Little. This could be the thing that makes your career.

andrew

And if things go belly up?

General matthias

I promise to take all the blame.

jake

That’s what you guys always say.

General matthias

The top brass understands how risky this mission is. They know the risk parameters and are comfortable with them. No one but me will get blamed for a screwup.

Jake

Well, I guess we have to make it happen then.

andrew

I will get started right away.

contractor

I’m already billing this conversation’s hours to the project.

General matthias

This clock is going to count down the days until operation. When this hits zero, I need you to hand me a flash drive containing functional code that is ready to ship. Do I make myself clear?

andrew

Yes sir!

Contractor

Definitely.

Jake

Yup.

General matthias

Good. I’m counting on you men.

(MATTHIAS exits.)

jake

So this is happening…

(ANDREW moves over to the red digital clock on the wall and starts adjusting it.)

contractor

Looks that way.

andrew

(ANDREW has now finished adjusting the clock. It reads 60.)

60 days.

jake

(JAKE checks his watch.)

59 now.

(JAKE looks over to Andrew.)

Coming?

andrew

I’ll catch up with you later.

(JAKE and contractor exit together. Andrew stays and gets to work. Andrew says the final line to himself.)

60 days.

Scene I-2: Building the Virus

(This scene focuses on the creation of the virus. The scene takes place over the course of the two month period. Essentially, this scene will show andrew hard at work and Jake kind of blowing things off. Jake will come in, talk to Andrew and leave. The lights will go off. Jake will come back in. This will show the long hours Jake is putting in. The red digital countdown started at 60 and will count down. The point of this scene is to show the passage of time. For the first mini-scene, Jake comes in and starts to get ready. Andrew is in the same position we left him in, but he is now wearing headphones and singing at moderate volume while working unaware of other’s presence. Timer reads 55)

andrew

*Baby now we got bad blood. You know we used to be mad love.*

jake

(JAKE walks up to Andrew and stands by him. Andrew is oblivious and does not hear the next line.)

How is the module coming?

andrew

*So take a look what you’ve done because baby now we’ve got bad blood.*

(JAKE takes Andrew’s headphones off his ears.)

jake

I asked how the module is coming?

andrew

We’ve got problems. And I don’t think we can solve them.

jake

Okay. Okay. I’m sorry I took away your music in the middle of a song.

andrew

That’s not a lyric. That’s my honest opinion of where we are.

jake

What happened to the famous Andrew Little optimism? Where’s the programmer I met at the beginning of this project.

andrew

He died around day 3.

jake

Might he come back?

andrew

It’s not looking so good.

jake

Well, what’s giving you so much trouble.

andrew

There are just so many moving parts. Everything has to work perfectly. Plus, the code has to be small enough to be undetected but also contain specific guidance for dozens of machines.

jake

And there’s no time to learn how to work with every machine.

andrew

Maybe, we can do something generic. Figure out a way so that one piece of code works on every machine.

jake

Just do the bare minimum. We’re not inventing cold fusion over here. We’re having a hard enough time making things work in time without going off the rails.

andrew

Yeah. I guess you’re right. It’s just so hard.

jake

I’m sure you’ll figure it out.

andrew

Thanks! That means a…

jake

Gotta run! I have a meeting.

(JAKE exits. Lights go out. Lights go on. Jake comes in and yawns. He lazily sits at his desk and turns on his computer. Andrew is nearly manic with excitement. The countdown reads 50.)

Andrew

I have an idea for how we can code this thing faster.

JAKE

That sounds… promising. Anything to do a little less work.

Andrew

We use GTP3.

JAKE

We’re using an AI to write the world’s most complex exploit?

Andrew

Exactly! We outsource the easy but time consuming code to AI and focus on the more important stuff.

jake

And what happens if something goes wrong with a line of code, and we have no idea what it does?

andrew

I will check every piece of the code the AI writes myself. It will be the gold standard.

jake

Sounds good!

(Lights fade to black. Jake exits and comes back from off stage. The countdown reads 38. Andrew is asleep at his desk. Jake walks up to him and taps on his shoulder.)

jake

(*Softly*) Andrew. Andrew.

andrew

(ANDREW is still asleep. He starts talking in his sleep. He sounds like he’s arguing with someone.)

No! You… Weren’t… Listening… Need a… neural net... Only works with… CNN… And Relu… Has… To… Be… Relu

jake

(*Loudly*) Andrew!

Andrew

I’m awake.

Jake

Jesus! You smell terrible. Did you sleep here last night?

andrew

A little bit.

jake

You should head home. Maybe take a shower…

andrew

I can’t head home. There’s this section of the code I’ve been working on. I haven’t been able to figure it out, and everything is going to fall apart.

(ANDREW starts hyperventilating. It’s clear he’s freaking out. He starts rocking a little.)

It’s all going to fail! It will be all my fault! I will cause so many problems! Everyone was right about me. I am going to be a failure! I’m not cut out for this!

jake

Easy there. You’re having one of your panic attacks.

andrew

I… I guess I am.

(ANDREW is desperately trying to calm down, but the more he tries to calm down, the more anxious he feels.)

jake

Easy Andrew! Just breathe. Breathe.

(ANDREW starts breathing more deeply. It seems to help a little.)

andrew

I need to get back to work.

jake

You are in no shape to work today. Mental health is important. You need to go home.

andrew

No! I need to be here.

jake

This project is not nearly as important as your health. Can you walk to the bus station?

(ANDREW is still freaking out a little. With a great deal of energy, he shakes his head no.)

You know Andrew, you’re the only person at Fort Meade who doesn’t drive. It still amazes me.

(ANDREW laughs slightly. It’s clear he’s trying to defuse the situation.)

Look with your prior history of mental illness, if you don’t take care of yourself, you’ll lose your security clearance, and then who’s going to save America?

andrew

I… I guess you’re right.

jake

Come on. I’ll drive you home.

andrew

No! I have to work!

jake

I’m not taking no for an answer.

andrew

(ANDREW is feeling a little better.)

You know, it’s really nice of you to care about me like this. My family doesn’t even talk to me. Sometimes I worry that if I died, no one would even notice.

jake

General Matthias would notice.

andrew

I guess that’s one person.

jake

I know I make fun of you a lot, but I couldn’t imagine my life without you in it.

jake

Another word of advice from a pro. Be careful who you fall asleep around. You talk in your sleep. Don’t want to reveal classified information in your sleep, you know?

andrew

(ANDREW is calming down almost completely. Still a little on edge though. The next line is kind of a joke in his eyes to puncture tension.)

Oh. Did I say anything interesting?

jake

You said something about a convolutional neural network and needing a rectified linear unit? I don’t know, it didn’t make much sense.

andrew

(ANDREW starts to get excited. It is not fully in an anxious way, but he is still elevated there. He goes back to his computer to get to work.)

No! That’s the solution I’ve been looking for! I needed a way for the bug to adapt to different software updates of machines. I see it now!

jake

(JAKE puts his hands on Andrew’s shoulders to calm him down.)

No! Right now, you shower and sleep. The code will still be there tomorrow.

andrew

I guess you’re right.

(BOTH exit together. Lights go off. Andrew is sitting at his desk. Jake comes in. The clock reads 30. Andrew is decidedly calmer than he was before.)

jake

How are you feeling?

andrew

I feel great. I got a full five hours of sleep last night, more than in the past two weeks.

jake

Baby steps I guess.

andrew

How is your section of the code coming? You said you’d have it done today.

jake

You know, I really wanted to complete it, but I had to go to my sister’s baby shower.

andrew

It’s okay. I actually rewrote some code that connects to it, so your section requires a little bit of a rewrite. Do you think you can have it done by the end of the week?

jake

I don’t know. I’m kind of busy with year-end expense reports and my quarterly review.

andrew

It’s fine. I’ll take care of it.

jake

Thanks!

andrew

No problem!

jake

Actually, I have a doctor’s appointment right now. See you.

Andrew

But you just got here!

jake

Yeah, but I round up to the hour, and the doctor’s office is a ways away.

(JAKE exits. ANDREW keeps working. Lights go off. Contractor is in the room with Jake now. Clock reads 10.)

Contractor

I think we make it.

andrew

It’s been a hell of a two months, but we are going to do it!

contractor

Do you have any Christmas plans?

andrew

Not really. I don’t really get along with my family. You?

contractor

I bought my little ones a PS-5. We plan on a Call of Duty Marathon. As a dad, I’m supposed to let them win, but I won’t.

andrew

When I get done with this project. First thing I want to do is play Call of Duty again. I miss it so much.

contractor

First thing you should do is take a shower. But after, hit me up online.

(JAKE walks in.)

contractor

Nice of you to join us Mr. Garcia. Ready to make your Github commits? We need to be done now, so we can go to quality control.

jake

I need a couple more days for this last commit. It’s really giving me a hard time. I’m sure you understand.

andrew

I actually kind of assumed you were too busy, so I went ahead and did it for you.

Jake

That must have taken you forever.

andrew

Yeah. But what are weekends for if not work?

jake

Thanks, bud. I will go get a coffee since I have some free time. Then we can get started on that quality review. I promise I will hold up my end there.

Andrew

Sure.

(JAKE leaves.)

Contractor

Andrew, you can’t do his work for him.

andrew

That’s the only way the work gets done. We’re on a deadline, and he’s busy.

contractor

I know he’s your friend, and you don’t have many of those, but you have to put up boundaries. You will burn out.

andrew

Okay.

contractor

I’m serious. Don’t let him blow off the code review. Make him do his fair share.

andrew

I will.

(Lights go off. Jake re-enters. Andrew is knocked out at his desk wearing headphones. The clock reads zero.)

Jake

We did it. We got it done.

contractor

Yeah. “We” certainly did.

jake

I helped. I worked on it.

contractor

Listen. I want you to give your entire bonus to Andrew.

jake

But I already spent it on presents for my family.

contractor

Spent it? You haven’t gotten the money yet.

jake

I took out credit card debt.

contractor

And you wonder why you’re poor.

jake

Look, just because I took care of my mental health and didn’t kill myself like Andrew doesn’t mean my contributions weren’t useful.

contractor

You took advantage of him. You saw how bad he got during this project, and you refused to ease the burden just a little.

Jake

I helped him. I made sure he took his meds. I drove him home. I made sure he slept.

contractor

Everything but did your job so he had time to sleep.

jake

Well, it’s over now.

contractor

In the future, I want what happened here to never happen again.

jake

It won’t happen again.

(GENERAL Matthias enters.)

General Matthias

What won’t happen again?

jake

We won’t have to listen to my rendition of Let it Go again at the Christmas party.

contractor

Nice save.

(GENERAL Matthias looks over at Andrew and motions towards him.)

General Matthias

Kid really came through for us on this.

(JAKE nudges Andrew. Andrew wakes up.)

andrew

Man. That felt good. I feel like I slept at the Ritz Carleton.

Contractor

Nope. Just your desk again.

General Matthias

Andrew, do you have the flash drive?

andrew

(ANDREW looks around before finally finding it.)

Right here. All two hundred eight thousand sixty-two lines of perfection.

general Matthias

Could the code win a Pulitzer like your last one?

andrew

This code could win a Nobel prize in literature.

contractor

He’s not joking. It’s good work.

jake

It is excellent work

General Matthias

It better be. Want to double check it one last time?

andrew

Definitely. I mean I checked it ten times yesterday, but I can test it on our dummy software again.

jake

It’s fine Andrew.

Contractor

I can vouge. No double check required.

General Matthias

Excellent. You should shower Andrew. See you all at the party tomorrow.

andrew

Yes sir.

(Lights go off.)

Scene I-3: Holiday Party clusterfuck

(This scene takes place at the annual holiday party for employees of this division of the NSA. Things look more festive. There might be a tree up. Maybe garland. Red cups are around. Maybe other employees are milling. Jake is hanging out talking to other employees. Andrew is nervously hunched over his laptop. The contractor is sitting alone.)

andrew

Everything looks good so far…

(JAKE sees Andrew alone. He over to Andrew with two red cups. He pushes one towards Andrew.)

jake

Is there a party on your computer screen tonight?

andrew

The virus just came online in Shenzhen. It looks like it’s working perfectly.

jake

Then take a break Andrew! Face it. We won. The impossible thing? We did it. You did it! You took the world’s craziest idea that had a one in a million chance of working and took it all the way to fruition. There’s nothing left to do here but party!

andrew

What about what you said about possible problems? Shouldn’t we monitor to see if anything goes wrong?

jake

We’re not finding anything out like that tonight. Stuxnet took months to escape from the nuclear plant.

andrew

The first 24 hours are critical. You know that.

jake

This party is also critical. You know that, right? They set up a big screen for a massive Civilization tournament. Don’t you want to show everyone you’re the superior strategist?

Andrew

I don’t know.

jake

Come on! You live to dominate strategy games. You’re playing. You’re doing it.

andrew

Okay. Okay. But just one round.

(Both exit temporarily. Lights go off. They come back together with the contractor.)

contractor

Andrew, I have to tell you! Your strategy was inspired. I’ve never seen anyone get to alpha centauri that fast.

andrew

I’ve never seen anyone win 5 straight games using only economic victories. That was crazy!

contractor

Dollars and cents just make sense to me.

jake

We should keep the party going. I am going to grab my coat, and then let’s head to Flannigan’s. Best bar between DC and Baltimore.

Andrew

Okay! I’m down. I just need to check my email.

(JAKE goes to his desk to get his coat, grabs it, and puts it on. Andrew checks his email.)

Holy shit!

contractor

Virus working better than we thought?

andrew

It’s offline completely. I can’t reach it.

(JAKE and the contractor are peering over Andrew’s shoulder.)

jake

Maybe there was an internet outage that paused communication?

andrew

No. The signals travel over fiber optic. No way it went dead.

jake

Weird. Probably nothing.

Andrew

The general just forwarded me a news article. Hmm… There’s a power outage in Shenzen. The entire city has lost electricity.

jake

That explains why we can’t access our software. Can we go now?

andrew

What if this is us?

jake

It’s not.

andrew

I’m just saying. A city like Shenzen is massive. All those high rises. There will be riots if this blackout continues.

jake

Which is good for us, right? You wanted problems for the Chinese. Here they are!

(CONTRACTOR is playing on his phone.)

contractor

I just got a Wechat message from a friend China.

jake

(JAKE is making a joke in next line.)

Oh no! An undisclosed foreign contact.

contractor

Fuck off! I hadn’t even talked to him in five years! He says he thinks the blackout was a cyberattack. He wants my opinion.

andrew

See!

jake

The Chinese call everything a cyberattack. That’s propaganda. Means nothing.

Contractor

He sent me a link. I’m going to open it.

Andrew

(ANDREW is having another panic attack.)

Oh my god! I can’t breathe. Am I dying?

jake

See what you’ve done? You gave Andrew another panic attack.

Andrew

This can’t be happening.

jake

Just relax.

Andrew

I can’t.

contractor

Damn.

andrew

What?!?

contractor

The attachment links to all our code.

(ANDREW clutches his chest and falls to the floor. Jake leans over him trying to comfort him. Contractor puts head in hands. Scene fades to black)

Scene I-4: Interrogations

(Things have gone terribly wrong with the malware. Now, one by one Jake, Andrew, and the contractor have to answer to the general. We start with Jake sitting there. The general walks in.)

General matthias

Couldn’t dedicate yourself to the project, and now we’re dealing with the biggest international incident in the history of the agency.

jake

I’m not apologizing. This plan was fucked from the beginning.

General matthias

Maybe it could have succeeded if you had put forth the effort. Did what it took to make this project work? But no. You couldn’t.

jake

I told you what I was willing to do. You said it was fine.

General matthias

Let me be direct with you Garcia. One of you will lose his job.

jake

Why can’t you take the hit? That’s what you said at the beginning, right? You’d take the blowback for us?

General matthias

(General Matthias is shaking his head.)

You think that’s what it’s even about anymore. You think I get to continue on as the head of the agency, and I am just looking for a patsy to blame?

jake

Isn’t that what’s happening?

General matthias

Not this time Garcia. I’ve been asked to resign. I am leaving the agency. Twenty years of service, and now I’m out in the cold.

jake

Why do we need someone to blame then? Seems like the bullet has already been taken.

General matthias

They’re trying to stop all offensive cyber-operations of the agency. The Intelligence committee is not happy. They want proof this was not a flawed plan before we do any more hacking.

jake

It was a flawed plan. The work was excellent.

General matthias

I don’t believe that. And no one else will. There are rioters in the streets of Shenzhen demanding answers from the Chinese government and Chinese government officials demanding answers from us. Someone has to fall on the sword. It can’t just be me.

jake

What’s your next position? I could make it very difficult for you if you hang me out to dry…

General matthias

I’m retiring. Leaving government work entirely.

(General Matthias looks at Jake and smiles.)

You thought you would blow the whistle on me and the Thai woman?

jake

From what I heard she wasn’t exactly a woman.

General matthias

That’s incredibly transphobic.

jake

I meant she was underage.

General matthias

Oh. Well, regardless. Someone has to take the fall.

jake

Make the contractor take it. I don’t deserve to get fired. Andrew doesn’t deserve to lose his job. The contractor will land on his feet.

General matthias

So would Andrew.

jake

You can’t be serious.

General matthias

He’s a young guy. Brilliant. Youngest ever American Master graduate from MIT. He’ll be okay.

jake

Fire me before you fire him.

General matthias

He can work anywhere he wants. Plus, you have to admit that his use of AI on this project was reckless. I think that’s why things went belly up.

jake

His work was flawless. Please! This is the only thing he’s ever wanted. Fire me instead. Or fire the contractor. Just not Andrew.

General matthias

You have a family. The contractor has a family. Andrew is alone.

jake

All the more reason someone has to be on his side. He needs someone to look after him.

General matthias

But you swear it’s not your fault?

jake

The problem was not in our work.

General matthias

Well, I’ll wait for the results of the inquiry. If we cannot assign blame directly, I won’t go after Andrew.

Jake

Thank you.

General matthias

Send in the contractor on the way out.

(JAKE exits. Contractor enters and sits next to the General.)

General matthias

Who are you a spy for?

contractor

What?

General matthias

You working for the Russians? Did the Iranians pay you off?

contractor

I only work for one organization.

General matthias

A man cannot serve two masters. I don’t believe for a second you’re loyal to both me and the almighty dollar.

contractor

Believe whatever you want. We both know that the problem here wasn’t the work. Don’t blame us.

General matthias

Someone has to take the blame. I need a head for the higher ups.

contractor

Then give them Jake’s. He blew the whole project.

General matthias

Most counter-intelligence is due to monetary incentives. Maybe you thought we weren’t paying you enough.

contractor

I’m not the one who mentions money all the time. I have money. You’re barking up the wrong tree.

General Matthias

What tree should I bark up then?

contractor

I already told you! If someone has to get fired, fire Jake.

general Mattias

I’ve been thinking about getting rid of Andrew.

contractor

You can’t be serious.

general Mattias

Come on. The kid is not nearly organized or quiet enough. What about him screams NSA?

contractor

For one thing, the fact that he’s a genius-level programmer.

general matthias

We have plenty of those.

contractor

You only have one Andrew, and you know it.

general Matthias

And if the review finds that his code is to blame?

contractor

It won’t be. He writes poetry.

general matthias

But if it does?

contractor

Then, be human. Don’t fire Andrew.

general matthias

Maybe I’m doing him a favor. This is a high pressure job, and his mental health is in a rough place.

contractor

Did you ever hear of anyone getting fired and calling it a favor?

general matthias

He could make a lot more money in the private sector working for Facebook or Tesla.

contractor

He could triple his salary by working for us as a contractor. He doesn’t want that.

general matthias

Okay. I promise I will only fire him if it turns out he’s to blame.

contractor

Good! Let Jake go. Let me go. Anyone but Andrew.

general matthias

Okay! Okay! Send the guy in on your way out. He looks like he’s dying.

(CONTRACTOR exits. Andrew comes in. He looks incredibly anxious, like he’s about to fall over.)

general matthias

At ease Andrew.

andrew

I am so sorry sir. I take full responsibility.

general matthias

You do?

andrew

Totally. I did most of the quality check myself. I should have caught the error that caused this mess.

general matthias

The others tried to blame each other.

andrew

No. It’s totally my fault. Don’t fire Jake or the Contractor. I am happy to fall on the sword.

general matthias

I will take that into consideration, but we will wait until the results of the final review are in before we make a decision.

andrew

I just don’t know how I messed up. The code was perfect. And what happened in Shenzhen doesn’t even make sense to me.

general matthias

Maybe the code you brought in from AI did things you didn’t expect?

andrew

That doesn’t seem likely.

general matthias

Maybe the neural network you used to work on the machines caused the virus to mutate?

andrew

That doesn’t even seem possible.

general matthias

I said maybe.

andrew

With all due respect sir, I don’t trust your technical expertise.

general matthias

I’m not the one conducting the review.

andrew

If you could just let me take a look at the code taken from Shenzhen, I could figure out what happened here.

general matthias

I really shouldn’t let you.

andrew

Please sir. I need to know.

general matthias

Okay. You can take a look. It’s pulled up here on this laptop.

(ANDREW starts looking at the laptop General Matthias gets a call.)

I didn’t expect the investigation to be done so soon. What was the culprit? Really? Well, I hate that that had to happen. I’ll figure out who coded that section and let them know.

(GENERAL Matthias looks over at Andrew and is now looking over his shoulder.)

It was some additional code added near the neural network. Check there.

Andrew

I don’t recognize this code.

general matthias

I thought you said you reviewed every line.

andrew

I did. I don’t know how this slipped past me. It’s crazy.

general matthias

I’ve heard enough. Andrew, you are either incompetent, a liar, a traitor, or overwhelmed. I think we both know which. I think this agency was too much for you.

andrew

I can handle it sir.

general matthias

No. I don’t think you can. I’m worried about you. I’ve gotten reports of you sleeping in the office, not showering. That’s a no-no.

andrew

It was… It was a tight deadline.

general matthias

Even still. You have to take care of yourself. The next words out of my mouth will be hard for you, but I promise. They’re for the best.

andrew

Please no sir. Please. Please. I’ll do better.

general matthias

You’ve done enough. Clean out your desk. You’re fired.

(ANDREW collapses. He is crying and having another panic attack.)

I’m sorry. All this proves is that you couldn’t handle it. Pack up your desk. See if Jake will drive you home.

andrew

Okay.

(ANDREW does not get up. He is just broken.)

general matthias

You need to get up Andrew.

andrew

(ANDREW is sobbing.)

I can’t.

general Matthias

You’re making a fool of yourself. Get up.

(ANDREW just shakes his head. General Matthias gets down next to him and tries to comfort him.)

It will be okay Andrew. This didn’t work out, but the next thing will be better. I’m starting over too. This is for the best. I promise.

(Lights go off. End Act 1.)

Act 2

Scene II-1: Smith Resigns

(We have now left behind the world of NSA programmers for a world of high-powered political and military elites. This act takes place in the president’s war-room. Secretary of Defense Smith, Secretary of State Kim, National Security Advisor Matthews, and Chairman Kelly are sitting around a conference room table. A map of the world is behind them.)

Smith

I just wanted to say it’s been a pleasure working with you Chairman Kelly.

kim

Don’t say that! You’re not gone yet!

Smith

I am handing in my resignation today.

kim

The president might not accept.

kelly

He’ll accept. A clusterfuck like this? The president has to set an example. It must be one hundred percent clear that the United States does not condone what happened.

matthews

Does it?

kelly

Don’t start with me Matthews.

matthews

I’m just saying. There’s no avoiding a confrontation with China at some point. Let’s make it happen right now. Fight a battle while we can still win it.

kelly

Matthews! You never served in uniform. Don’t talk to me about fighting battles and wanting a war. While you were getting your PhD in women’s studies and defending your dissertation, I was seeing combat and defending the United States.

Matthews

As you know, my PhD is in political science with a concentration in international affairs… And I spent plenty of time serving my country overseas.

kelly

What as a station chief in Slovakia?

Matthews

That was an important post! I was crucial to our intelligence operations in Eastern Europe. We couldn’t have won in Ukraine without that intel.

Kelly

Every CIA agent thinks information wins wars. How is espionage doing right now?

Matthews

It wasn’t the CIA who fucked up here. I will remind you that NSA falls under the DoD. If anyone fucked up, it was you guys!

kelly

(KELLY gets up and leans over to Matthews.)

Why don’t you come over here and say that to my face?

(HAYNES walks in alongside his bodyman. Hail to the Chief starts playing, surprising everyone. Everyone stands and goes to attention.)

HeyNes

Are we running a fight club here? I have enough problems without infighting. Smith is about to have to leave the building over this mess. Do you want to join him?

Matthews and Kelly

No Sir!

Heynes

Good! At ease all of you!

(PRESIDENT sits and everyone follows. President looks at Smith)

Do you have it?

smith

I do indeed. It has been the pleasure of my life serving at your side.

Heynes

The pleasure has been all mine. If this wasn’t such a mess, I would have loved to have you stay with the administration for another three years.

Smith

That’s no longer an option.

heynes

I know. Before we let you go, any parting wisdom you can share about the current situation?

smith

We have to deescalate. I know some in this room think a war with China is inevitable. It’s not. It never will be. Cooler heads can prevail. This doesn’t have to end in bloodshed.

heynes

Thank you for your service, John. You are dismissed.

Smith

Thank you Mr. President

(SMITH exits.)

heynes

I want to hear all sides on this issue. I know National Security Advisor Matthews and Chairman Kelly don’t agree on anything, so we’ll start there before hearing Secretary Smith propose a middle way. Matthews?

Matthews

We have to remain strong here. The Chinese have committed acts of cyber-espionage same as we have, and plenty of problems have emerged there. They never apologized. Neither should we.

kelly

This isn’t cyber-espionage at this point! A city of 18 million people is without power. This is cyber-warfare!

matthews

Which is exactly why we should go on the attack!

Kelly

You are out of your mind Matthews!

heynes

Kelly, let Matthews speak.

matthews

Thank you Mr. President. As I was saying, we need to remain strong and put up a united front. In no way do we regret what we did, we stand fully with Taiwan and the people of China. The current regime is illegitimate and belligerent. It must go, and we are on the side of its opponents.

Heynes

Kelly?

Kelly

China is not Tunisia in two thousand ten, and it is most certainly not the USSR in nineteen ninety-one. It is a financially stable powerhouse that will not in a million years collapse. China is a thousand-year-old dynasty. A bunch of protesters angry they don’t have power cannot destroy what took generations to build. As much as National Security Advisor Matthews would like us to engage in a hyper-realist fantasy Thucydides trap—Yes Matthews, I also took an international affairs class—this is not the time for a confrontation with an angry nuclear power.

(KELLY pronounces the word nuclear NUK-U-LAR. This is very important.)

heynes

Kim?

kim

Obviously the best path is to negotiate with the Chinese to sort this out, but we have to hold strong. Maintain our position that Taiwan is independent, that this was an accident, and tow the line. This is all Sabre rattling. Just stay calm. Keep playing the game of chicken. We don’t apologize, but we are willing to come off our position on semiconductors.

heynes

Do we move the fleets? Do we up our strategic posture.

kim

I think we hold calm. I don’t think the repercussions will be serious.

Bodyman

(BODYMAN has been quiet all this time. Suddenly he looks at his phone. As he says the next line, he pushes the phone to the president.)

Mr. President, I think you will want to see this. It’s on CNN right now.

heynes

A full-scale invasion of Taiwan is being planned! How the hell does CNN know this before we do?

matthews

Sometimes open source intel is easier because it can aggregate from many places.

heynes

God damn it Matthews. This is your job! You are supposed to know things about what’s going on!

Matthews

I warned you this was a possibility.

heynes

I don’t need to know what’s possible! I need to know what’s happening.

Kim

Do they actually think the Taiwanese are in any way responsible?

matthews

Of course not.

heynes

What do you mean? Why else would they invade?

Kelly

She means that what I said would happen when we authorized the NSA mission is happening.

matthews

They’re invading because they know we won’t let them have a semiconductor industry. They’re taking it.

Heynes

They have to know that won’t work. These parts are sourced from all over the world. China will make themselves a global pariah… Like Russia after Ukraine!

kim

They don’t have to be able to source the parts. All they have to do is cut off our supply. Bleed us out with the economic damage and military problems caused by the war. Get us to cut a deal. Control the supply of the most important good in the world. Control us.

heynes

Well, we won’t let that happen! I want the seventh fleet on its way to Matsu. Have them in the Taiwan strait as quickly as possible!

Kelly

Sir! This is a mistake Eisenhower went to great lengths not to make! Don’t put ships in the Taiwan strait.

heynes

I’m not Eisenhower, this isn’t the nineteen fifties, and the crisis we’re facing is not hypothetical. It is clear, present, and real.

Kelly

In the 1950s, we were facing a far greater enemy. Even in the height of the cold war, we weren’t so reckless.

matthews

First off, the cold war never ended. We just switched the target. Second off, let’s not forget that we made plenty of risky decisions to contain Russia that paid off. Berlin 1961, Seoul 1950, Cuba 1963…

Kelly

Iran 78, Vietnam 1968, Cuba 1961. History is also full of examples where our hubris and recklessness have caused problems for the United States and the world as a whole.

Kim

I don’t mean to state the obvious, but this is no longer a hypothetical scenario about escalation. This is a very real escalation occurring right before our eyes. We have to react.

matthews

Shit.

kelly

What?

matthews

I just got word that the Chinese have updated their nuclear posture.

kelly

They’re threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons if our ships get anywhere near the South China sea.

heynes

I want the Secretary of Energy brought in now. This is now not just an energy crisis but a nuclear crisis.

(BODYMAN nods and exits.)

kelly

I have to advise you sir. We should pull back the fleet.

matthews

And let them take Taiwan!?!

kelly

And stop a nuclear war.

Kim

Taiwan is not totally without defenses.

matthews

It won’t stand a chance without our help.

kelly

This is too risky, and you know it.

heynes

I agree. I’m not playing a game of Russian roulette with a fully loaded gun. Kelly?

kelly

Yes, Mr. President?

heynes

Stop the ships. Don’t move them any closer.

kelly

Right away!

matthews

But sir! You will trade away our strategic leverage.

heynes

Better than trading away lives.

(SECRETARY Zhou enters with Bodyman.)

bodyman

Energy Secretary Zhou is here.

zhou

I’ve been briefed on the situation.

heynes

And?

zhou

The nuclear threat is credible.

heynes

You think they’re willing to escalate that far?

zhou

I think the Chinese people are angry. Blackouts are the next worse thing to nuclear bombs.

heynes

Are we positive our cyberattack is responsible for Shenzhen?

zhou

Yes. I don’t know how though. A cyberattack like that is nearly impossible to carry out on purpose. We did it on accident?

kelly

There were rumors that one of the agents may have been compromised.

matthews

Nothing verifiable.

zhou

Regardless of how it happened, the blackout has caused a very real crisis. I recommend we also update our nuclear posture and prepare for a little brinksmanship.

heynes

This has gone on long enough. I want the president of China on the phone. I want to see if he is in any mood to negotiate.

(BODYMAN makes a call, holds phone up for president Heynes. President Han can be heard over the phone.)

han

Mr. President. You have caused a great deal of pain to my countrymen.

heynes

I understand you feel that way, but cyberattacks are a very normal part of international relations.

han

Of this magnitude?

heynes

We didn’t want to cause devastation. We just wanted to hurt your semiconductor plant.

han

Then you are not just reckless but stupid.

heynes

The invasion of Taiwan is an over-reaction.

han

How dare you tell me what is and isn’t an overreaction. People in my country are dead! And you tell me this this an overreaction.

heynes

We have to stop you. By force. The American navy remains unmatched.

han

We are more than willing to drop the bomb.

heynes

Are you willing to negotiate? We are prepared to make some very reasonable concessions regarding the South China Sea.

Han

Are you willing to cede all of it including Taiwan?

heynes

Of course not. That’s insane.

han

Then I’m afraid I have nothing to say to you.

heynes

Please! No one wants a war. This is an overreaction.

han

I agree no one wants a war, so don’t start one.

heynes

Please! There must be something that you want!

han

We have what we want.

(Phone goes dead. Heynes hands it back to bodyman.)

matthews

Something is wrong.

kelly

What was your first clue?

matthews

No, something was off about that phone call. He was acting weird.

zhou

You don’t think that it’s because a city’s entire grid went down, and we’re in a nuclear crisis?

matthews

The president of China is not acting like a man who is in crisis. He’s enjoying this too much.

kelly

Maybe he just likes watching us trip over our dicks?

kim

The president of China would usually be very embarrassed by a failure of this magnitude.

matthews

Unless it wasn’t a failure…

zhou

What are you implying?

matthews

I think something else is going on.

kelly

Something else?

heynes

I’d like to speak to the person we held accountable for the code breaking.

(HEYNES motions to bodyman.)

Get him for me.

(BODYMAN exits.)

kim

Mr. President, I don’t know if that’s a priority right now.

kelly

According to the General, he’s a bit unstable.

heynes

Answer me this Matthews. How does someone go from being America’s best hacker to being an unstable madman over the course of two days?

kelly

He had a history of mental illness.

matthews

And yet he was well enough to get through a rigorous Top secret clearance vetting.

kelly

The process is not perfect.

heynes

Damnit Kelly. Let Matthews speak.

matthews

I read the reports. Pretty clear he was a patsy. Claims he didn’t even recognize the code that caused the issues.

heynes

Didn’t even recognize the code?

kelly

Like I said. Unstable.

matthews

He claims it wasn’t there originally.

zhou

Did we check the Github logs?

matthews

The general ordered the Github taken down. Said the records needed to be deleted to give plausible deniability.

heynes

And where is the general at the moment?

kelly

He resigned. We stopped keeping track of him

heynes

You could… I don’t know… Call him!

kelly

His cell phone has been disconnected.

heynes

Disconnected?

kelly

He took the resignation hard.

matthews

As a member of the intelligence community, I can tell you there’s only one thing General Matthias takes hard, and it sure as hell is not bad news.

kim

Matthews!

heynes

Do I even want to know what that means?

matthews

I had reason to believe he was personally vulnerable to being compromised. I reported it years ago, but it never went anywhere.

kelly

Those were unfounded rumors.

heynes

Then why can’t we get in touch with him?

matthews

Like I said. Something is going on.

(BODYMAN enters with Andrew Little.)

Bodyman

This is Andrew Little. He took the fall for the mess at Fort Meade.

heynes

So you’re the one responsible for this catastrophe?

andrew

I was in charge of most of the coding of the virus. The line of code that caused the issue was not part of the original code I submitted. Someone added it.

heynes

So you’re not willing to take responsibility?

andrew

You’re not listening to me. Our code wasn’t the problem. Someone sabotaged the operation.

heynes

You’re sure.

andrew

Completely.

heynes

Can you prove it?

andrew

Maybe…

heynes

Until ten hours ago, I was told you were the best coder we have. Can you prove it?

andrew

No.

heynes

Then, I don’t see why it matters…

andrew

Because the code that took down Shenzhen’s power… It was designed to stop the blackout after a few hours. It was designed to cause maximal social outrage and minimal damage.

matthews

That’s exactly how we would have done a false flag operation. Make the citizenry mad while keeping critical infrastructure essentially intact.

kelly

It’s a classic military strategy.

heynes

And we missed it.

andrew

That’s not all. The code that took down Shenzhen, it was kept as similar to our code as possible. It still has the uplink via the web.

heynes

Are you saying you can still monitor it?

andrew

No sir. I am saying I can still edit it. I think we make China go black.

zhou

The Chinese grid’s operational characteristics are a state secret. Developing an exploit to circumvent them would take months.

andrew

Unless the virus already was designed to take down the Chinese grid. All it takes is a few edits and the entire country will be without power.

Matthews

You want to shut down all of China? Why? Won’t that just make things worse?

kim

Do you intend to take the country hostage?

andrew

No. I intend to start a revolution.

Kelly

This is crazy. Mr. President, I cannot in good faith allow you to listen any longer to this teenager’s reckless attempt at a foreign policy that makes Matthews look responsible.

heynes

Be quiet Kelly. This might be our only chance to save Taiwan. Let’s hear what he has to say.

andrew

My plan has just four letters…

(ANDREW starts gesticulating and explaining. Stage goes black. End Act 2.)

Act 3

Scene III-1: Here comes the General

(The final act takes place in a similar building to Act 2, but this time in the People’s Republic of China. A Chinese flag hangs on the wall behind the table. The President Han and PRC minister Yan sit together talking.)

Yan

The plan was a masterstroke. It was bold. It was brilliant. It was an act of genius.

han

We’re in private. You don’t need butter me up.

yan

No, I mean it. We showed the Americans what happens when you mess with China.

han

I need rational advice not buttkissing.

yan

I’m serious. We placed the highest asset at the head of signals intelligence in America, and we are soon to retake Taiwan. This is the coup of the century!

Han

You were the one who found out about General Matthias and his Thai whore.

yan

A well-placed bribe to the right whorehouse never fails to pay off.

(General Matthias walks in.)

General Matthias

I met her on Grindr actually.

yan

A whorehouse of the 21st century—of which my shell company owns an extremely silent thirty percent stake.

General Matthias

The videos?

Yan

Will never see the light of day. The Americans will think of you as a traitor, but your reputation remains unbruised.

General Matthias

My money?

yan

In an unmarked Swiss bank account you can access whenever. There are some more boys—“girls” waiting in your hotel room when you get there.

General Matthias

That was a one-time thing. An accident.

han

You forget that it happened many times. All accidents?

yan

And in the same way, now it has never happened at all. This was not an accident.

General Matthias

I’m done with that.

han

You Americans… Haha. You are never done with anything.

General Matthias

Regardless, you can tell whoever is in my hotel room that they’re not needed.

yan

You can tell them yourself though I don’t think you will.

han

Sit down. We’re done playing with you. Let’s get to business.

General Matthias

My part in this operation is done—No? I shared intel, switched the code on the flash drive, and eliminated America’s most talented hacker in the process. I think that’s enough.

han

You just made millions of dollars, and now you say enough. It’s never enough for you Americans.

General Matthias

That’s not a very socialist thing to say.

han

We are not socialists anymore. You taught us capitalism. We mastered it.

General Matthias

Still, I am without informational value. I don’t know what else you could even want from me.

I disagree. You’re one of the top military minds of your generation. I want your expertise.

Yan

And you understand the Americans better than anyone.

han

We’d like your advice.

General Matthias

You’re not scared off by the skeletons you found in my closet?

yan

You Americans. You’re puritans in public and vulgar rats in private. What you do in your bed does not make your military advice any better or worse.

han

I am surrounded by sycophants like Yan here. I need someone who can tell me what I need to—not want to—hear.

Yan

As usual, Han is right. I am completely unable to disagree with him on anything.

han

So tell me. What are the weak points in this plan?

General Matthias

Permission to speak freely?

han

You have it.

General Matthias

Shutting down the power to a city was a risk I wouldn’t have taken.

han

Why not?

General Matthias

Even though the people of China believe it was the Americans...

yan

And it was as a matter of history.

General Matthias

You kept the lights off for hours. You let people die. This kind of attack will make people angry at the Americans, but it will also make them angry at you.

yan

Angry at us? Keep this filth from your mouth. Dirty American.

han

He’s merely telling the truth. Let him speak.

General Matthias

You couldn’t protect your own people from a major cyberattack. That spreads fear but it also spreads resentment.

han

Anything else you find worrisome in my plan?

General Matthias

The threats of nuclear weapon usage were wrong.

han

Why?

General Matthias

The invasion of Taiwan looked like natural blowback for a devastating cyberattack. The threat to use nuclear weapons though? That made you look like the aggressor.

yan

Shouldn’t we use or threaten nuclear weapons if we have them?

General Matthias

These weapons are extremely taboo—as I’m sure you know. They make you international pariahs. Alongside the invasion of Taiwan, these threats make you look like a rogue state.

han

Is that what you think the Americans will say, that we’re a rogue state?

yan

No one will believe that.

General Matthias

There’s a certain segment of the Japanese and Korean populations that are cheering this attack. They think American action is long overdue.

han

The Filipinos, Kazakhs, and Russians are squarely in our corner and have all issued statements denouncing America for the attack.

General Matthias

Not the best bedfellows I am afraid. The Pakistanis haven’t said a word, and I hear the Indians are possibly making a joint statement with the Quad. That should tell you that you don’t have the full faith of the international community.

yan

Han has the full faith of the Chinese people!

General Matthias

You asked for the truth.

han

And I am grateful you have provided it. It is refreshing to hear honesty.

General Matthias

And then there’s your problem in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang.

han

What problem?

yan

I’d rather we not discuss this matter.

han

No. I think we should.

General Matthias

It’s all over the internet. People are using all sorts of techniques to get around your firewall.

yan

I don’t think we should discuss this.

General Matthias

People in some of your provinces are saying that this is part of a broader plan to liberate certain provinces. Rioters have taken to the streets urging American intervention.

yan

Small bands of rioters who will be stopped.

General Matthias

The hashtag MBUS is all over Wechat.

Han

MBUS?

General Matthias

More blackouts Uncle Sam.

Han

Enough. We have to put a stop to this rebellion at once. I will not let everything I have worked so hard for be destroyed by arrogant schoolboys.

Yan

We will institute curfews right away for those errant schoolboys. Just remember that the invasion of Taiwan is soon to commence, and the Americans aren’t even anywhere near the Taiwan strait. Things are going well.

han

But we cannot get lazy because we are ahead.

(Lights go out.)

General Matthias

What the fuck?

han

What’s happening?

yan

I’m sure it’s nothing. The back up generators should kick in any time now.

(Beat.)

han

Well?

yan

Something is wrong with the backup generators. I will procure some candles.

han

This is a very strange occurrence indeed.

General Matthias

Two blackouts in one day. What are the odds.

(YAN lights candles. If we cannot have candles, a lantern will do.)

yan

I can assure you everything is alright. It is probably just a localized outage. Maybe we blew a fuse.

han

Why don’t you make sure it is a localized outage?

(YAN pulls out a cell phone and makes a call.)

yan

What is the state of the grid? I’m sorry. Are you absolutely positive? There’s no way.

han

What did he say?!?

yan

There’s no reason to panic.

han

What did he say?

yan

There’s been a massive cyberattack. This is ten times worse than Kiev 2015. Everything that uses power and has some sort of connection to any form of wireless network is down.

han

(HAN points at General Matthias.)

You! You did this! You laid the trap and we stepped right into it.

General Matthias

I have no idea what happened, but I can promise you I had nothing to do with it. I have been loyal to you. Everything you have asked of me, I have done.

(YAN receives a phone call. He puts it to his ear. He gestures to General Matthias.)

yan

It’s for you.

General Matthias

For me?

han

Put it on speaker.

andrew

Hello General. Andrew Little sends his regards. Hashtag M-B-U-S motherfucker.

(Dial tone. Phone goes dead.)

yan

How did he get that number?

General Matthias

He’s an incredible hacker.

han

You said he done. Out of the picture. Finished. What happened?

General Matthias

I don’t know! This was not the plan.

han

This was not my plan. I am quite sure it was yours. Mr. Yan.

yan

Yes sir.

(YAN takes out a gun. Aims at Matthias. General Matthias gets on his knees and starts begging.)

General Matthias

Please! I am a great military mind remember. I can be of exceptional use to you. This will all work out.

han

This will not work out for you. Tell me General. Did Andrew plead this way when you “ended” him? Did you betray us or were you bested by a child?

General Matthias

You don’t understand. You see what happened was—

(YAN shoots Matthias. Matthias dies.)

han

I understand perfectly.

yan

The Americans are fomenting a revolution right under our noses.

han

You should have known about this.

yan

I should have.

han

This is your failure.

yan

I accept total responsibility.

han

Good. I want you to call the Americans.

yan

I will.

(YAN makes a call.)

yan

It is PRC Minister of National Defense Yan. I would like to connect the White House to President Li Han. Can the President speak right now? I understand. Who can? Well, I guess that will have to do.

han

Who took the call? Secretary Kim? Kelly?

yan

You aren’t going to like it.

han

Please tell me they had a little respect for me?

yan

(YAN is ashamed.)

It’s Matthews.

han

Fuck them!

yan

Do you still want to talk?

han

I guess I have to. Put her on.

(NATIONAL Security Advisor Matthews is on speaker.)

matthews

Cold over there yet?

han

What do you want?

matthews

To be honest, I am just happy with the enjoyment value of watching you trip over your dicks.

yan

This is a great disrespect. You will pay for this.

han

What do you want?

matthews

Formal independence for Taiwan and an independence referendum for Hong Kong.

han

You are delusional.

matthews

And you are quite literally powerless.

han

Our nuclear weapons systems can operate just fine.

matthews

Do you really care so little about your place in history that you will use nukes?

han

How is it any different from what you have done?

matthews

You mean what you have done. Isn’t that right?

han

We are not responsible for this attack. It is your virus.

matthews

Let’s not forget what you did to Shenzhen.

han

We are set to invade Taiwan within a number of hours. We will bury you.

yan

You think you’ve set us back to the dark ages. See what happens when you no longer have microchips.

matthews

You won’t win a war without electricity. Do you even know where our ships are?

han

You’d be amazed how little accuracy is needed from nuclear weapons systems.

matthews

You have no idea how deeply embedded we are in your grid. You put us there.

han

I want to speak to the president.

matthews

The president is busy.

han

Let me speak to the president.

Matthews

Are you willing to make a deal?

han

I am… I am… Open to making a deal.

(HEYNES voice can now be heard over the phone.)

heynes

Turn your ships around. Let Taiwan be independent.

han

What do you offer in return?

heynes

We will give you back your electricity. Stop the attack. We will also stop the misinformation and disruption campaign we’ve been running on social media.

han

I want more.

heynes

That should be enough.

han

No. You need to give me more.

heynes

I don’t need to do anything.

han

Yes you do, and you know it.

heynes

What are you talking about?

han

This all happened because I wanted a semiconductor industry in China. You’re willing to attack me. I’m willing to take Taiwan. The biggest geopolitical moves over the world’s smallest technology.

heynes

The world’s most important technology.

han

Exactly. As powerful as I have been as leader of China, I am on my way out. You must know this.

heynes

My Secretary of State suggested it.

han

Someone like me will come in, and they too will want semiconductors.

heynes

So we will stop them too.

han

And go through all this again? Mr. President, I have a question for you.

heynes

What?

han

How many times can we really go to the brink of nuclear war before we go over the edge? How many times do you want to throw the dice.

heynes

This technology is at the heart of American power and has been for decades.

han

So keep it there. The machines you were so worried about. They were a generation behind. All I ask is that you let China be one generation behind.

heynes

I can’t do it. I won’t be the American president who trades away our edge—our industry—our future.

han

Allowing this chaos to go on. That is trading away our future. What is it you always tell the American people? Capitalism made America great?

heynes

It did.

han

Well, let capitalism make China great too. Be the free-trader you claim to be in public. Partner with us, and let’s get rich together.

heynes

To get rich is glorious.

han

We just want to share the glory.

heynes

Okay.

han

Okay?

heynes

As long as you turn the ships around and allow Taiwan to remain independent.

(The lights come back on.)

han

You’re not worried that this is some sort of ruse?

heynes

Nope because if it is, there will be consequences.

(The lights flicker on and off.)

han

I understand.

heynes

Good. I am glad we could come to an understanding. Have a great day Mr. President.

(The phone goes dead.)

yan

You made a great deal.

han

Shut up.

yan

No. You brought semiconductors back to our shores. You will make us strong again.

han

The Americans are all over technology in our country. They are on our necks with a boot.

yan

But you still beat them.

han

I did not beat them. You told me this plan couldn’t fail.

yan

The plan did not fail.

han

This is what success looks like in your mind?

yan

You got a semiconductor industry out of it.

han

I guess you’re right.

yan

You are always right, so when you say I am right, I know I must be.

han

Yan, can you bring me the gun you used to shoot the general—er. The former general.

yan

Sir?

han

I just want to inspect it.

yan

Yes sir.

(YAN brings Han the gun.)

han

Thank you for your service Yan.

yan

My pleasure Mr. President.

han

I think you deserve to die.

yan

I agree. By your mercy alone I am saved.

han

I’m glad you agree.

(HAN shoots Yan. Yan dies. Han picks up Yan’s phone and makes a call.)

han

Hey, send in a replacement.

(HAN hangs up. A replacement for Yan walks in.)

yan’s replacement

That was a very good choice to kill him.

han

I certainly think so.

(Stage goes black. End Act 3.)