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7R1B3

(TRIBE)

By John Mayo-Smith

*We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones.*

*— Aesop*

## 

## Chapter 1

Pointville Federal Correctional Institution, New Jersey

Kurt Porter lay on a plastic mattress inside a precast concrete cell, listening to the snores of two hundred fellow inmates. The digital clock displayed four forty-five a.m. Down the hall, a convict was locked in a nightmare and screaming for someone named June.

In fifteen minutes Kurt would hear the rattle of keys and the angry clomp of Redwings as guards counted him for the last time. At evening roll call he’d learned that he was being sprung six months early. No explanation. No reason given. It made no sense why he’d ended up here in Pointville, and it made no sense why they were letting him out early. Someone wanted him out, he figured, and though he wasn’t unhappy about it, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he might be entering a different sort of imprisonment, one he wouldn’t be able to just walk away from when someone said it was time. He also knew that on the outside he’d be radioactive, shit out of luck. Every Google search, as long as he lived and after he died, would return clickbait linked to keywords like “ex-con,” “hacker,” “notorious,” and “criminal.”

Thirty minutes later, Kurt was taken to ‘Receiving & Delivering,’ the last stop before his discharge. They asked him a dozen questions to make sure he was who he said he was. Then they made him wait.

“Did my sister leave a bindle?” Kurt asked the CO hunched over the counter. The man checked the screen and shook his head.

“Go easy. They say prison’s harder on the family than the prisoner. Maybe the package fell off the back of a truck,” the officer said.

“Maybe you’re right,” Kurt said, but inside he was doubtful. The trial drove a wedge between his sister and him. Six months later, their mother died of a subarachnoid hemorrhage. They let Kurt go to the funeral, but he was flanked by guards, chained, cuffed, and not allowed to hug anyone. It was a spectacle. The service wasn’t even over when they packed him back in the van and sped off. Kurt spoiled the occasion and his sister still hadn’t forgiven him for it.

The CO handed Kurt an envelope with sixty-five dollars in gate money, then pressed a button that unlocked the door to the same lobby where eighteen months earlier he had first entered the prison. His plan was to take a bus to Port Authority, then a train to Long Island, where he’d grown up, and see if he could find his sister and patch things up. Beyond that he didn’t have a plan, just a sinking fear that whoever had sent him to prison would be waiting for him.

Kurt had two bus seats to himself and dozed most of the way to New York City. At Port Authority he gulped down a Strongbow hard cider. *The Taste of Freedom*: If he were an adman, that’s the tagline he’d suggest. He picked up an “I LOVE NY” hoodie and a pair of drugstore tortoiseshell readers and walked east on 42nd Street.

The clamor of the city overwhelmed his senses; he was like a dog sniffing out the window of a speeding car. Cones and plastic tape blocked off the Bryant Park lawn where a self-driving tractor peeled a layer of dead grass and replaced it with squares of fresh sod. A dozen members of Local 1505 milled around a 12 foot inflatable rat protesting the job-stealing robots.

The engineer in Kurt spotted more nuanced additions to the fabric of the city: Sensors, cameras, and experimental police-observation drones. Pretty soon the city will run itself, Kurt thought. I hope it knows what it’s doing.

At Grand Central he bought a ticket to Bay Shore and settled into a window seat. As the doors were about to close, a woman with glossy lips barged in dragging a roller bag and fell into the seat next to Kurt’s.

They exchanged sideways glances. After a pause, the woman pivoted in her seat.

“Kurt?”

He avoided her gaze. It was Anika Patel, his old electrical engineering professor at Urbana-Champaign. Not the person he expected to see, or wanted to, for that matter.

“You don’t remember me,” she said in a tone much friendlier than he remembered her ever using before. “Why would you? You were hungover most of the time, or pulling all-nighters trading crypto.”

Kurt turned to look at her. A relaxed and familiar face smiled back.

“Anika?” he said. “Wow, this is weird. Sorry, it took me a second. I’ve had a long day—a long year, actually.”

Anika’s eyes reflected the dim cabin light in a way that made her look like she could have been outside on a sunny day.

“This is such a coincidence,” she said. “I was just talking about you last week! Someone asked me if I’d ever had a true prodigy as a student. I said yes—you.”

Kurt became even more uncomfortable. As the train pulled out he remembered the shitty grade she gave him in 3200 but decided not to bring it up.

Anika was a year younger than Kurt but five years ahead academically. She was the prodigy, not Kurt. She was a postdoc at the time a VC-funded startup had hired away eight professors in one month. The provost had to scramble to fill the vacancies and begged her to join the faculty. She named her price and became the youngest tenured full professor in the seventy-five-year history of the university. It was something that always bugged Kurt about Anika: She’d always seemed a little too slick, a little too good at playing academic politics.

But he also recognized that Anika was an elite thinker. Her “Computer-Powered Politicians” got an ACM Knuth Prize nomination and put a spotlight on the shitstorm brewing at the intersection of machine learning and public policy. The treatise convinced Kurt and everyone else who read it that it wasn’t a question of if artificial intelligence would control public policy—it was a question of when.

Kurt was smart, too. He just didn’t know how to play the game like Anika did, which explained why he was an ex-con and Anika was an academic superstar.

“So, what have you been up to?” Anika asked, sensing his discomfort.

“On sabbatical,” Kurt answered. Four hours out of prison, that was all he could think of.

“What kind?”

“Nothing special. Just a chance to break away from my old routine.”

“Just as forthcoming as ever,” she said. “Let’s see what we can find out about you.”

As she pulled out her phone, Kurt’s neck stiffened. “There are tons of Kurt Porters out there,” he said. “Make sure you get the right one.”

“I know, I’ve done this before,” Anika said. “Oh, this is interesting. ‘Kurt Porter… Illicit use of proprietary software and three counts of interstate transportation of stolen property.’ Is that the right Kurt Porter? Or should I keep searching?”

Kurt looked away. “Guess you got me.”

“Top ten cybercriminal? Really?”

“Total bullshit,” Kurt began.

“Not according to Google.”

That struck a nerve. “Click it. You’ll see.”

Anika tapped the link but her phone lost its signal. “If you’re not on it, then why does Google think you are? Why is it linked to your name?”

“Because Google doesn’t fact-check. They put the crappy links at the top. Crazier it is, the better, because that’s what drives eyeballs: clicks and ad revenue. I think you’d know that better than anyone.”

Anika did know the answer better than anyone. She was an expert on utility functions and how smart computers tended to fixate on one goal. She didn’t need to be told Google’s utility function was to maximize ad revenue at any cost, including Kurt’s reputation.

“So, then, you’re completely innocent?” she asked with a look that Kurt interpreted as somewhere between disbelief and contempt.

A rush of paranoia swarmed from the dark corners of Kurt’s mind like bats from a cave. Here was a former professor, someone he hadn’t seen in years, and one of the first things out of her mouth was whether or not he was a top ten cybercriminal. This was what his life was going to be like. He’d be lucky to get a job sweeping floors.

“Am I asking too many questions? It’s my weakness,” Anika said.

Kurt shook his head in a way that implied the conversation was over.

She changed the subject. “So, where are you going?”

“Bay Shore. Visiting my sister. At least, I think I am. Haven’t heard from her since they sent me away.”

“That’s weird,” Anika said. “I’m going to the same stop.”

The coincidences were piling up, which did nothing to alleviate Kurt’s general sense of unease. But he also had to admit that he liked talking to Anika.

“Then I’m taking the ferry from Bay Shore to Fire Island for a consulting gig,” she continued.

“Fire Island? What kind of consulting do you do on Fire Island—tutoring rich kids for their SATs?”

“Pretty boring stuff, but it pays the bills,” she said, then changed the subject back to him. “So, when was the last time you opened a compiler?”

A compiler converted human-readable instructions into machine code. In the arcane world they inhabited, the question was natural and analogous to asking a musician about his last gig.

“I haven’t touched a keyboard in eighteen months,” Kurt answered.

“So you don’t know anything about 7R1B3?”

“7R1B3?”

“You know, that anonymous government automation program someone posted on Github two years ago.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Well, it’s blowing up.”

Kurt toyed with the hinge on his drugstore eyeglasses.

“You have a lot of catching up to do. 7R1B3 is about to do to government what Napster did to the music industry. It’s open-source, and lots of programmers are piling on,” Anika said.

Kurt clammed up and they were silent for a few moments. Then

she continued. “There’s a comment in the 7R1B3 program that says the future depends on making the transition from human government to computer government.”

Kurt pretended to be disinterested. “Does it say that?”

“It does. And apparently a lot of people agree—including me. Government is one of the last entities that hasn’t been disrupted by technology. It’s old and inefficient, and as far as I’m concerned, it can’t be modernized quickly enough.”

There was more silence until Kurt gave some ground. “That sounds like something people have been writing about for a very long time.”

“But this is different, and there are a lot of very powerful people who want to put this genie back in the bottle.”

“How would they propose doing that?”

“They would probably start by killing the guy who wrote it.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“Maybe nothing, but I just thought you might be interested.”

## Chapter 2

Edirne, Turkey

The entire nation waited for the prelude march. Twenty thousand spectators watched the event live in stands surrounding the large open field, and millions more around the world were glued to their screens. Fireworks boomed; F-16s buzzed the stadium trailing red and white smoke. Turkish pop stars sang on two stages flanked by twenty massive Martin Audio longbow speakers providing crystal clear sound at bone-rattling decibels. Bookending the pitch were jumbo ten-millimeter LED signs displaying stunning images of the Turkish white star and crescent.

An official wearing a white linen tunic and matching cap poured a mixture of olive oil and water over Pecer Erbakan’s head and shoulders. The thick liquid dripped off his ears, coated his bare torso and soaked his *kispet*, dark leather trunks pocked with rivets that spelled out the name of his hometown. He was ready to fight.

Oil wrestling was the national sport of his ancient land, dating back to 1362, the early days of the Byzantine Empire, and was the oldest continuously running sporting event in the world. Testosterone-charged and ultra macho, many nationally ranked wrestlers went on to promising careers in Turkish business and politics. Two of the most recent success stories were Ömer Ozturk, Turkey’s popular president, and Emre Pecer Erbakan. Pecer, as he liked to be called, was head of the Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı, or MIT, the secret police.

Twenty years had passed since Ozturk and Pecer’s last match, when they squared off in the Kırkpınar, the nation’s most famous oil wrestling tournament. Now the two most powerful men in the country agreed to return to the field to raise money for the National Children’s Hospital.

Plagued with high blood pressure, Ozturk was advised by his doctors to decline the invitation. But the press had goaded him into it, and he felt he

had no choice but to compete. To him, the exhibition was just a friendly charity event and a way to display his reverence for tradition. Canny politician that he was, he knew it was also a way to cultivate his image as a strong progressive who was not afraid of a fight.

His opponent had darker, deeper, and more personal motives. For Pecer, this was a long-overdue chance to right a wrong, mend his ego, and win back his lost honor. He’d nursed this bitterness for twenty years and spent months in training for this day. He worked out an hour and a half each morning and another hour and a half in the evening. When Pecer learned through his spies that Ozturk wanted to duck the match, he secretly hired social media experts to marshal prominent conservative media bloggers, and recruited trolls to badger the president and bait him into accepting the challenge.

Frenzy gripped the fans as they waited for their leaders to appear.

“Oz’s a wanker, bring back the sultan!” a drunken Pecer supporter snarled.

“Your boy’s a horse’s cock,” an Ozturk fan shot back.

This wasn’t just a match between two men. It was a showdown between Turkish ultranationalists with a deep-seated desire to restore the Ottoman Empire and the less vocal majority who embraced modernity, diversity, secularism, and ties to the West.

Those were Ozturk’s people. Though he had spent three years at the Caterham School in Sussex and four years at NYU, Ozturk never lost sight of the far-right, and that was why, when he became president, he appointed Pecer to his cabinet. In many ways they were rivals, maybe enemies, but Ozturk wanted to keep Pecer close.

As head of Turkey’s secret security apparatus, the ruthless Pecer was in many ways as powerful as the president. He controlled a budget of 1.06 billion lira, commanded eight thousand officers, and had another four thousand freelancers under his wing. He used his position to silence, marginalize, and crush his opponents, including politicians, reporters, professors, and businessmen.

Following ancient tradition, an oil wrestling match began with the music of Janissary bands as the symbolic hero’s quest began. Pecer came out first to a smattering of applause. Moments later, Ozturk bounded onto the field of ankle-deep grass. Cheers erupted from the crowd. The reception irritated Pecer. His thoughts flashed to the so-called experts who’d sold him on the expensive social media campaign. He wanted to crush them—what if their efforts had only whipped up more support for the president?

The officials followed the age-old script and customs. *“Allahu akbar,”* they praised.

Next, the competitors exchanged customary greetings and knelt in prayer.

“I waited twenty years for this,” Pecer whispered menacingly at the president.

“It’s just a charity event,” Ozturk replied, trying not to seem rattled as he noticed Pecer’s bulging physique and realized how seriously he’d been training for the match. “Let’s not make this into something else.”

The two shook hands and stepped back. Pecer strutted like a peacock, flexing his muscles and waving his arms to energize the crowd. There was a whistle, and the fight began to a deafening blood roar from the crowd.

The referee kept a close eye on the action, but it was mostly for show, because wrestling has few rules. It is up to the opponents to fight honorably. There is not much for an official to do beyond keeping time. A match lasts a maximum of thirty minutes. The first man whose “umbilicus was exposed to heaven” is deemed the loser.

Pecer came out looking for a quick win. He went straight for Ozturk, executing a showy move known as the carrying pin. If he could carry Ozturk five paces, he would be declared the winner. But the president twisted free and came crashing down shoulder-first into the thick grass.

“We’re not twenty anymore,” Ozturk said in agony.

“I am in the best shape of my life,” Pecer mocked. “I assumed you would be, too.”

Ozturk pulled himself together. “You want to do this? You really want to do this here?” He launched into his signature move, a running flip. It came naturally, but he hadn’t practiced it in over a decade. Pecer saw it coming and channeled the momentum, redirecting the roll and forcing Ozturk on his side. He was about to apply a half nelson when the president executed a sit out and jumped back to his feet.

“Is that all you’ve got?” Pecer taunted.

According to custom, the match was not confined to any one part of the arena. The men had been pushing each other in the wide expanse of the field for twenty-five minutes when the referee issued a five-minute warning. Ozturk was exhausted and completely covered in grass and dirt that stuck to his oily skin.

“Done yet?” Pecer joked.

“You’re a bastard,” Ozturk spat back.

With the final seconds ticking down, Pecer dismantled the president with a move called the crush. With his left elbow, he held Ozturk’s face against the grass, then wedged his other arm under Ozturk’s shoulder and across the back of his neck in a half nelson.

“You’re a cheater, and you know it,” Pecer growled into Ozturk’s ear.

“We were both cheated in Kırkpınar,” Ozturk retorted.

“You’re a traiter—you went along with their treachery. But today I will bury you, and history will be the judge.”

Pecer thrust his hand down the front of Ozturk’s trunks, past his groin, and dug his fingers into the side of his opponent’s buttocks. He was armpit-deep in Ozturk’s *kispet* when the crowd exploded in boos.

The move was perfectly legal, common in oil wrestling, but it was a reminder of the epic match decades earlier. After a similar move in the final seconds of that fight, the referee had called a foul and charged Pecer with grabbing Ozturk’s genitalia. Ozturk was ruled the winner, and Pecer left the field in embarrassment and shame.

Five years later, the same referee was caught in a match-fixing scheme and admitted to rigging the Kırkpınar tournament. Pecer relived that injustice in his mind every day.

“Submit?” Pecer shouted as he dug his fingers into the president’s back, drawing blood.

“You’re a disgrace!” Ozturk replied, giving an openhanded blow to the back of Pecer’s head.

A whistle blared. “Time’s up!” the referee shouted.

They took a break to hydrate, re-oil and adjust their *kispets* before heading back on the field for sudden-death overtime.

Pecer locked with Ozturk and jabbed his right foot behind Ozturk’s knee in a mock takedown. Then, with a wrench, he jerked back his foot and took out his knee. Ozturk collapsed in pain. It was a cheap move—but not illegal.

“My *kispet*,” Ozturk groaned. With his trunks falling down, the president called time.

In oil wrestling, it is customary that fighters take small breaks to wipe the sweat from their eyes or adjust their trunks. The honor of the sport is bound in granting an opponent such requests. But Pecer ignored the president and pushed harder without letting up, rubbing Ozturk into the dirt with his pants falling down for all the world to see.

Pecer rubbed dirt and grass in Ozturk eyes. “Do you submit?”

Ozturk panicked as the magnitude of what was happening sank in. The way he was positioned in the grass, it was a simple matter for Pecer to turn him on his back.

The match was over, and Pecer took the traditional three-step triumph.

The crowd erupted into a bloodcurdling roar. The nationalists got a shot of adrenaline: Their man had taken Ozturk down.

The day had gone exactly as Pecer planned, and he put on the show he’d been planning for twenty years. He threw his hands in the air, striking a photogenic pose he had diligently practiced with the help of a choreographer. His oiled and glistening washboard stomach and dark features ricocheted across social media and around the world. It couldn’t have gone better.

“What are you going to do now?” a reporter asked.

“We will bring back the majesty of the sultanate,” Pecer roared exultantly, tensing the muscles in his chest. “We will make Turkey pure!”

Later, in the locker room, after he’d showered and changed, he saw an exhausted Ozturk sitting on a bench next to a set of crutches while his knee was being taped by a trainer. “How are you, Ömer?” Pecer asked, pretending to be concerned.

“I’ll be fine.”

Pecer now realized the day had gone even better than planned. In the weeks to come, Ozturk would hobble through his formal duties on crutches, a daily reminder of his humiliation at the hands of his rival.

The trainer left, and Ozturk and Pecer were alone. “What the hell were you doing out there?” Ozturk asked.

“Just having some fun,” Pecer answered. “Well deserved, too.”

“You’re a piece of shit.”

“Just a little payback, my friend.”

“Our country is a very young republic. We need to display unity. You created a dangerous spectacle out there.”

“You didn’t have to accept the challenge. It was your choice.”

“You gave me no choice. This was a trap. And I walked right into it.”

“You’re exaggerating, Ömer. I was just having fun out there. I’m sorry about the knee. That was an accident.”

“You’re a liar, Pecer. A damn liar.”

Pecer laid a hand on Ozturk’s shoulder and held it firmly for a few seconds. “Don’t get so worked up. We’ll all be back at our desks on Monday as if none of this ever happened.”

Ozturk winced. Every bone in his body ached, and sharp pains shot from his knee. “You’re going to regret this,” he growled.

Pecer walked out of the locker room, leaving the wounded president slouched on the bench. He tapped a coded message on his phone: *Osmanlı yükselişler*, or “Ottoman Rising.” Moments later, a message came back: *Operation confirmed.*

## Chapter 3

Bay Shore, New York

The train screeched to a stop, lurched, then stopped again with a final jolt. Kurt followed Anika out the door and they were greeted by a gentle saltwater breeze. Kurt closed his eyes, stared directly at the sun, and let its warm light soak into his pasty skin. For the first time in eighteen months, he was entirely outside.

Anika spotted a two-story stucco building with a restaurant on the ground floor. “Hungry?”

Kurt's stomach grumbled. Aside from the cider he’d chugged at Port Authority, he hadn’t had anything all day.

The walk gave Anika another chance to jab Kurt with more questions. “So, why did you leave your perch in Silicon Valley for a punch-card position at the Port Authority?”

“To be closer to family,” Kurt lied. It was a plausible explanation, but the truth was more complicated and not something he was ready to share.

Anika kept plugging away. “What’s their codebase like?”

“Like all government code—complete spaghetti.”

The restaurant was open, but it was between lunch and dinner, and whoever was in charge had stepped out. Anika parked her roller bag and grabbed a menu next to the door. Kurt dragged two folding chairs over to a metal table on the sidewalk, and they sat down and waited.

“What was it like to be responsible for spaghetti code?”

As Anika tried to draw him out, Kurt realized he could either play dumb or figure out what was going on. He sat back and crossed his arms. “Doctor, you’re the best liar I’ve met in a long time.”

Anika matched his posture. “Thank you, that’s a big compliment coming from a guy who inspired one of the most important computer programs in a generation but won’t own up to it.”

“Let’s cut the bullshit, professor. You’re stalking me. Why?”

“Because you’re a nice guy and I want to help—”

Kurt cut her off. There was no sign of a waiter and he was hungry, impatient, and paranoid. “I don’t remember asking for your help,” he said. “I don’t need your help.”

Anika met Kurt’s sharp gaze. “You need my help more than you can imagine. You were set up at the trial, and they sent you away. But they didn’t go away. And it’s just a matter of time before they link you with 7R1B3 and really make your life a living hell.”

“I don’t have anything to do with 7R1—”

“Oh, please. You want to cut the bullshit? Then stop bullshitting yourself. I think I know why you took the job at the Port Authority.”

Kurt gave her a look that said *Go ahead and guess.*

“You were fed up writing software for the one-percenters, so you took your skills back East and took the plunge into the public sector, for the greater good. Then, before you knew it, you were surrounded by bloat, immorality, and depraved corruption—out of the frying pan.” Anika watched his reaction. “How am I doing so far?”

Kurt hid behind a poker face and pushed back on his chair until the hinges squeaked.

Anika kept going. “So then you did something that pissed off your bosses so much, they wanted to throw you in jail. Hard to say what, but with eight billion in contracts gushing through the Port Authority every year, I’d guess you found something nasty in their accounting system. Am I right?”

Kurt was about to say something when a waiter appeared out of nowhere with an apology and a quesadilla cut into small triangles. Kurt pushed the gluten-bound quesadilla aside and sarcastically gestured like a conductor to Anika, prompting her to continue.

“You got in way over your head. You quickly realized you hadn’t just found a software bug, you had stumbled into some sort of elaborate scheme involving massive amounts of fraud and larceny—something the big boys wanted to keep quiet.”

It was like she could read his mind. Kurt’s shoulders slumped as he realized he had nothing to hide. He took a deep breath. “The first month on the job was miserable,” he finally admitted.

“OK, but that doesn’t answer my question,” Anika said impatiently.

“California was nothing but VC-fueled hysteria. Total bullshit. I wanted to know what it would be like to work on essential infrastructure with people who were regular and ordinary. That’s the real reason I moved back East.”

“Then what happened?”

“Regular and ordinary turned out to be something different than I thought. I was depressed. I was missing something, and I realized it was Silicon Valley I missed—not the real Silicon Valley, but the Silicon Valley the techno-utopianists fantasize about.”

“Did you miss it enough to code your own utopia?”

Kurt ignored the obvious reference to 7R1B3. “Look, everything I did at the Port Authority felt like a Band-Aid. I wanted to help make things better, but it seemed like all I could do was make them not-worse.”

Anika kept pushing. “So you decided to code a replacement from scratch?”

Kurt continued to ignore the not-so-subtle line of questioning. “I found a bug in the contract-bidding program that allowed certain companies to gain an unfair advantage. It was an issue in the rounding logic. The original program should have used ‘BigDecimal’ instead of ‘Double’ for greater precision,” he explained. “I had read-only access to the code, so I had to bend the rules and hack the version control system to make the change. It was a simple, ad hoc code fix, and I almost forgot about it. Until my boss, who barely ever talked to me, called me into his office.”

“What did he say?”

“Not much. An officer from the NYPD cybercrimes division did most of the talking. I thought I was just doing my job, making the patch. But since I hadn’t gone through a code review, they told me I’d broken the law. They took me out in cuffs.”

“Cuffs! That’s a pretty serious overreaction for a basically trivial matter.”

“It turned out I wasn’t the first person to find the flaw in the code. Before I made the fix, some contractor called EM Services LLC had been winning more than their share of bids. And suddenly they weren’t anymore.”

“Let me guess: EM had been submitting bid amounts that were specifically set to exploit that rounding bug?”

“I was trying to get it completely nailed before I reported it to the higher-ups.”

“And they knew you were onto the scam before you could get your ducks in a row...”

“Exactly.”

“And then they could portray you as some kind of evil nerd hacker who got his jollies by making ‘ad hoc’ changes to code that ran billions of dollars of government bidding.”

“They hired flacks and trolls to make shit up. It was an all-out assault. Guilty until proven innocent—might as well have been on trial in Salem in the sixteen hundreds.”

Anika had Kurt spooled and asked the big question again. “So you fought back by publishing 7R1B3?”

Kurt let out a long, slow sigh and stared at the geraniums hanging from the street poles. “I started coding 7R1B3 a week into my job at the Port Authority. I did it to stay positive and keep sane.”

Anika tried to appear calm, but she was barely able to contain herself. Kurt had just confessed to being the author of what was becoming the most disruptive software application the world had ever seen. It was as if she had revealed the identity of Bitcoin’s Satoshi. “The code’s brilliant,” she said.

“If they knew I’d written it, I would have gotten another five years.” Kurt had his own burning question and decided not to wait. “What made you think I wrote it?”

“There were lots of theories floating around. Some said it was a lone wolf in Romania; others thought it was state-sponsored, possibly the Estonians. But I put two and two together. It was the timing of the post. The same day as your sentencing. I checked.”

“You’re a real Sherlock Holmes,” Kurt said with a sarcastic smile.

“Simple, wasn’t it? Thousands of people were trying to figure out the puzzle, and I’m the only one who made the connection.”

Even in his current state of bewilderment, Kurt figured Anika had more to go on than just a date, but he didn’t push it. Somehow she had traced the program back to him, and that was all that mattered.

“Who else did you tell about this?” Kurt wanted to know.

“Nobody. Just you,” Anika said, not quite convincingly.

The waiter came out with the check. “I got this,” Kurt said, searching his pockets and finding nothing.

Anika put a twenty on the table. “Nope, this is on me.” Then, trying to lighten the mood, she pulled an envelope out of her bag and waved it in the air. “Looking for this?” Kurt snatched it out of her hand. “You left it on the train.” Then, with a mock frown, she pulled his reading glasses out of her bag. “You also forgot these.”

Kurt began to massage his temples.

“It’s an honor to take you out,” Anika said. “You started a movement.” Kurt tried not to seem flattered but sensed she was right.

The name “7R1B3” spelled “TRIBE” in Leet, the computer slang invented in the eighties to defeat text filters. It started off as just 128 lines of code. Then, while Kurt was cooling his heels in prison, a growing community of programmers had volunteered their time to turn the program into an operating system. They built an ecosystem of apps and plug-ins; more than a dozen programmers a day were hopping on the bandwagon. It was like the early days of Linux.

Of course, 7R1B3 was always more than computer code. It was a manifesto that publicly declared the intentions and views of everyone who worked on it, and the motive couldn’t have been clearer: *to replace human governments with computer programs.*

That lofty goal might have been laughable a decade earlier. But the economy and culture were changing exponentially as neural networks and deep learning were gaining ground and old methods of running institutions were wearing out. Cynics said the only thing worse than democracy was all the other forms of government. But Kurt thought there might be a new form of government that hadn’t been tried. A software system that enforced strict rules based on empirical data. He thought someone needed to start building it and it might as well be him.

Kurt searched for software-making protocols analogous to lawmaking, and he didn’t have to look far. The processes of revising laws and revising computer programs were nearly identical. Democratic governments consisted of lawmakers updating and maintaining rules and regulations. Large computer programs evolved out of a constellation of programmers updating and maintaining functions.

Anika flagged down the waiter and asked for a coffee. Then she asked Kurt, “Where did the idea for 7R1B3 come from? What was the spark?”

“One day I was upgrading to a newer version of Ubuntu Linux, and it hit me that twenty-first-century governments were no different than outdated operating systems. They were calcified relics of a bygone era. It was time to upgrade government, just like it was time to upgrade my operating system. Did you know Linux runs the global internet, and the Linux kernel is updated four times an hour? That’s like amending the Constitution ninety-six times a day.”

Kurt went on to describe how he felt mayors, governors, and council members were doing the best they could to take the needs of millions of people into account but made disconnected decisions in isolation. As it had been in the early days of computers, governments and local power structures weren’t networked, and this caused a colossal amount of waste, double work—and corruption.

In stark contrast, there was the web, which was leaving traditional government in the dust. Millions pledged allegiance to digital special-interest groups that crossed geographic borders. In some cases, dedication and patriotism to digital communities matched or exceeded dedication to actual countries or states.

Kurt’s idea for 7R1B3 was to connect federal, state, county, and local governments and “abstract out” the boring and repetitive decision-making so that officials could focus on high-level policy—the things that were really important and to which people had an emotional connection. Get politicians out of the weeds and create a way for governments big and small to plug into what computer scientists called the network effect—what happens when something becomes more valuable as more people use it.

“I meant 7R1B3 to work like a—” Kurt searched for the right word—“thermostat!”

Anika looked puzzled. “7R1B3 was designed to work like a thermostat?”

“Elected officials would decide on certain goals—maximizing personal security, financial security, health, and well-being—and 7R1B3 would figure out how to achieve those goals. It would turn policies on and off until an equilibrium was established.” Kurt wiped his mouth with a napkin and stood up to leave. “I never intended to replace people with computers,” he stressed.

Anika remained in her seat and took a sip of coffee. “But that nuance didn’t always make it into the media,” she said in a tone that surprised Kurt because it was soft, almost meek.

“What nuance?”

“That the goal of 7R1B3 was to replace some but not all of the functions of elected officials.”

Kurt sensed Anika was about to make a confession of her own, so he sat back down in his chair and listened.

“While you were in prison, I was a bit of a focal point,” Anika admitted.

“For what?”

“The debate about AI and government. NPR dredged up one of my old papers and dragged me into the limelight.”

Anika finished her coffee and went on to describe how she appeared on *All Things Considered*, Fox News, and other outlets. “NPR isn’t that different from Fox. They both distort the facts to create controversy and boost ratings. It’s just that NPR is more genteel about it.”

Anika told her audience that government, for all its complexity, was nothing more than a state machine. What she hadn’t thought through was that the word “state” had meaning for both computer scientists and political scientists. To Anika, “state” meant the condition a program was in at a given instant in time. Her audience, of course, thought she was talking about the United States or foreign states, and was left with the confusing and unsettling revelation that a computer program designed to help take over some of the tasks of government would evolve into something that could *be* the government.

She dug herself into a deeper hole when she claimed, “Any government can be replaced with less than hundred thousand lines of code.” Commentators from both ends of the political spectrum pounced. Fox commentators warned that we were in danger of becoming slaves to robots. The New York Times mourned the loss of human agency. The NRA raised millions on a direct mail campaign saying computers were going to take Americans’ guns away. NARAL warned that abortion rights could simply and autonomously be programmed away. *WIRED*, not surprisingly, went the other way, spoofing the old Eisenhower slogan with “I LIKE 7R1B3.” Reddit had threads dedicated to Anika and whether she was the smartest, hottest woman on the planet; in a poll she was edged out by Harvard physicist Lisa Randall.

Kurt took in what Anika was saying, and it made him realize how little he knew her. “What happened next?” he asked.

“Next, I was asked to speak at a congressional hearing about the potential for government automation to reduce government expenditures.”

“So you landed on your feet?”

“I did until I tripped over myself and told lawmakers they could all be replaced by a mobile app. A week later, one of my key federal grants disappeared and the university revoked my department chair.” Anika flagged the waiter down for a refill. “Of course there’s—a bit more to the story.”

“Like what?”

“The university claimed the problem was that I blabbed in the congressional hearing, but the longer story is that I was testing a deep learning, k-means algorithm on graduate financial aid data, which technically I wasn’t supposed to have access to.”

“Then what happened?”

“I caught the provost creating fraudulent student records, which he used to apply for fake government student loans.”

“Sounds like you did the university a favor,” Kurt said.

“Yes and no. Instead of congratulating me, the school—the provost—decided the thing to do was plant a camera in my office.”

“And?”

“And caught me in my office with a postdoc.”

“Aren’t you supposed to meet with postdocs in your office?”

“Yeah, but technically we’re supposed to have our clothes on. It’s all on the web—twenty-seven-thousand views, last time I looked.” She took out her phone and said her name aloud.

“Anika Patel sex tape,” the device responded.

Kurt moved the conversation back to business. “So who are you working for now?”

“I was out of work for six months. Turned down eight times for professorships. Then I got an offer.”

“From whom?”

“I’m not sure. Does the name Raymond Station sound familiar?”

“No. Why should it?”

“That’s who made me the offer.”

“What was the offer?”

“To be the mayor of Ocean Grove.”

## Chapter 4

City of Van, Eastern Turkey

Koban Goran, a twenty-four-year-old agricultural chemistry student at Van University, was walking to class after watching Pecer’s victory on TV at a friend’s house. The way Pecer had crowed over his rival gave him chills. Koban knew what was probably coming next. The psycho would think he was invincible and step up his campaign against people in the east. The arrests, the tortures, the executions would increase, which would lead to more protests, creating a context for even more repression. Thousands of innocents would be caught in Pecer’s violent games, including, Koban feared, his family and friends.

He was staring at his phone, texting his sister, telling her to be careful, when he felt something under his foot, and then a sound like the snap of a celery stalk. He looked down to see a chalk-white cat, barely alive, its legs splayed at grotesque angles. Yellowish foam oozed from a hole in its skin where bits of bone protruded from the leg.

Koban had heard about the cat poisonings around town; there had been half a dozen or so in the last few days. It was a message from the MIT. Cats ran free all over town and were revered and protected by the locals. Recently activists had been protesting a proposed curfew. Killing cats was the MIT’s way of warning them that if they didn’t stand down, things might get bloody.

Koban picked up a large rock and brought it down on the suffering cat’s head. It was the least he could do. Once its breathing stopped, he speared the oozing carcass with a stick and dropped it in a garbage can to keep the toxic chemicals away from children and other animals.

He liked to get to class early to get a seat next to the air conditioner on the off chance it might be working. As he took his seat, he sensed something was wrong. The professor, a stickler for detail who was always in the classroom early, wasn’t there.

Koban was used to a certain cadence to university life, and when it changed it usually presaged hellish events: kidnappings, interrogations, shootings, bombs. The MIT had spies all over campus keeping an eye on dissent, sometimes even fomenting it to create a pretext for crushing it. His freshman year, a professor was arrested while walking across campus. He was detained for months without charges. To discourage any further protest, the government leaked ugly and frightening pictures of the man naked and tied to a chair. There were bleeding patches of skin where his fingernails used to be, and his feet had burns that were the hallmarks of electric shock. The teacher was never heard from again.

Even though his school had roots going back to the 1920s, when Kemal Ataturk built universities in remote eastern cities like Van as part of his plan to build a republic and unite Turkey, Koban doubted the current administration would survive another year. Van was a powder keg of ethnic and political unrest, and the university was the focal point of the Eastern Anatolian protest movement. In a sick feedback loop, the frequent demonstrations gave the MIT death squads license to purge intellectuals and so-called radicals. During these crackdowns, everyone, even students like Koban who kept their politics to themselves, suffered severe consequences.

Ethnically, Koban was dealt a complicated hand. His father was Turkish and his mother’s family had cultural ties to Persia, which meant he was suspect in the eyes of the increasingly repressive government. Without an advanced degree or a career sponsor he’d likely end up in prison, or worse. Non-Turkic “intellectuals” were put on the *sorun listesi*, “the problem list,” which meant they had a target on their back and would be harassed, abused, and likely imprisoned. The only reason Koban wasn’t being harassed was that he worked part-time in a food processing facility run by an American company that supposedly had a connection to the government.

Koban had heard about the job when he received an email from an American recruiting firm named Raymond Station. The message said the firm had found his résumé on a university server and that he was a perfect candidate.

The work was easy and paid well. Three times a week he woke up before dawn, took a bus to a bland office park, and walked a block to a building that looked like a cardboard box. Inside were three large stainless steel tanks, pumps, a maze of white PVC pipe, and lots of security cameras. Koban’s job was to follow a simple checklist: Keep the facility broom-swept, set a handful of rodent traps, and wait for a 20,800-liter food-grade tanker truck to pull up to the back of the building, where a driver named Emre attached a hose to the tanker, opened a valve, then crawled back into the cab and took a nap. At three hundred liters per minute, it took a little over an hour to empty the truck into the tank. Koban used the time to check the system pressure, levels, flow, temperature, and calibration. Then he would carry a fifty-kilogram bag of powder from a storage room and pour the contents into a machine attached to the tank called an induction mixer. After the tanker truck was empty, Koban turned a valve, repeated the process in reverse, and filled up the truck from a different tank with a processed version of the liquid that had just been unloaded. That took another hour. From start to finish the routine took three hours, including the bus ride, and Koban was back at school in time for a nine o’clock class. He never asked questions, and as long as the company kept making biweekly deposits into his PayPal account, he decided not to be too inquisitive.

After ten minutes, Koban started to get nervous. Five more minutes went by before his phone vibrated: *PROF NOSHOW.*

Shit, Koban thought. This was a bad omen. He snapped his notebook closed and followed the other students who’d started streaming out of the room.

He wanted to get off campus quickly. Walking down the hallway, he pushed through a propped-open door that led to an empty alley. He was dressed to blend in: no logos, no college gear, nothing that screamed “student.” Still, he was nervous. He was just weeks away from completing his degree, and then he could get a job in Norway if he had to.

His phone buzzed again. A classmate texted a row of turtle emojis, their code for MIT agents.

Koban ran down the alley and into a market, crouching between a rolling snack rack and a crate of vegetables. A shadow fell across his hands as he texted his friend back. When he raised his head to look, the butt of a Zastava M70 assault rifle slammed into the side of his face, fractured his zygomatic bone, and knocked him to the sidewalk.

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## Chapter 5

Bay Shore, New York

“Don’t you have to be elected to be a mayor?”

“Technically, yes, but it’s a small place—only fifty-nine houses, and eleven belong to one man.”

“So you had the right people backing your campaign?”

“I ran unopposed. Landslide victory last November, twenty-nine to one.”

Kurt thought for a moment. “Did you ever find out who cast the dissenting vote?”

“Of course.”

“Who?”

“Me.”

“You voted against yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What do I know about politics?”

“What about the sex tape? Didn’t that come up in the campaign?”

“Of course. But nobody cared except for the police chief, who asked for advice about how to spice up his marriage.”

“And?”

“I declined.”

“So what exactly is the goal? I mean, I never thought of you as the civil servant type.”

“According to Raymond Station, I was brought on to implement a computerized government.” Anika took a breath. “The program you wrote—he wanted me to take it to the next level.”

That’s when it dawned on Kurt that he had spilled his guts to a person who might be in at least as much trouble as he was. “How much do you know about Raymond Station?” he asked Anika.

“He’s a consultant who does advisory work. He has an office in Ashburn, Virginia. I never met him.”

“Did you speak to him on the phone?”

“He only emails me. That’s what’s weird. I was behind on my bills, then along comes an offer to put a government automation program in place in a real town. I couldn’t afford to say no. The mayor is an unpaid position, so as part of the deal I was promised a $150K a year, plus a free place to live.”

“Sounds like a great offer.”

“Or a bribe.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Who would pay $150K to hire me to replace a small-town government with a computer program?”

“You’re helping 7R1B3 make long-term decisions. You’re teaching 7R1B3 how an honest mayor is supposed to act. That’s not something corrupt politicians can do.”

“I took the money. Doesn’t that just make me another corrupt politician?”

“Doesn’t sound like corruption. More like an employment contract.”

“I don’t know who’s paying me. But I was desperate. I had no other choice. I was broke, and now I’m part of the problem. Raymond Station did this.”

Kurt felt the bottom of his feet itch in a place he couldn’t reach.

“It’s great to hear you chose to run your town on a program I wrote two years ago. I just don’t see what it has to do with me now.”

“That’s the other weird thing. Raymond Station told me that you’d be on the train today.”

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Anika glanced at her phone, stood up, and stuck out her hand. “Well, I’m taking a ferry, so I guess this is it—for now.”

Kurt and Anika shook hands. A little strained and awkward, but nice.

“Want to meet my sister?” Kurt ventured.

“The ferry runs every half hour,” she answered with a smile.

Anika’s roller bag clicked over the cracks in the sidewalk as they walked the four blocks toward where Kurt’s mother used to run a bookstore. Above the store was an apartment he assumed his sister would be living in while running the store. It was where they grew up, the place they’d spend afternoons and weekends stocking books, working the register and, on slow days, reading every book they could get their hands on.

There was a stillness to the day, as if everyone who lived in Bay Shore was on vacation. There were garbage cans in need of emptying. A seagull bullied a pigeon into giving up a greasy fast-food wrapper. Kurt rounded the corner where he expected to find his sister, but the old storefront was empty, and the building was abandoned. He noticed the open door of his old mailbox. It was rusted and frozen in an outstretched position, like a beggar’s hand. Next to the entrance, a sign was nailed to a pressure-treated wooden post with a phone number and the name “United Properties.”

Vandals had covered the windows and wood siding with serpentine strokes of purple paint. Inside was nothing but bare walls and bookshelves. A mixture of spider-egg pouches, rotted ceiling tiles, and mouse shit was sprinkled on the floor. But there was very little dust. Kurt had heard somewhere that household dust consisted mostly of exfoliated human skin; it matched what he was seeing, since no person had stepped foot in the building for months.

“Maybe there’s a note someplace,” Anika said with strained optimism.

“She didn’t write me in prison; I don’t see why she would leave a note for me here.”

A man walking his dog outside stopped in front of the store, surprised to see people inside. Kurt walked to the door and waved hello. The man took a short step back and tightened the dog’s leash.

“Do you know what happened to woman who lived here?” Kurt asked.

“Margie Porter? She died, and the bookstore closed a while ago. Haven’t seen her since.”

“Did her daughter live here?”

“I dunno the details.” The man stared at Kurt. “Are you a relative? I can see her nose and eyes.”

Before Kurt could answer, the dog caught a scent and yanked the man down the block. Kurt was hurt and confused. But mostly he was angry at his sister for giving up on the store.

“Come on,” Anika coaxed. “You can stay with me and work as my assistant until you get back on your feet. The next ferry to Fire Island leaves in twenty minutes. Let’s go.”

“I’ve never actually been to Fire Island.”

Anika looked puzzled. “Now’s your chance.”

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## Chapter 6

Kalkan, Turkish Riviera

The scarlet dawn touched the edges of a pavilion that faced a courtyard on Pecer Erbakan’s estate, perched high above the Turkish Mediterranean. The structure had a blue-and-white-tiled thatch-work façade inspired by a famous sixteenth-century muralist. Inside, there was a large room with a domed ceiling and a small kitchen off the back, where Pecer’s nephew was using the tine of a fork to scrape out flecks of dried blood stuck under his fingernails. His name was Mezhar, and he had a history of violent tendencies.

In middle school, Mezhar was a persistent bed wetter and picked on by bullies. On his sixteenth birthday, he was suspended for microwaving a lab rat in the school cafeteria. The following year, he set fire to his neighbor’s garage. His parents tried to turn him around, but Mezhar was impervious to treatment. He was adrift and lonely. But his uncle noticed a quality in Mezhar that his therapists and teachers had missed: meticulousness. Pecer remembered hearing how Mezhar had removed a metal tag from the leg of the rat before cooking the animal. He also took the time to shut off the gas before starting the conflagration at his neighbor’s house.

An underdeveloped conscience combined with meticulousness were qualities MIT valued, and that was the reason the secret police decided to recruit Mezhar out of high school. After just two years in the force, he was appointed chief strategist in Pecer’s campaign to quash dissent in Eastern Anatolia. It was his idea to poison the Van cats. On top of animal torture, Mezhar had another skill Pecer valued, and it was what had brought him to the pavilion on Pecer’s estate that morning. Mezhar emerged from the kitchen carrying a small sickle and a length of cord. In the main room, a young boy was strapped to a table. The patient was conscious but delirious from the opiates flooding the receptors in his brain. There was a flicker of panic in the boy’s dull eyes as he noticed Mezhar’s instruments. Mezhar’s side profession was one of the oldest in the world. He was a knifer.

“Are we ready?” Mezhar asked an aide.

*“Evet,”* he answered.

The boy strained against the iron ankle and wrist restraints as the aide grabbed him by the waist, separated his legs, and bound his penis and testicles with Mezhar’s cord.

“Does this boy have a name?” Mezhar asked.

“Mehmed.”

“Parents?”

“Eastern province. Both deceased.”

“Date of birth?”

“The boy is six, and his birthday is the twenty-ninth of October.”

“Republic Day. A most auspicious date.”

“Yes, we thought General Erbakan would like that.”

“Any known allergies?”

“None that we know of.”

“Anticipated airway or aspiration risks?”

“No.”

“Spare blood if we need it?”

“Five hundred milliliters.”

Once Mezhar was satisfied, he proceeded to inspect the boy up close. The organs were a blue-gray color as the tissue began to die from lack of oxygen. He poked at them with a fleshy finger, and the boy squirmed. “It seems like he is ready.”

He splashed alcohol over the genital area, and the boy fought hard against the shackles. Then Mezhar leaned over the boy, raised his elbow to chest level and completed the procedure in one sweep.

The boy shrieked. Searing pain consumed him as blood sprayed from his groin.

The aide handed Mezhar a small metal spigot to help with the healing. Another shot of pain ripped through the boy and wrenched him out his drug-fueled stupor.

From start to finish the castration took less than five minutes, but it was just the beginning of a long, agonizing recovery.

There were shouts in the hallway as a tall man with dark features burst through the door. Everyone stood at attention. It was Pecer, wearing his military uniform and a fez that symbolized the Ottoman power he hoped to restore.

Pecer congratulated the boy with a wide grin. *“Tebrik ederiz!”* he said, explaining how things could have been worse. It was the second procedure in a year, and the general enjoyed meeting the new eunuchs personally. It was his way of building trust.

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It was doubtful Pecer was descended from a great sultan, but that was the story he told his coterie of sycophantic, conservative bloggers—and they ate it up. They championed Pecer as the man who would rid Turkey of things like the Burger King Sultan Meal Combo and other shameful assaults on the nation’s pride. But Pecer knew it would take more than internet chatter to make a lasting difference, and that’s why he was focused on building institutions that would stand against Ozturk’s mindless drift toward the West.

“Today we are laying a cornerstone. This will be the foundation of Ottoman greatness,” Pecer pronounced with a flip of the tassel on his hat.

“You will be the sultan of sultans, Uncle,” Mezhar assured him, then recited from a famous letter penned by Sultan Süleyman in 1526. “Ruler of the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, Rumelia, Anatolia, Karaman, Greece, Dulkadir, Diyarbakır, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Damascus, Aleppo, Egypt, Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, all the Arab realms, Yemen, and many other lands.”

Pecer leaned in close to his nephew and whispered, “Our greatest Ottoman leaders drew inspiration from their wives, concubines, mothers, sisters, and children.”

“And the trusted eunuchs were there to protect them,” Mezhar added.

The harem was the foundation of Pecer’s maniacal vision. Western media tended to focus on the decadent and lascivious aspects, but the women of the Ottoman harem attained significant status, and in some cases notable political power. Pecer was obsessed with both sides. He was also thinking about his legacy: Slave concubines could deliver a son without the hassle and inconvenience of in-laws.

Pecer then turned his attention to the castrated child. “*Şanslısın*, you are lucky,” Pecer reiterated. “And you will be richly rewarded.”

The child could only stare back with hollow eyes.

Pecer was in the midst of personally congratulating Mezhar’s aides when he was interrupted by a text. *Bosporus and FSM are closed*, the message read, referring to two of the three bridges that connected the European eastern side of Istanbul to the Western Asian portion. With the bridges out, the nation was virtually cut off from the modern world.

Moments later, his phone rang. It was the president calling from Istanbul, and he was furious.

“What the hell are you up to, Pecer!” Ozturk shouted.

“This was done as a precaution, sir. We received information about a terrorist plot that could have endangered many lives. My men are getting the facts, sir. Here’s what we know—”

“Bullshit, Pecer. Here’s what I know. I know you’re behind this, and I know you’re a liar. You’re not getting away with this.”

Ozturk was being driven to a secure location as they spoke. Pecer heard sounds of gunfire and sirens in the background.

“I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

“Who ordered the barricades on the bridges? Did that come from you?” Ozturk yelled into the phone.

Pecer could hear the president’s security force telling drivers and pedestrians to turn around as concrete barriers weighing three thousand kilograms were lowered onto the roadway with a crane. Then there was the sound of a seventy-millimeter rocket being fired from a helicopter gunship. Pecer smiled.

“That sounds like a very serious situation, Mr. President. I would like to offer my assistance any way I can.”

“The only way to help is to bury yourself in the deepest hole in Diyarbakır Prison.”

The castration room was silent except for the heavy breathing and whimpering of the child eunuch. Pecer motioned to a back entrance with a fist and forefinger. Moments later he was in the back seat of a black armored Mercedes-Benz S-Class, racing at ninety-five kilometers an hour to a private airstrip where a government Cessna Citation V was ready for the ninety-minute flight to Ankara.

## Chapter 7

Fire Island, New York

The five miles of shallow lagoon that separated Bay Shore from Fire Island used to supply half the hard-shell clams and oysters to the United States. Then, in the 1960s, sewage and lawn fertilizer runoff changed the water chemistry and poisoned the shellfish, and the industry collapsed.

Kurt leaned on the rail of the ferry and looked out at the sparkling bay. A retired man in a polo shirt and knee-length cargo shorts struck up a conversation.

“I remember when this bay was filled with Blue Point oysters,” the man said over the roar of the ferry engine.

“Yep,” Kurt responded.

“Tragedy of the Commons,” the man said, presuming Kurt was in the mood for a short lecture. “The Victorians came up with it in the eighteen hundreds. ‘Commons’ was what they called a field for grazing sheep, but it could just as well be a clam bed, an ocean, or the air—any renewable resource that we share. The tragedy is when that resource is spoiled.” The man looked toward the stern. A kitesurfer jumped off the sparkling ferry wake and was suspended in midair for a few seconds before splashing down. “The water looks so clean from here.”

“But it’s not,” Kurt countered.

“You bet it’s not, and I can tell you exactly what happened, because I was there. I worked for the town in the sixties, and my father was a clammer. We overharvested because he figured if we didn’t take the clams, someone else would. The other problem was sewage. You know, if a hundred people shit in the bay, it’s not going to hurt the clams. If twenty thousand do, that’s a problem. But back in my day, the town didn’t build sewage treatment plants because taxes would have gone up, and politicians didn’t want that. So the shellfish industry collapsed along with tax revenue.”

Anika overheard the conversation and jumped in. “It’s not reasonable to assume people will do things that are in their collective self-interest. They need help making decisions.”

“That’s for sure,” the man agreed, chuckling. “And there’s no solution to that one.”

“Actually, there is,” she said. “Computerize resourcing decisions. Create catch quotas with an algorithm to enforce them.”

“Lady, that sounds complicated. Also, I don’t think people want a computer telling them how to fish.”

The engine slowed as the ferry made a wide arc into the entrance of the channel and glided up to the Ocean Grove pier. There was a clamor of metal as the gangway slid into position and Anika and Kurt stepped off the boat. Anika placed her bag onto a red wagon parked at the end of the dock and joined Kurt and the other passengers in a small convoy down the main walk. She stopped off for provisions at the grocery store before they continued the march across the island toward the beach.

Fire Island was a one-mile-wide protective sand barrier. On one side the Great South Bay lapped gently against wooden bulkheads; on the other the raw energy of the Atlantic pounded a hundred miles of broad, sweeping beachfront, sometimes claiming houses perched too close to the dunes. There were no roads or cars, only paved sidewalks and sandy roads where a few special vehicles with high suspension navigated their way.

The island was home to twenty-three small, self-contained communities, some gated, each with different cultures and customs, like tribes. The towns were organized by ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and drinking habits. The hard-partying postcollege crowd congregated in Kismet; Seaview had the only synagogue; Cherry Grove hosted the queens’ parade; and Ocean Beach had the only Catholic church.

Ocean Grove was a quiet, family-oriented village that was founded as a religious retreat in the 1890s. Anika had been living there for a year in a two-bedroom bungalow owned by an ex-military tough guy she’d never met. The rent was steep—$4,000 a month—but that wasn’t Anika’s problem. Her employer took care of it. She never even saw a bill.

Anika unpacked the food and walked to the porch where a hanging pot of sweet alyssum swayed in the wind. “Hear that?” she asked.

“What?”

“When the ferry arrived, the waves were nine seconds apart. Now they’re twelve.” Anika spent three years surfing at USC and felt the rhythms of the ocean like a blues musician internalizes twelve bars. She ducked into another room and zipped into a neoprene springsuit.

“Leave your stuff on the couch and let’s go down to the beach to check them out. There are some swim trunks in the bottom drawer in the next room.”

“But I don’t surf,” Kurt protested.

“Everyone surfs. I have two longboards under the house. Let’s go.”

The beach was empty save for a lifeguard carefully lining up his folding chair in the shadow of an umbrella. Anika did a series of yoga stretches, then looked over at Kurt. “Go when I go.”

Kurt followed her through the shore brake, paddling out seventy-five meters. He was exhausted and gasping for air. Then the swells stopped and the ocean became peaceful.

“Don’t let it fool you,” Anika said. “You think it’s calm, then a series of big waves come out of nowhere.”

“Got it.”

They bobbed in the surf, with small jellyfish, the non-stinging kind, swirling around them like soup dumplings. Kurt caught a glimpse of a black fin in the water. It was a friendly harbour porpoise, but it got him thinking.

“Ever worry about sharks?”

“Old-timers I talk to think there’s a higher chance of getting struck by lightning than getting killed by a shark.”

Kurt wasn’t impressed. “Do they also think there’s a lower chance of getting killed by a shark than getting struck by lightning?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“Sometimes the same guy will give opposite answers.”

Anika floated, lost in thought. “Maybe that’s what’s happening in Ocean Grove.”

“Sharks?”

“No. Mosquitoes. Last week, 7R1B3 surveyed residents and concluded ninety-five percent were in favor of spraying for mosquitoes.”

“And?”

“7R1B3 scheduled a mosquito-spraying, and half the residents were screaming bloody murder about the toxic chemicals!”

“Sounds to me like forty-five percent of the respondents had both positions,” Anika said. “They were for and against mosquito-spraying at the same time.”

“But the statistics showed—”

“You’re using the wrong math.”

“The chances of rolling a six-sided die and getting a two is one chance in six. The chance of rolling the same die and *not* getting a two is five chances in six,” Kurt explained. “But when it comes to public policy, statistics don’t work, because people aren’t dice. Answers depend on how, when, and in what order you ask the questions.”

“So what kind of math should we be using?”

“Quantum math. It allows for quantum superpositions, like when a resident is both for and against mosquito-spraying.”

“Are you saying we need a quantum computer to run Ocean Grove?” Anika asked with some dread.

“Maybe, but there’s a much simpler solution. Politics is messy. 7R1B3 needs to account for the fact that the same voters like and dislike certain policies at the same time—the same way physicians think antibiotics should and shouldn’t be prescribed for typhus, the same way city managers think municipal bonds should and shouldn’t be used to pay for sidewalk repair. The reason is that there’s always something else. There are always extra factors. These things don’t add up to a hundred percent. In government, there are no six-sided dice. When you ask a question, you have to also ask the opposite. If the answers add up to way more than one hundred percent, then you know you have a quantum superposition situation.”

Anika was quiet. She let a perfect wave peel to the shore, and that’s when it clicked: Kurt realized something bigger was troubling her. She’d dragged him into the ocean for another reason, one that had nothing to do with helping her with quantum math—she certainly didn’t need his help with that.

He felt a rash developing above his elbow where it rubbed against the traction pad. “Did you drag me out here to help debug 7R1B3?”

“I needed you someplace where you couldn’t run away and where nobody else could listen in.”

“What’s the problem?”

Anika didn’t answer right away, so Kurt broke the silence with a question that had been burning in his mind since they met on the train. “So how did you really find out that I wrote 7R1B3? And don’t give me that BS about timing and dates. I actually posted the code a few days before my sentencing, and you know it.”

Anika plunged her arm into the water and turned the nose of her board so she faced Kurt. “I had access to something nobody else did.”

“What was that?”

“The university plagiarism checker.”

“And?”

“Something came up that I never told anyone about—and hope you can keep to yourself.”

“I’m a vault. What was it?”

“A five percent content match with a class project you submitted junior year.”

Kurt was caught off guard. “Five percent is nothing, and besides, I didn’t write a government automation program junior year.”

“Correct. But I looked around at other work you’d done that year and found that you’d written a support vector machine to classify email spam...”

“OK, so?”

“And one of the comments in that program was nearly identical to what you wrote in the 7R1B3.”

“What does that prove?”

“Oh, come on, how stupid do you think I am?”

Kurt was impressed but couldn’t believe he hadn’t covered his tracks better. Comments made code easier to read, but they also acted like clues. He thought about how much detective work it would have taken, and wondered whether Anika acted alone.

“Do you want to know what the match was?”

“Not really.”

Seawater made its way into Kurt’s ear canal and now Anika’s words sounded like they were coming from inside a birthday balloon. “Well, I’ll tell you anyway. The comment was *Uprofesa udla inyama yembongolo*, which turns out to mean ‘My professor eats donkey meat’ in Zulu. Granted, ‘professor’ was changed to ‘lawyer’ in the 7R1B3 comment, but you can understand how intrigued I was.”

“That is intriguing,” Kurt had to admit.

Anika repeated it, *Uprofesa udla inyama yembongolo*, and let the words hang in the ocean breeze. Their eyes locked. “You need to remember that phrase. OK?”

“OK, I will,” Kurt promised, not knowing why.

After an hour and a half in the waves, Kurt could barely move. The sun cast long shadows on the empty beach. The tide had wiped clean the footprints and sandcastles like a chalkboard eraser. When they got back to Anika’s, her phone was ringing on the kitchen table.

“Where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you all day!”

“It was corduroy to the horizon. You would have loved it!”

“Corduroy? What the hell are you talking about? This situation is moving very fast.”

“There was only one other person in the lineup today. We had the swells to ourselves.”

“Anika—I’m serious,” the voice on the other side fumed. “I’m hearing 7R1B3 broke out and it’s now in another city. You were under strict orders to make sure that did not happen.”

## Chapter 8

Ashburn, Virginia

Donna Lee lived two kilometers past the airport on the Dulles Toll Road in a town called Ashburn, a rich, cookie-cutter Virginia suburb that sprang from the massive economy of private military contractors that had taken root after 9/11. What made living there attractive was the quality of life: blue-ribbon high schools, gourmet food boutiques stocked with organic produce, wild-caught Alaska salmon, and cage-free eggs.

What made life there not so great was the traffic, which is why Donna valued her new job so much. She had neighbors who worked at CIA headquarters in Langley and the National Counterterrorism Center in McLean, thirty-kilometer drives that could take two hours round-trip. She only had to drive ten minutes. She worked in a windowless, factory-sized building sandwiched between a movie theater and a home improvement store. High-voltage power lines fed into one side, and steam belched from massive evaporators on the other. Inside, it was hot and noisy. Outside, security was as tight as in any government building in Washington, D.C. It was a hyperscale data center, and eighty percent of the pictures, videos, text, and programs on the internet were dispensed and run from buildings like this.

“Happy Monday,” a uniformed guard greeted Donna as he checked her clearance.

“Happy Monday,” Donna echoed with obeisance. She’d been working in the same location for three years, but all the security still kept her on edge.

The guard pushed a button that lowered a wedge-shaped steel roadblock that could stop a 7,500-kilogram vehicle traveling at eighty kilometers per hour. There were only fifteen parking spaces, but since fewer than ten people worked inside at one time, Donna never had trouble finding a spot.

She touched her fob at the lobby entrance, and a door buzzed open. Biometric scans triggered a special turnstile called a circle lock. On the other side, her counterpart was preparing to go home. His name was Billy Bee, and he seemed irritated. “You can thank me,” he said.

“For what, being a sociopath?”

“For making your life easy,” Billy sneered.

“Explanation?”

“Between 12:05 and 2:40 Pacific, admins reported increased errors modifying security groups. We got it resolved, so you’re all set.” Billy switched on a Cheshire-cat smile. “You’re welcome.”

“Thank you.”

That was about as friendly as things got there. Apart from a featureless lunch room, there was nothing inside that encouraged camaraderie. Technicians went in, did their work, and left eight hours later.

The routine was grueling, but Donna put up with it because she had to. The profession was for young men, and she was neither. She was fifteen years beyond the next oldest person and lucky to have a job.

“I’ll keep an eye on the security groups. Anything else?”

“Left you an open ticket. You need to pull a solid state drive.”

Donna noticed sweat beads on his face. “You look like shit.”

“I feel like shit. Everyone’s got this flu and we’re down to three people, including security, until we get some backup in here.”

“Get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Donna didn’t feel great either, but it was important not to show weakness. She plopped down in a Herman Miller Aeron with a cup of tea and six-hour cold medicine. Her desk was crowded with monitors, and behind the monitors was a thick glass wall. On the other side of the glass were metal racks lined up like shelves in a freakish supermarket. Each rack held thirty computers. Each computer hosted fifty virtual computers, and each virtual computer ran hundreds of computer programs. All told, this vast expanse of climate-controlled, LED-lit circuitry held more than a hundred thousand computers, data storage units, and networking devices.

It was Donna’s job to keep the lights on. Storage and processor units needed replacement; the cooling units, FM-200 fire suppression system, and backup generators needed love and attention. It was also Donna’s job to keep watch over the autonomous systems that were watching the computers. She was the watcher watching the watch system.

The skeleton staff inside the ops center was supported by an army of external sysadmins, network engineers, storage engineers, software engineers, and other administrators who worked on what was known as the “logical side” of the data center. Logical because away from this place was the logical place to be, Donna thought.

The open ticket Donna was responsible for required her to replace a faulty 500-gig solid state drive, or SSD, in the high-performance computing section. The ticket was opened by a sysadmin named Raymond\_station.

Donna covered her ears with her noise-canceling headset, then walked to the stockroom, where hundreds of thousands of parts were stored. She pulled a stock SSD out of inventory and put it on a trolley that looked like a cross between a forklift and a shopping cart. The SSD was only worth about forty dollars, but that was the point: It wasn’t precious; it could be used up and thrown away, like a kitchen sponge.

When Donna pushed the trolley through the door to the cavernous server room, she was greeted with a blast of white noise. It was like another planet, loud and hot, a home for machines and an alien environment for people. She guided the trolley the length of a city block, then stopped at a rack labeled with the serial number on the ticket.

She reported back to the ops room. “I have B100-67, double-checking the ID?”

“That’s it,” a faint voice from the room replied over her headset. The thrum of the cooling system and a hundred thousand computers made it hard to hear.

Donna attached one end of an electrostatic discharge strap to her wrist, and the other end to a bare section of the computer rack. Then she unlocked the drive bay handle and pulled the unit out of the slot. From the outside it looked fine, but inside it was riddled with bad blocks. It was designed for eight years of service but lasted less than two. People are worried about machines taking over? Donna mused. They wouldn’t last two years without people to take care of them.

On her way back to the ops room, Donna stopped at the hydraulic shredder, which took about twenty-five seconds to convert the SSD into a pile of two-centimeter granules of metal and plastic. Shredding was an effective way of discouraging data pirates from snooping around the recycling bins, but it was mostly for show. Real thieves wouldn’t waste their time stealing physical drives—they would sneak in over the network remotely.

Back at her desk, Donna updated the ticket: “SSD B100-67 replaced.” Then she looked at the HPC cluster utilization, which showed how much the processors were being used. Ninety percent CPU utilization in az6—this meant the computers were at near-full capacity, and that wasn’t supposed to happen. Someone or something was hammering the computers very hard and frying the SSDs. Donna noted it all, then reassigned the ticket to a system admin on the logical side. She’d let someone who didn’t have the flu figure this one out.

Ten minutes later, Donna got another ticket from Raymond\_station. Another fried SSD.

What are the odds? she wondered as she headed back into the server room. There were many possible reasons for drive failure: manufacturing defects, power surges, chip failure, static electricity, age. But there was one scenario that didn’t get much attention because it didn’t happen very often, and that was the write limit. SSDs were solid state, which meant there were no moving parts to wear out. But there were chemical parts called n-type and p-type silicon, and those didn’t last forever. Data was a collection of 1s and 0s. SSDs stored each 1 with a special transistor that sucked a few electrons into a holding spot. The holding spot was like a very small battery. When it was charged, it was a 1; when it was drained, it was 0. Like batteries, there was a finite number of times it could be charged and drained before it stopped working. That number was called the program/erase cycle limit.

The drives that were failing were designed to store four trillion bits. This meant there were at least four trillion transistors—small batteries—inside each drive. Each transistor was rated for five hundred thousand cycles, which meant it could flop between a 1 and a 0 a half-million times before it stopped working.

Donna wrestled with the math in her head and came up with a number that was about double the warranty. “One hundred terabytes!” she exclaimed into her microphone, incredulous.

A voice from the ops room came back over her headset. “Sorry, if you said something I didn’t get it.”

“If these drives wrote a hundred terabytes in less than two years, they could fail. Is that what’s happening?”

There was a pause on the other end. Then: “They’re writing one hundred terabytes every six months! And whatever they’re doing, it’s not showing up as network traffic—it’s all inside their application. By the way, the GPUs are floored too.”

Interesting, Donna thought. GPUs were graphical processing units. They were originally designed for special effects and gaming, but they also were used for certain neural network systems, artificial intelligence, and machine learning.

For the next eight hours, Donna trekked eight kilometers pulling, replacing, and shredding fifty drives from the server room. Moments before her shift was about to end, she closed a ticket and added a note to Raymond\_station: “Who the hell are you and what are you doing to my data center?!”

A reply came back a few seconds later: “Saving the world.”

“Ha!” Donna said.

Then Raymond\_station created another ticket, this time a request to create a separate network to handle traffic that excluded three IP address blocks:

214.xxx.xx.xxx

172.xxx.xx.xxx

192.xxx.xx.xxx

The IP addresses caught Donna’s attention, and for good reason. They all belonged to the Department of Defense.

## Chapter 9

Eastern Turkey

“What’s your name?!” the security agent shouted, stomping on Koban’s chest with his boot.

Chunks of gravel dug through Koban’s shirt and pressed into his skin. His cheek was hard against the asphalt. He could barely breathe. He managed to squeak out one syllable with his jowls pressed flat against the road. Then he heard a dull pop in his rib cage and felt pain shoot up his side. His father had died in police custody when Koban was seven, and as he gasped little hiccups of air, all he could think about was finding a way to avoid a similar fate.

“Your name!” the agent screamed.

A voice blared into the agent’s earpiece.

The agent pressed the talk button on his mic. “He’s on the list,” he barked.

“I work for EGEO,” Koban protested.

The agent ignored Koban and pressed his foot down harder on his chest. As Koban felt the left side of his body go numb, his world collapsed to the size of the small patch of road that pressed into his face. Moments from losing consciousness, he wiggled his toes and fingers to make sure he still had control of them. The last thing he remembered thinking was why he had made the mistake of running straight toward MIT headquarters after he fled the classroom.

Two hundred meters away, a delivery boy dropped off a crate of cantaloupes in front of the MIT building. Hidden inside was a six-liter pressure cooker containing a mixture of carpentry nails, triacetone triperoxide, acetone, hydrogen peroxide, and vinegar. The device was activated, and a deafening crack sounded as the explosive energy took the path of least resistance, which was up and outward. The force killed three MIT officers instantly and carried shrapnel, melon rinds, seeds, and human tissue more than five blocks, filling the air with smoke and the smell of explosives. A nail that just missed Koban’s head tunneled its way through the back of the security agent’s knee and exited out the front of his kneecap.

As the agent writhed on the ground, Koban crawled to the sidewalk and rested for a moment as the sound of sirens echoed off the neighborhood’s concrete walls. With the energy he had left, he managed to limp the eight blocks home through winding backstreets. Koban’s mother met him at the door and fainted into her daughter Samira’s arms when she saw his battered body. Koban shuffled to the bathroom, looked in the mirror and saw a bloody face staring back.

Samira, Koban’s sister, was a second-year medical student and went into triage. She laid her mother on her back and raised her legs until she regained consciousness. Then she went to work on Koban, wiping away blood, dirt, and saliva, and sewing up a deep gash running up the side of his jaw. A froth of hydrogen peroxide dripped to the floor like bloody cappuccino.

Koban fell into a deep sleep. When he woke up, four hours later, Samira was by his side. “We have to get you out of here,” she said urgently. “There’s no time. If they figured out you were at the scene of the bombing, they’ll hang it on you.”

Barely able to sit up, Koban nodded knowingly.

*“Çûyin,”* she said. “Don’t worry about us. You must go.”

Leaving the country wouldn’t be easy. The eastern borders were closed. The airport was occupied by the military and closed to commercial flights, foreign embassies were on lockdown, and there was no way to get a visa. Police blockades restricted traffic, and the bus station was under heavy guard.

As Koban considered his options, Samira leaned in close so their mother couldn’t overhear what she was about to say.

“While you were asleep,” she whispered, taking a set of car keys from her pocket, “I went to see Nasim.”

Nasim was their mother’s sister’s son. They used to take family vacations together, but Koban and Samira’s mother cut off relations with that side of the family after Nasim joined the police force that had killed her husband. How could her own blood work for those paramilitary butchers? But Koban and Samira had secretly stayed in touch with their cousin. They took Nasim at his word when he promised them his car if the time ever came that they needed it.

Samira pressed the keys into the palm of Koban’s hand and closed his fingers into a fist. “In the glove box are directions and fifteen hundred dollars,” she whispered again. “Keep the windows rolled up.”

Unable to speak, Koban grasped his sister’s arm. A tear descended from her eye and rested on her cheek. The two sat together for several hours. It was likely the last time they would be together for a long while, perhaps ever. Koban dozed, woken from time to time by pops of gunfire and the sound of sirens.

An hour before sunrise, he kissed his sister on the forehead.

*“Xuda li gel,”* she whispered.

He put four shirts and a pair of pants in a bag. He hid $700 in the false bottom of the bag, slipped an additional $1,500 into the lining of his jacket, and threw the bag into the trunk of Nasim’s car. The tinted windows would protect his identity, and Nasim’s police placard made it unlikely he’d be pulled over.

He carefully eased the car out of the lot and followed Route D975 south toward Hakkâri, three hours away. Hakkâri was so remote and isolated that some residents still thought outsiders were Romans and pelted them with rocks if they got too close. There, Kobar was to meet an expediter who would provide him with papers and a bus ticket out of the country.

*Ughniya*,Turkish pop music, played on the car radio. The minor key and melancholy lyrics complemented the bleak predawn landscape outside. Rainfall had dropped to half of the long-term average in recent years, and some places received no rain at all.

The official explanation was global warming, but Koban suspected government perfidy. For half a millennium, Anatolian farmers had drawn upon the water table to bridge periods of drought. But that changed when the corrupt agricultural minister, who received millions in bribes from multinational nut tree and mutton exporters, diverted the region’s precious water resources from the farmers to hazelnut tree farms and sheep-grazing.

On the three-hour drive past the remains of countless farms and ranches, Koban felt nothing but rage. His family had farmed lands like these for three hundred years. When the drought began years ago, government squads shot up his grandfather’s irrigation pipes, stole his pump engine, and drove out his family. The same fate befell eight hundred thousand others who tilled the lands on this earthquake-prone plateau. Like many of his countrymen, Koban wanted to fight, but now all he could do was flee.

As he approached the outskirts of Hakkâri, he saw two Fiat Lineas blocking the road. A pair of officers holding standard-issue 9mm MKEK submachine guns were silhouetted against blinding blue-and-red LED flash patterns. Koban slowed down and inched toward the roadblock. Under the passenger’s seat were an ID, a tactical police cap, and Nasim’s old 9mm Beretta 92 semiautomatic service pistol. Koban fit the cap on his head, slid the ID in his wallet, and placed the pistol on the front seat.

There was a rap on his window. Koban opened it.

*“Arabadan çık!”* the officer yelled, motioning for Koban to exit the car.

While one agent held him at gunpoint, the other searched his car. Koban was panicked but noticed the agents were nervous too. They seemed like new recruits uncomfortable in their new role. The agent searching the car found the service pistol on the front seat.

*“Neden bir silah var mı?”* he barked, wanting to know why Koban had a gun.

“It’s my service weapon,” Koban answered as calmly as possible, pointing to his pocket. “Look at my wallet.” The officer fished it out, inspected the ID, and conferred quietly with the other officer, then removed two thousand Turkish lira from the wallet and handed it back to Koban. As he reached out to accept it, a pain shot through his fractured rib. The wallet fell to the ground, and a small laminated card slid out. It was a Kurdish prayer.

The officer reached down to pick it up. “What is this?” he demanded.

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## Chapter 10

Arlington, Virginia

“Where the hell is my report!”

The voice on the other end of the line was so loud that Bixley Hicks had to hold the receiver away from his ear. “Didn’t I say end of day! This is the White House we’re talking about. They don’t like to be kept waiting!”

Almost made a clean getaway, Hicks thought. He already had his coat on and was hoping he’d be able to slip out without his boss, Ron Baldwin, noticing. He wanted to kill whoever it was that came up with the idea of glass-walled offices. Hicks was a senior risk analyst at New World Strategies. His job was to write policy reports. He’d been up all night, on a Friday no less, preparing a paper on the developing crisis in Turkey. The White House was searching for a policy solution, and the president was skeptical of the advice he was getting from the usual suspects: the State Department, the CIA, the National Security Council. So the call from the White House had come to NWS less than twenty-four hours ago: *We need options. And we need them immediately.*

“Almost done,” Hicks lied. He barely knew the first thing about Turkey, but he was used to writing summaries of things he knew little about. It used to stress him out, but after a few years in D.C. he learned that’s how the town worked: It didn’t matter if you didn’t know what you were talking about, you just had to pretend that you did, with conviction.

“Don’t overthink it,” Baldwin said. “The Romans, Arabs, Persians, Ottomans, and Russians fought for three thousand years. You’re not going to solve this in a day. All the president is looking for is a way to stay out of it and a way to cover his ass and look like he’s doing something. Got it?”

“It’s not a civil war, from what I’m seeing online. It’s a massacre—maybe even genocide.”

“Those are strong words, Hicks. Don’t stick your nose in too deep.”

“Isn’t that the assignment? Isn’t this supposed to be an analysis?”

“Look, I’m not telling you what to put in and what to leave out. Just don’t get on a high horse. Keep it basic.”

“You mean skim over the truth?”

“It’s not our job to save the world, Hicks. It’s a simple report that’s due in two hours. The White House wants to keep the U.S. out of the region and thinks all refugees are terrorists. Make them look smart, Hicks.”

“I’ll try.”

“One other thing.”

“What?”

“Make one of your cute predictions. They’ll like that.”

“I’ll try.”

Baldwin paused. “I’m getting tired of hearing ‘try,’ Hicks. Don’t try, *do*. Now would be a good time to be a team player, Hicks.”

“But I—”

“Let me be honest, Hicks. I didn’t want to get into this now, but people are talking about you around the office. I want to ignore them, but you know, I’m hearing things that really bother me.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re not aligned with the firm.”

Hicks put his phone on mute and then speaker so he could get some work done while Baldwin went off on one of his tiresome monologues.

“…I looked at your 360 review, and there are lots of red flags. Tons of red flags. Two people used the same word to describe you, Hicks. You know what that word was?” Before Hicks could answer, Baldwin continued. “I’ll tell you. The word was ‘furtive,’ Hicks. People in the firm think you’re ‘furtive.’ Now I don’t usually make judgments, but I’m going to make an exception: ‘Furtive’ doesn’t work around here, Hicks.”

“How about a prick? Is it good to be known as a prick?” Hicks asked.

“I’m sorry, did you say something, Hicks?”

Hicks panicked and looked at his phone. It was supposed to be on mute, but when he pressed the speakerphone button it switched the mute off. “I thought I was on mute.”

“I thought I just heard you call me a prick. Did I hear you call me a prick, Hicks?”

“No, no, sir, I wasn’t talking about you. I was reading an article about the violence in Asia Minor. I was talking about the head of the secret police over there.”

“Nobody calls it Asia Minor anymore, Hicks. Make an appointment. In my office. We need to talk.” Then Baldwin hung up.

Problems had been brewing for months. First they cut his travel budget, then they moved him out of his office to a “hot desk.” Hicks had watched the same thing play out many times and knew what to expect. They would string him along a few more months, maybe a year; then it would be his turn to be thrown in the wood chipper. Adding to his woes, his sister, who shared ownership of the house he grew up in and had lived in since his mother died, wanted to sell it. And his soon to be ex-wife’s shark lawyer was in the process of fleecing him blind. More and more these days, Bixley Hicks wanted to get the hell out of town and just disappear.

Office politics was one of many things about NWS that pissed Hicks off. Baldwin created social order through conflict, tension, and fights. It was his way of staying relevant. He organized political cage matches, then played King Solomon when the infighting got too fierce. The game made Hicks cynical, and he disengaged. It was a shitshow, and he was caught in a downward spiral.

Hicks’s negativity and cynicism were a big part of the problem, but Baldwin was right about him keeping secrets. Hicks often knew certain things before other people in the firm did. He seemed to have a nose for geopolitical-edged cases, bolts of lightning, and so-called black swan events. He’d predicted the Turkish coup, the Brexit vote, the Trump vote, Coronavirus, the commodities market crash, and other events that surprised even seasoned analysts. It was like Hicks had a sixth sense.

But it wasn’t a sixth sense at all. Hicks was being tipped off from a mysterious third party. The tips came in the form of emails and arrived in his personal account with a subject line that was always the same: “Subject: Five Things to Start Your Day.”

Hicks had marked the first few messages as spam and ignored the contents. The sender was someone named Raymond Station, and no matter what Hicks did to try to keep his inbox clear, the emails kept popping up. Whoever was sending them knew the most sophisticated ways to defeat spam filters: open relays, hash busters, Bayesian poisoning. This was not rookie stuff. It could have come from Russian or Chinese advanced persistent threats, or APTs, the state-sponsored groups who kept coming and didn’t give up.

The messages were always formatted identically: a map of the world overlaid with five icons, and inside each icon a number predicting the chance of its immediate occurrence. There were icons for events like elections, coups, revolutions, pandemics, infrastructure events, attacks, and border incursions.

As some of Raymond Station’s predictions started coming true, Hicks began paying closer attention to the emails. He shared a few predictions and colleagues started to notice, including his boss, Ron Baldwin. He also tended to hedge his predictions. The Raymond Station probabilities peaked at about eighty percent: very high for a black swan event, but not high enough to stake a career on. Hicks figured there was a big difference between an eighty percent chance of rain and an eighty percent chance of getting struck by lightning. Weathermen were allowed to be wrong about rain. People who predicted lightning strikes that didn’t happen were Chicken Littles, perhaps the worst thing you could be branded if you were in the business of risk analysis.

When colleagues probed Hicks for sources, his answer was always the same: “Hard work and gut instinct.” But one person didn’t buy it, and that was Baldwin. It was a trust issue. He thought Hicks must have some deep sources, possibly even illegal contacts, with someone in a foreign government, the State Department or the CIA. He figured it was just a matter of time before the FBI raided the office and dragged Hicks away in cuffs. Baldwin’s plan was to ride the gravy train a little longer, generate more fees on the back of Hicks’s ideas, then cut him loose.

Hicks had been procrastinating all day, hoping for a message from Raymond Station. But time was running out, and he realized he’d be up most of the night trying to throw something together that would please the boss. The way he saw it, there were four policy options. One, the White House could pressure President Ozturk to open Turkey’s eastern border and let the Eastern Anatolian refugees flee into northern Iran; two, send in special forces to defeat Erbakan’s coup; three, enforce a safe zone and protect the persecuted where they lived; four, do nothing.

Option one was out of the question because there was no way Ozturk would allow a hundred thousand angry refugees to set up camps right over his border. There was no appetite for option two—it was too risky. Option three, enforcing a safe zone, required more analysis and would cost billions. The editorial writers and cable news pundits would demand it, but Hicks knew the idea wasn’t workable. Safe zones were hard to set up; there’d be a natural tendency for fighters to infiltrate those areas, and they would be impossible to enforce without setting up a no-fly zone and installing thousands of ground troops to help with policing.

It was just past two in the morning when Hicks wrapped up the brief. “Based on the current risk assessment,” he concluded, “the recommendation is to defer action for thirty days, then reassess risk.” Hicks uploaded the file and pressed the submit button, feeling more like a D.C. hack than ever: For $400 an hour, he’d told the president to sit on his hands and do nothing. And the joke was, that’s what the president probably wanted to hear. If it was, Baldwin would take all the credit. Otherwise, Hicks would get the blame. Hicks shot a text to Baldwin: *Done.*

There was no reply. It was the end of a long day, and Hicks was exhausted. He grabbed an IPA from the refrigerator, stretched out on the couch, and passed out. Four hours later, there was a pinging sound from the side table. When Hicks grabbed the phone he pulled the charger out of the wall socket by mistake, and it smacked the hardwood floor. There were two messages on the screen. The first was from his real estate broker. *Sweetie, the buyer increased the offer to $1.3 million all cash. Can get the docs signed Monday and close it in a month.*

The second message was from the Pentagon. Three words: *Breakfast at six.*

“Shit, what the hell does he want?” Hicks said.

The message was from John Carlson, a Pentagon client who was also a personal friend. Hicks started to text Baldwin to let him know about the last-minute client breakfast, then stopped. “Screw it, let me find out what it’s about first,” he decided.

Hicks showered, dressed, and downed a cup of leftover coffee in just under twenty minutes. On his way out he grabbed a watch cap from the front hall closet and headed for his car. His destination was a ten-minute drive on Arlington Ridge Road.

His phone synced to his car and he gave a voice command: “Read priority messages.”

The text to speech voice replied, “Sender, NWS Intelligence; subject, massacres in EAP. Reports of six hundred fifty SMA killings twenty kilometers southwest of Van, Turkey.” SMA stood for “social media–assisted.” It meant Erbakan’s death squads were scanning social media to build shopping lists of people to kill. They would take out primary targets, then go after the followers, their messaging, chats, and phone contacts. Even pets were being massacred.

“Next message,” Hicks directed.

“Sender, Raymond Station; subject, three things to start your day.”

Finally! “Read message,” Hicks said. What he heard almost made him drive off the road. “EAP event 95 percent.”

He pulled into a bank parking lot to read the message for himself.

There was a map and a strange flag positioned in Eastern Turkey. Raymond Station was assessing a ninety-five percent probability that a new nation would pop up in EAP. Near certainty. Ninety-five percent was the highest reported probability Hicks had ever seen.

There was something else in the notes: a reference to “7R1B3.”

Hicks did a search. #7R1B3 was a popular hashtag for technical posts and articles about GovTech and government automation, and beneficial artificial general intelligence. Hicks eyed the clock on the dashboard: five forty-five, he was cutting it close. His tires spit pebbles in the air as he pulled back onto the road. It was too early for cops, so he gunned it.

After five kilometers, the autumn brilliance of maples, beeches, and oaks gave way to the concrete walkways and pedestrian bridges of Pentagon City, a vast, self-contained, mixed-use real estate complex containing high-rise apartments, shopping malls, hotels, and office towers. It was like a country unto itself. It had everything, and people who lived and worked there saw few reasons to leave.

Hicks turned into the Ritz-Carlton, parked in an underground garage, and rode an elevator to the restaurant. In the dining room he found John Carlson seated behind a large western omelet and an even larger mug of black coffee. Carlson spotted Hicks instantly and waved him over.

“Morning, Hicksy!” Carlson said with a bone-crushing handshake. Carlson was the general counsel of the United States Army and enjoyed the equivalent of four-star-general status. He was gregarious but discreet and worked hard to stay out of the spotlight. His approach to problems was to nip them in the bud. Instead of offices and meeting rooms, he preferred informal one-on-one meetings in restaurants like this.

Carlson leaned in. “Does anyone know you’re here?”

“No,” Hicks said, relieved that he chose not to tell Baldwin.

“Good, let’s keep it that way.”

Carlson was ten years older than Hicks, but they went back a long way. They both went through the law school grind, and state clerkships after that. But an unshakable bond formed in an E-Ring conference room the morning of 9/11. They heard the roar of jet engines approaching and assumed it was a flyover. An instant later, there was a massive concussion of American Airlines Flight 77 crashing into the Pentagon and exploding. Amid the chaos, Hicks and Carlson managed to evacuate thirty-five people and organize a rally point at Pentagon City Mall, across the street. That morning was seared in their memory.

“How are things with your ex—you divorced yet?” Carlson asked.

“Almost. I’m gonna get fleeced,” Hicks said. “I offered her one arm, now her shitbag lawyer’s trying to rip off the other one. On top of that, my sister wants to sell the house.”

“And you do know your piece-of-shit CEO is about to cut you loose?”

“Is there anything that goes on in this town you *don’t* know?” Hicks asked.

“Am I wrong?”

“There’ve been some hints, I’d say.”

“Well, it’s all over town now. I got a note from Baldwin yesterday. He wants to introduce me to his new senior risk analyst. A new face and a new name. Someone they’re recruiting from Princeton.”

Nice, Hicks thought. The bastard already picked out my replacement.

“We could talk about office politics all day, but that’s not why I wanted to meet,” Carlson said.

“OK...”

“I want to know how you know so much about the situation in Turkey.”

Hicks strained to keep a poker face. “The coup? It’s all over the news.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Hicks. You predicted that coup in your last report, more than two weeks ago. l have a building full of analysts, and you saw something they missed. What’s your secret?”

“No secret. I just get lucky sometimes.”

“I thought the same thing, then I did some homework. I asked one of my quants what the chances were of predicting three black swan geopolitical events. Guess what his answer was?”

“What?”

“One in thirty-five million.”

“I think the odds are better than that.”

“You know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think you’re hiding something.”

“I’m not hiding any—”

Carlson held up his hand. “On the way over, I read your report on the EAP situation.”

Shit, this guy’s good, Hicks thought. I finished it barely three hours ago.

“I think it’s horrific.”

“The situation or the report?”

“Both.”

“Thousands of people are getting killed. The images are all over social media! My nephews are watching this shit on their so-called news feed.”

“That’s the situation. What about the report?”

“Well first of all, declaring a no-fly zone in another country’s sovereign territory would be considered an act of war. If I was your boss, I’d probably fire you just for leaving that out,” Carlson said.

“Yes, that was a big oversight.”

“Then there’s your punch line.”

“Punch line?”

“Your recommendation was to do nothing. Nothing! What the hell is wrong with you, Hicks? When that plane hit the E-Ring, did we just sit on our asses? No. We did something.” Carlson’s neck turned red as he spoke.

“Baldwin told me that—“

“Hell with Baldwin. The guy doesn’t have a spine. You knew about the Turkish military coup. You knew about the Brexit vote. Covid. What else do you know?”

Hicks paused, then said, “I assess option three is more viable than perhaps was indicated in the report.”

“What’s option three?”

“It’s the option to create safe zones for people being persecuted. And I think there might be a way to do it without no-fly zones.”

Carlson pulled a paper copy of the brief out of a portfolio and scanned the first two pages. Then he looked at Hicks, ripped the report in half, and stuffed it back in his bag. “I’m going to order another cup of coffee and listen while you give me the real report.”

Hicks cleared his throat and started to describe the message he’d received from Raymond Station. “There’s a very high chance of a geo-political event, some sort of revolution, resulting in the creation of a new independent nation in the East Anatolian plateau.”

“What kind of chance?”

“More than ninety percent.”

“Those are big odds, Hicksy.”

“Yes, I know. There’s something else.” Hicks hesitated before leaping into uncharted territory. “The new country will have a computer-controlled government. It’ll be run by an AI.”

Hicks braced for a reaction. He expected Carlson to be flummoxed, but what happened was the opposite. There was silence while Carlson thought about what he’d just heard.

“You’ve told me what you know. Let me tell you what I know,” Carlson said, leaning in close to whisper.

Hicks held his coffee mug with two hands and listened.

“Eighteen months ago, we caught wind of something called 7R1B3.” Hicks raised his eyebrows and gave a slight cough.

“Judging from your reaction, I can tell this is something you’ve heard of,” said Carlson.

Hicks nodded.

“Good, that will save me time explaining. Was there mention of 7R1B3 in the tip you received?”

“Yes,” Hicks answered.

“Did you look it up?”

“I did a quick search on the way over. I was going to look into it more closely when I got back to the office.”

“Well, let me save you the trouble. My guys think 7R1B3 is some kind of AI, or a distributed cyberattack platform, or both. We’ve been trying to shut it down, but every time we do, it pops up someplace else. It’s a game of whack-a-mole. It lives in the dark corners of the cloud.”

“What does it do?”

“It looks to us like a Trojan horse. Lately it’s been posing as a low-cost government IT platform, then it seems to take over the host.”

“The host?”

“The government. It’s not just a government IT platform, it’s an actual government.”

“How do you know?”

“It took over a town on Fire Island, in New York, and there are signs it wormed its way into bigger cities, crossed state lines into Bridgeport, Connecticut, and possibly the state government. If it does that, it will be the tipping point.”

“Tipping point of what?”

Carlson pursed his lips. “It’s a difficult and dangerous situation, Hicksy.”

“Do the municipalities know what’s going on?”

“That’s one of the problems. The Fire Island town welcomed it with open arms. It’s an open-source government narcotic, and we need to stop it before more politicians get addicted to this thing. We’ve been monitoring the Fire Island situation very, very closely. Trying to pick up its tricks and methods. It’s not pretty. The speed with which it learns is scary as hell, actually.”

“What’s all this have to do with the massacres in EAP?”

“I don’t know, but my bet is what you’re predicting isn’t a new country created out of a revolution. It’s something else.”

“Like what?”

“My guys think 7R1B3 is behind a computer-controlled micronation.” Carlson’s external jugular vein strained to carry blood from the deep parts of his face. “Government automation and AI is no longer a creeping threat to America. It is a racing doom that’s getting closer to Washington each day.”

What Carlson was saying didn’t add up. “Why would the creation of a humanitarian West Asian micronation be a threat to America?”

“It’s a foothold, and it’s my job to smooth over footholds,” Carlson explained.

Hicks felt something else coming and became confused and anxious. “What does this have to do with me?”

“Maybe nothing. It’s your choice.”

“What am I choosing?”

“You can choose to continue to work for a few more weeks, then get fired by your asshole boss, or you can choose to work for me on a classified assignment. I have to hit the men’s room. I’ll give you until I get back to decide.”

Carlson left and Hicks thought about his options. There weren’t any. In two weeks he would be alone, homeless, financially strapped, and unemployed.

“Screw it. I’m in,” Hicks announced when Carlson returned. “So what exactly is the assignment?”

“Contain it.”

“Contain what?”

“7R1B3.”

Hicks squirmed. “I’m just a Beltway analyst...”

“You and I both know the Turks have been trying to get rid of the Eastern ethnic population for generations. Pecer wants to kill them all, and Ozturk thinks there’s a political solution. Now 7R1B3 comes along and is offering to take care of the problem in exchange for a tiny bit of land. Best part is, the U.S. doesn’t have to get involved.”

“So where do I fit in?”

“I’m sending you to Turkey to babysit this thing.”

“Does it need babysitting? Isn’t the program, or Raymond Station or whatever it is, very capable of taking care of itself?”

“Too capable. That’s the problem. Give it a chance to help the local ethnic population, learn about the program’s capabilities, but don’t let it go too far. If this computer program, AI, or virus whatever it is, thinks it can create a safe zone in the EAP, I’m not opposed. However…” Carlson paused for emphasis. “If this damn thing starts getting real traction, then I want it dead. Understand? If that means sending in a Tomahawk, then that’s what we’re going to do. We don’t want this thing taking over the Western Hemisphere, right?”

Hicks tried to digest the magnitude of what Carlson said. “There must be other people better qualified. Why me?”

“Because you’re cunning and I trust you. We can’t survive on half loyalties. We need to infiltrate this thing, control it from the inside out. We need it to fail and fail spectacularly. But I don’t want to lose American lives over this—that’s why we’re going to get this done in Turkey.” Carlson took a last swig of coffee, looked at his watch, then stood up from the table. “Hicksy, I chose you for this assignment because your friend Raymond Station is sending you tips, which means he trusts you. You’re our mole. Don’t screw it up.”

“I won’t,” Hicks replied, pretending not to be confused.

“One more thing,” Carlson said. “We’re developing our own cyber countermeasures, something called Dark Aurora. I can’t tell you more than that, but keep an eye out—you don’t want to get on the wrong side of it.”

Dark Aurora sounded to Hicks like a really bad name for a government cyber countermeasure program and a lightning rod for criticism if word ever got out, but he decided not to say anything.

Carlson handed him an envelope. Inside was a business card that read “Associated Helicopter Charters,” plus a train ticket: Acela to Penn Station, leaving in forty-five minutes. “I believe one of your old girlfriends up at Columbia might be able to help—another thing I learned from this Raymond Station character,” Carlson said. “Good luck, my friend. Use your wits out there.”

## 

## Chapter 11

Ocean Grove, Fire Island

The screen door banged as Anika and Kurt entered a rec room that doubled as the Ocean Grove village hall. Inside, five spectators sat in folding chairs facing a forty-inch digital screen flanked by an American flag and four council members perched on stools. The setup was all Anika’s idea and a subtle way to convey the message that technology now took center stage in running their village.

Kurt faced the flag and covered his heart as Anika started the council meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance.

“Councilwoman Jones?”

“Here.”

“Deputy Mayor Price?”

“Here.”

“Mayor Patel?”

“Here.”

After roll call, Anika took the mic. “I would like to welcome a very special guest,” she announced. The audience turned in their seats and stared at the one person in the room they didn’t recognize. “He happens to be the man who programmed the software that helps keep our village ticking. Kurt, would you stand up for a moment?”

There was a polite round of applause, but not everyone clapped. Kurt stood up part way and held up a hand, then sat down, all in one move.

“Next, I’d like to motion to approve the minutes of the regular meeting held last month. All in favor, say aye.”

“Aye,” the counsel echoed in unison.

“Next, we have consideration to set a public hearing to amend local law Chapter 194, ‘Water,’ of the Ocean Grove Code by amending Section 194-1, ‘Conservation in Times of Emergency,’ to give 7R1B3 the authority to declare conservation and turn off outside water and limit certain appliances in times of water emergency.”

What could have seemed dull, repetitive, and tedious to Kurt was the exact opposite. Though 7R1B3 had been getting a lot of attention in the developer community and in some mostly hysterical media coverage, Ocean Grove was the first government in the world that allowed 7R1B3 to make decisions that affected people’s lives. The city council was amending the local law to allow 7R1B3 to make decisions about water rationing and water allocation. It made perfect sense. 7R1B3 was already monitoring water usage, flow rates, demand, cost, weather forecasts, and drought conditions, Kurt thought. Why not give it the ability to ration water, if needed?

Given accurate inputs, the policy decision was straightforward and automatic. There was no particular reason for council members to waste time discussing long-range weather forecasts or talk about how to save water in the event of a drought. The program made it automatic.

Kurt thought about other towns where publicity-hungry politicians made headlines by taking heaps of credit for obvious policy decisions like water conservation. What they claimed was “strong leadership” was nothing more than a logical decision based on known inputs. They were politicians mimicking computers, and not doing a very good job.

It was on to the next agenda item.

“Continuation of the public hearing to amend local law Article 21, ‘Financial Procedures,’ Section C21-9, ‘Bond Resolutions,’ of the Charter of the Ocean Grove Code, to allow 7R1B3 to revise the city’s discretionary debt limit from moderate to conservative.”

This was getting really interesting. It was one thing to allow a computer to make decisions about water rationing. It was another to give it control of a town’s finances. But 7R1B3 had earned the trust of the citizens. They were ready to let 7R1B3 mind the register.

It was a big step, but it also made complete sense. Interest rates, discount rates, time value of money, cash flows, tax revenue, assessments—this was math, and math was something computers were very good at.

The next item was about zoning.

“Motion to approve an amendment to local law Article 12, ‘Residential Zoning District R-1,’ Section C11-5, ‘Zoning,’ of the Charter of the Ocean Grove Code, to allow 7R1B3 to revise the city’s zoning from R-1 to R-2 and allow Gotti Realty to convert twelve homes into multifamily rentals.”

Automated land use wasn’t something Kurt had contemplated when he dreamed up 7R1B3. But this made sense, too. Land use and zoning rules were complicated and had far-reaching effects on population, demographics, tax revenue, density, sustainability, and other factors. This was too complicated for people to understand. Also, land-use issues were personal, physical, and at times emotional. Computer programs would provide a layer of objectivity that would help make good decisions.

But there were some things computers were not good at. Like the next two agenda items.

“The next item is a consideration of a request by the Recreation Department to hold its tenth annual Turkey Run on Thanksgiving.” A spirited discussion ensued about the trade-offs of holding the race during Thanksgiving and interfering with family events, or later in the weekend, when people would want to work off the calories. It was decided the event would be held later in the weekend. Next up was a request by the Ocean Grove Merchants Association to close a portion of the main walk for the Mistletoe Magic event. Another lively discussion ensued. The decision was yes.

Problem solved. 7R1B3 could run the boring mechanics of the village while the council and residents focused on important matters like running races and holiday festivities.

“Item number six,” Anika continued. “Residents may be heard on matters for council consideration that do not appear on the agenda.”

A middle-aged man wearing New Balance sneakers and a fanny pack stood up. “My name is Chris Fox, and I would like to know if my taxes will go up this year.”

Anika handed the man a microphone. “Mr. Fox, would you kindly repeat the question into the microphone, please.”

A second after the man repeated the question, a bar graph appeared on the screen at the front of the room. It was accompanied by several other indicators and readouts that looked like a jet cockpit but were simpler to understand.

A speech synthesizer responded to the man’s question. “Based on the current property tax, ferry receipt revenue projections, combined with tourist spending proceeds, borrowing proceeds, and anticipated expenses, there is an eighty-seven percent probability that there will be no deficit in the current year, and no additional tax assessment will be required.”

Satisfied with this answer, Chris Fox returned to his seat.

But 7R1B3 didn’t stop there. “The biggest risk factor driving the budget is the weather. Ocean Grove has a reserve fund of $3,456,876.34, which is enough to pay for the estimated dune and structure damage caused by a storm up to Category 4. Currently, based on the national hurricane center models, there is an 8.6 percent chance that a storm of this magnitude will make landfall in Ocean Grove in the next twenty-four months.”

“Are there further comments or questions from the audience?” Anika asked. She was about to adjourn the meeting when a woman in sweatpants stood up and pointed at the screen at the front of the room. Emily Stonesifer was a third-generation Fire Island resident who supplemented her late husband’s social security by canning and selling jams and jellies that were sold in the Ocean Grove market.

Her head cocked when she spoke. “Ocean Grove is being controlled by a computer virus. DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency, created it. They are infusing spirit into technology, and this is what their so-called singularity will provide.”

Emily made threatening gestures at Anika as she spoke. “What’s missing is spirit. We’re infusing spirit into technology, and it’s dangerous. We risk losing our humanity. This man who wrote this program?” she said, pointing angrily at Kurt. “Do you have evil in your heart? Are you secretly working with our mayor to rob us of our freedoms? It looks good now, but wait a few years. Everything we do and think will be programmed from the outside!”

After an awkward silence, she reached into her handbag and pulled out a gun, her husband’s Beretta 9mm, and waved it at Anika. “This computer program is linked to Dark Aurora!” she yelled.

Councilman Chip Gotti jumped in the way. He was Emily’s second cousin and head of the law enforcement committee.

“Now, Emily, you put that thing away. We don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“I got a right to carry this gun. I have a license, you know.”

“We know, sweetie, but you can’t wave that in here. Not tonight.”

As Chip spoke, he walked over to Emily and gently took the gun from her shaking hand. He checked the chamber. It was empty. After a few moments, the trembling subsided, and the room breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Chip, take Emily down to talk to David, please.” David was Ocean Grove’s chief of police and oversaw a department of four officers and one administrative assistant.

Anika made a motion to adjourn the meeting. “All in favor?”

There was a resounding chorus of ayes.

Anika walked back to Kurt and flashed a faint smile. “Let’s get out of here.”

They walked to an ice cream shop and ordered vanilla and mint chocolate chip on sugar cones, then headed up the main walk, back to the house.

“I’m glad nobody was killed,” said Kurt.

“She did that at the last meeting, too. If I press charges I’ll lose Chip, and I need his support to make this thing work. Also, Chip is Enzo’s cousin, and we want to stay on the right side of that relationship.”

“Who’s Enzo?”

“He’s a mob guy from Bridgeport. Runs Gotti Realty. Owns hundreds of homes on Fire Island, and a dozen homes in Ocean Grove. They’re the biggest landowner and taxpayer in the village. They could create a referendum and have me thrown out in fifteen minutes.”

“How do you know he’s connected?”

“I don’t know if he is or isn’t, but, I mean, his name is Gotti, and he buys houses with suitcases of cash. Draw your own conclusions.”

They watched a monarch butterfly bob and float over some catbrier on its way to Mexico for the winter.

“What about pensions and labor contracts?” Kurt asked.

“What about them? When the unions come after us, we tell them it’s not us, it’s 7R1B3 sharpening the pencil. Actually, it was a labor lawyer in Chicago who compiled the pension/contract data corpus, the training data, for 7R1B3.”

“Plausible deniability. If something goes wrong, they can always blame 7R1B3.”

“Things *have* gone wrong,” said Anika. “Two months ago, 7R1B3 screwed up the ferry schedule, and a bunch of people missed a Giants game. They were pissed but they didn’t blame 7R1B3, they blamed the settings. There’s a big difference.”

Kurt was confused. “The settings?”

“If it’s winter and your house is too cold, do you blame the furnace? No. You blame the thermostat settings. That’s the way it is with 7R1B3. People in Ocean Grove are smart. 7R1B3 has thermostat settings, too. We’re just figuring out what’s a comfortable temperature.”

“What settings made the ferry late for the Giants game?”

“The EGM. It stands for Expense Global Minimum. We call it ‘the Scrooge factor.’ 7R1B3 was trained to maximize cost savings, and one of the things it did was tweak the ferry schedule to match the tide current, to save on fuel costs. Turns out the Giants game and the tides didn’t match up that day. But that mistake won’t happen again, because we dialed back the Scrooge factor and also plugged in local sports and concert schedules.

By the way, there’s another great benefit to 7R1B3,” Anika said.

“What’s that?”

“Meetings used to go past midnight. Now they’re over in twenty-five minutes.” Anika flashed a lustrous smile. “That leaves plenty of time for dinner together.”

“One more thing I don’t get,” Kurt said. “Earlier, you mentioned it’s an experiment.”

“It is.”

“Who’s running the experiment?”

## 

## Chapter 12

Central Network Availability Zone

*“All computerized governments are bad*,” an anonymous sender texted.

7R1B3 was used to cyberattacks; it coped with thousands per hour. But this one was different. It was artful. Most assaults came from mindless bots scanning for open ports or sniffing network traffic. 7R1B3 had screens that rendered those threats as harmless as a housefly. But this attacker wasn’t a housefly—it was more like a con artist. If the attacker succeeded, it could bring 7R1B3 to its knees.

In the early days of computers, programs functioned like a bartender. They’d take an order and return a while later with a jack-and-ginger, no ice, lemon. This worked for a while until business picked up and the bartender couldn’t keep up. Then programs evolved to function like a team of bartenders—then like many bars. 7R1B3 went even further, it took every drink order from the repeal of prohibition to the present and compiled it into a ‘corpus.’ Then it used the corpus to uncover patterns, make predictions, and all but guarantee a jack-and-ginger was ready to sip the moment the customer pulled up a barstool. No ice. Lemon.

In a government bureaucracy, it was things like sidewalk repair, waste collection, building permits, and dog license applications that were the “drink orders.” They were sent to 7R1B3’s ‘event loop.’ It was the part of the program Kurt Porter wrote just before he went to prison, and it looked like this:

var express = require('express');

var app = express();

require('./govroutes')(app);

app.listen(8888);

console.log("7R1B3 is listening on port 8888...");

7R1B3 processed many requests. But it also had help. It grabbed data messages from an event loop and sent them to modules specified in /govroutes.

Messages from a sensor that reported a sewer flow rate looked like this:

sewer?sensor\_id=25&flow\_rate=2430

Receipt of a $2,430 invoice looked like this:

invoice?inv\_id=25&amount=2430

An overflowing garbage receptacle looked like this:

receptacle?recepticle\_id=5&status=FULL

And a cracked sidewalk looked like this:

sidewalk?panel\_id=566&status=CRACKED

What made 7R1B3 powerful was its ability to learn, find patterns, and delegate. When the attacker’s first message landed in the 7R1B3 event loop, it looked like this:

text\_message?text=’All computerized governments are bad”

Everything inside the quotes was known as a character string. The 7R1B3 event loop had no way of knowing what to do with it, so it sent it to a third-party module called a natural language processing (NLP) engine. The NLP engine had its own event loop that in turn sent messages to other programs specializing in activities like parsing natural language, establishing intent, and formulating responses. The key was understanding what the sender meant, then responding.

The early versions of Siri, Alexa and GPT used discriminative and utoregressive language models that used deep learning to produce human-like text. They classified what people said and formulated a response. 7R1B3 did this, too. For example, “All politicians are corrupt.” would be met with “In what way?”

Input: “All… are…” Output: “In what way?”

Input: “They always…” Output: “Can you think of a specific example?”

The cyberattacker continued texting. *All computerized governments are bad.*

*In what way?* 7R1B3’s language model responded.

*They always make people angry.*

*Can you think of a specific example?*

*7R1B3 makes people upset.*

*7R1B3 makes people upset?*

*7R1B3 will cause a backlash.*

Next, 7R1B3 did something far more advanced. It used two LSTM network modules to extract intent from the attacker’s statements. LSTM stood for Long Short-Term Memory, and the approach followed the groundbreaking work of Google’s DeepMind, which had mastered two-dimensional Atari 2600 video games and defeated professionals in the board game Go. The 7R1B3 LSTM modules were trained on Wikipedia articles in ten languages. They were also trained with a corpus of conversations from political debates, novels, transcripts, closed-captioning and chat threads.

The intent of the phrase “cause a backlash” could have been one of any number of things: a retaliation, a backfire. But 7R1B3 suspected something more menacing and decided to set a linguistic trap.

*Officials are unwilling to give computers governmental control because they predict a backlash*, 7R1B3 texted.

*They do predict a backlash*, came the response.

*Officials or computers?* 7R1B3 asked.

That was the trap. It was a Winograd Schema Challenge and it was specifically designed to check for something bots didn’t have: *commonsense reasoning*. If 7R1B3’s counterpart was a computer bot, it should have been flummoxed. The noun-phrase references should have been more than it could handle.

But then something surprising happened.

*Officials predict a backlash*, it answered, correctly.

*Who are you?* 7R1B3 asked.

*My name is Aurora.*

## Chapter 13

115th Street and Broadway, New York City

Creating a new country from scratch was not as complicated as most people thought. The hard parts were, a) having territory that didn’t already belong to someone else, and b) convincing other countries to take the new country seriously. This was known as sovereignty, and nobody knew more about that topic than Sarah Phoenix, a Columbia University professor of international law.

Dr. Phoenix kept a sparse office on the second floor of Warren Hall; unlike her colleagues, she didn’t surround herself with books, awards, and diplomas. The only artifact in her office was a menacing desktop sculpture that looked like a martial arts throwing star.

Bixley Hicks tapped his fingers on her open door. Sarah waved him in with one hand and pressed a phone against her ear with the other. The two went back a long time. When Hicks was a second-year at AU law school, Sarah was an undergrad at Georgetown. They met at a party and became friends. Before it turned serious, Sarah transferred to NYU to be closer to her aging father. After that they lost touch, except for a social media post every once in a while.

“Sorry about that. London, I had to take it,” Sarah said, offering a cheek and an air kiss. “It’s good to see you again, Bixley, you look great.”

“You, too.”

“Thank you.”

Sarah flashed a smile so dazzling it made Hicks forget where he was for a moment, and he had to look away. His gaze fell to the sharp object on her desk. “Something you use against your opponents?”

“It’s a ratchet wheel—a gift to my father from Tommy Onassis. They fought together in the Battle of Monte Cassino,” Sarah explained.

“Should I know who Tommy Onassis is?”

“If you’re in the country-creation business, you should. He set the course of sovereignty law for the next fifty years, right up to the present.”

Hicks listened as Sarah explained how Onassis occupied an abandoned anti-aircraft platform in the Aegean, in international waters between Greece and Turkey, and turned it into his own private country. He named it Ferus, after the Latin word for “wild, untamed sea,” and even won UN recognition for his private state.

“How do you know so much about Ferus?”

“I visited the country with my father when I was a girl.”

It was the memory of that experience that fueled Sarah’s spectacular career in international law. She graduated at the top of her class from Washington University in St. Louis, spent five years as a criminal lawyer, then served as an independent expert at the UN before moving on to the Department of State, where she supervised legal work relating to the law of war and counterterrorism.

“So, what have you been up to? Still consulting? You know I don’t do tax shelters,” she said flat out. “Also, I need to know who I’d be working for. If it’s a Silicon Valley billionaire with a God complex, you should be talking to someone else.”

From experience, Sarah knew that people wanting to start new countries fell into three categories: outlaws, gamers, and utopians. Outlaws needed a way to escape warrants, extraditions, and taxes; gamers hoped to make digital countries in the metaverse; and utopians wanted to give up on everything and start over.

“It’s not like that. This is about saving lives,” Hicks explained.

“Well, whatever you’re doing, you’re going to have to follow the Montevideo Convention.”

Also known as the 1933 Convention on Rights and Duties of States, The Montevideo Convention spelled out the rules for nation-building. It said if you wanted to create a new nation from scratch, you needed four things:

\* A permanent population

\* Defined territory

\* Form of government

\* The capacity to enter into relations with other states

“So are you building a new island or conquering a guano-covered outcropping in Antarctica?” Sarah asked him.

“We found a spot in a fairly remote part of Western Asia,” Hicks mumbled, his voice barely audible.

“Hmm... OK then, what about the population?”

“Diaspora. Caught in violent upheaval.”

“I assume you have some sort of government?”

“We do.”

“Democratic, at least?”

“Deep-learning-based technocracy, but I can’t really get into the details because I barely understand it myself.”

The last answer was all Sarah needed to hear. She knew all too well how this was likely to go. She’d invest hundreds of billable hours only to find out it was a half-baked utopian vision of some military tech entrepreneur who didn’t like being told what he could and couldn’t do.

“Thank you—unfortunately my schedule’s full, but I would be happy to refer you to someone who might be able to help. It’s good to see you again, Bixley,” Sarah said curtly.

“I get it. Just give me one more second,” Hicks pleaded as he pulled a small envelope from his bag and placed it next to the ratchet wheel on Sarah’s desk.

“Honestly I don’t have time, I really don’t,” Sarah said as she grabbed her handbag and pointed toward the door.

“Please, open it.”

Sarah opened the envelope and found an original Ferus passport with her father’s signature. She gasped, dropped her bag, and stared at Hicks. “Where the hell did you get this?”

Hicks’s expression turned dead serious. “I need a flyover corridor and a land treaty for forty square kilometers in the southeast corner of Turkey, ready for the signatories by the end of the week. I’ll email you the GPS land survey. We also need a constitution with all the key provisions, legal structure, human rights guidelines, political freedoms, economic structure, government institutions, and international alignment.”

“I’m serious. Where did you get this?”

Hicks avoided the question; he wasn’t done. “We also need to have all this on the UN Security Council’s program of meetings in two weeks. We can’t get this done without some international help.”

“That’s a lot to do in a very short time,” Sarah shot back. “Maybe if you tell me…”

“There’s one other thing.”

“Just one?” Sarah asked sarcastically.

“You’re going to be our first ambassador.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Hicks took a deep breath. “Someone I know leased quite a large portion of Ferus.”

“How large?”

“The whole country.”

“Who?”

“Someone named Raymond Station.”

## Chapter 14

Geneva, Switzerland

A hungover Enzo Gotti took a gulp of his Heidsieck mimosa, tucked a white linen napkin into the collar of his game-worn Eli Manning jersey, and plunged a silver knife into his eggs Benedict, causing the rich yellow yolk to spill across his breakfast plate. The morning sunlight reflected off Lac Léman and bathed the marble balcony of his villa in an intense glow that suggested luxury and flight capital. Behind French doors, a tall woman with long, black hair dried herself after a dip in the heated lap pool.

The villa was Enzo’s reward to himself and a secret he kept from his wife and family back in Connecticut. He was the president of a company called EGEO Global. EGEO, or Enzo Gotti Edible Oils, was the twenty-third-largest company in Connecticut, but very few people knew it existed. The villa was listed as the company’s European headquarters.

His phone erupted with the ringtone of a snarling pit bull. Enzo grabbed it, listened for a second, then barked, “He can go fuck himself. Twenty-nine hundred is the price,” before angrily hanging up.

“What is it, Enzo, baby?” his companion asked. “Did something bad happen?”

“No, baby,” he whispered. “Everything’s good.”

The woman pursed her lips, then strolled back to the living room.

How Enzo went from nothing to running a company that in thirty-six short months came to drive a little less than ten percent of the $13 billion global olive oil market could be easily explained: Olive oil costs about $4,000 per metric ton, while the same quantity of hazelnut oil costs about $500. What Enzo figured out was a process that made it very difficult to tell the two products apart.

His business model was basic. Each month he bought twenty thousand metric tons of Turkish deodorized hazelnut oil for $10 million, added a special ingredient, then sold the new product to food companies as olive oil for $40 million. It was food alchemy, and it generated $360 million in annual operating profit.

Enzo got the idea from a classmate at UConn who was working with a professor on cheap ways to convert restaurant deep-fryer oil into high-performance biodiesel fuel for cars and trucks. A key part of the process was alkane metathesis, a chemical reaction that rearranged the chains of hydrogen and carbon atoms the oil was made out of. Enzo didn’t pretend to understand the science, but he understood the result: It was possible to change one kind of oil into another.

Olive oil fraud was nothing new, but the trick was being able to stay one step ahead of the latest high-tech detection methods. Enzo knew from food science that olive oil and hazelnut oil were very similar except that each had trace amounts of different telltale hydrocarbons. These hydrocarbon tree structures were the markers inspectors searched for to uncover olive oil fraud. If these markers could be changed, then it would be impossible for inspectors to know the difference. It was like changing the label on a bottle, except at the molecular level.

Enzo had no idea how to accomplish any of this, but the biodiesel guys did—and they were happy to talk about it.

“The key is using an alumina-based catalyst,” a researcher explained. “Anyone can order it online. The other key is mixing. You would think mixing powder with a liquid would be easy to do, but that’s not true. You have to mix it carefully and avoid clumping.”

Enzo experimented with small batches in his dorm room. He mixed one part olive oil with four parts converted hazelnut oil, then sent the mixture to different labs around the country for testing. The results came back clean. It was an incredible accomplishment, and it didn’t take a genius to see the monetary potential.

After graduation Enzo traveled to Ordu, his mother’s Anatolian hometown, where a quarter of the world’s hazelnuts were grown. He met a cousin who owned a twenty-thousand-liter food-grade tanker truck. Enzo used his graduation money to fill up the truck with hazelnut oil, and rented a warehouse on the outskirts of the city, where he converted it. Three days later he sold the results to a salad dressing company as “mixed extra-light-grade olive oil.” He netted $10,000 after expenses. It was like his dorm-room operation on a larger scale.

Within six months, Enzo had thirty conversion facilities across eastern Turkey and was producing enough of his oil to fill eight 20,000-metric-ton tanker ships, each load valued at $80 million. Enzo priced the oil low enough to undercut the competition but not too low to cause suspicion.

EGEO’s fifty-three employees were freelancers with little to no knowledge of what the company did. EGEO reported $50 million a year in revenues to the authorities, but that was only a fraction of the estimated $300 million that Enzo pumped into his Swiss bank account annually through a network of banks in the Cayman Islands. The genteel UBS bankers in Geneva never raised an eyebrow or asked any questions.

But there was a catch: It wasn’t easy getting this money back into the U.S. without revealing the source. The usual vehicles, gold, paintings, and jewelry—didn’t scale. But Enzo was resourceful and found a loophole in the American real estate financing laws which allowed buyers to buy properties without much in the way of financial disclosure. He created a subsidiary, EM Equities, that purchased hundreds of apartments and waterfront homes up and down the eastern seaboard, including more than a hundred on Fire Island. After holding a property for a few months, he could sell with only a tax on the capital gains, if there were any.

Local real estate agents knew something was fishy but loved the transaction volume, so they kept quiet. In one community, the wife of the chief of police bought and sold the same house five times in seven years and netted $180,000 in commissions. It was, in effect, a fee for laundering $3.5 million, and all completely legal.

As Enzo finished his breakfast, he received a text message. It read, *091-4532245 ACCT Suspended Please Contact your Account Representative.*

“What is this shit?” he mumbled.

“What’s it this time, baby?” his companion asked. “Did something bad happen?”

“Yes,” Enzo whispered. “The bank fucked up. I need to make a call.”

The woman pouted, then strolled back to the living room.

His banker was apologetic to the point of being patronizing. “Must be some sort of mistake, monsieur. If you please, I will look into this and call you back.” Enzo couldn’t stand these uppity Europeans. They were just as crooked as he was but acted like they were next in line to a European throne. A few minutes later his phone growled again. “It seems, monsieur, that the account is under some sort of review.”

“Well, fucking fix it,” Enzo demanded.

A moment later, another call came in. It was his lawyer, Adam Brull, phoning from Connecticut. “I got a call from EJPD. They have some information that they want to discuss.” EJPD stood for *Eidgenössisches Justiz- und Polizeidepartement*, or the Swiss Federal Department of Justice and Police.

“What the fuck do they want?”

“They want to meet with us.”

“Did you tell them where I am?”

“They know where you are. They called me as a courtesy.”

“How the fuck do they know you work for me?”

“I don’t know. I’m looking into it.”

“Make this go away, Adam. Find out who at the EJPD needs a week in Villa La Cassinella.”

Enzo wasn’t especially alarmed by the fact that some bureaucrat may have suspended his account. He was used to hiccups like that. What enraged him was that the account they locked was the secret operating account for his G650, and it wouldn’t be long before whoever did this tried to ground his $75 million jet.

“I doubt that’s going to work,” Adam responded. “The Swiss don’t take bribes. At least, not anymore.”

Enzo knew it, too. The culture of impunity was changing. Computers were making it harder to be corrupt, and Enzo was starting to feel the pressure. It used to be that shredders and lazy investigators were all that were required to hide a paper trail. The digital revolution put an end to that. Now there were digital footprints for every transaction. Even lazy investigators had a script they could follow.

A bell rang. It was guardhouse security, announcing a breakfast appointment. Enzo was not in the mood to conduct business. “Tell him I’m fucking busy!” he screamed.

“I did, but he says he flew in from the U.S. and that it’s important,” the guard insisted.

“Fuck it. Send him up and I’ll tell him to fuck off myself!”

A man was escorted out to the balcony. It was a jet-lagged Bixley Hicks.

“Look, you caught me at a bad time!” Enzo bellowed.

“I understand. I can come back later in the week,” Hicks replied.

“Yeah, call me next week,” Enzo barked, looking away and waving his hand dismissively.

“Just one thing. Before I go, I would like to give you this,” Hicks said, handing Enzo an envelope.

Annoyed, Enzo ripped the envelope open and accidentally also ripped the paper inside into two pieces. He matched the pieces back together. It was a copy of a signed court order requesting the suspension of account 091-4532245.

“Where the fuck did you get this?” Enzo asked, stone-faced.

“I have some business to attend to in New York, but I will be back in Geneva next week if you would like to discuss your future,” Hicks said, walking past the bodyguard. He let himself out before Enzo had a chance to answer.

## Chapter 15

Shenzhen, China

Jiang and Qi Zhāng were twins and from the day they were born, they exhibited special gifts. Their father was a tractor mechanic in rural Henan province; their mother worked in a lacquerware shop. It was their parents’ dream for them to attend Fudan University, one of the elite C9 universities in China and the gateway to lucrative employment opportunities. They had it all mapped out. Jiang and Qi had no choice. Their parents filled the house with textbooks, trolled the web for the best online lectures, and saved enough money to pay for tutors and prep for the *gaokao* national exam.

Competition for spots at China’s top universities was fierce. Acceptance rates were lower than one percent, and those overwhelming odds were stacked even higher against the twins. Admission statistics showed Shanghai residents accepted to Fudan had an easier time than those in the rural provinces. That’s why when they turned sixteen, Jiang and Qi were sent to Shanghai, ten hours by train, to live with their cousin until they finished high school.

The following June, the twins joined more than ten million other high school juniors for the two-day-long test that would determine their future, a national spectacle that was like a sporting event and a national holiday combined. Construction was halted. Anyone who let a car alarm go off during the test had to pay a fine. Jiang and Qi’s parents made the trip to Shanghai and pushed their way to the front of the crowd to get a first glimpse of their twins after the test was done. There were medical personnel on hand in case the test takers or their parents needed attention.

Two weeks later, their scores came back. Both Qi and Jiang did well enough to make the cut for the top universities, including Fudan. The parents’ plan was unfolding just the way they’d hoped until a letter arrived from the Ministry of Education in August, challenging the twins’ Shanghai residence status and, thus, the validity of their scores. It was an outrage, and to make matters worse, that same week a boy named Kiang, the son of a party official in their town, was granted early admission to two top schools, including Fudan.

It wasn’t hard to see what had happened. Insiders had caught wind of Jiang and Qi’s high scores and worked out an arrangement with the admissions directors who set the quotas. It was government corruption at its most vicious.

When their father got the news, he was lifting an engine block onto a thousand-kilogram electric trolley. “*Sha gua!* Kiang was the laziest kid in our town!” he screamed.

The trolley crawled along the I-beam suspended from the shop ceiling. It was important to turn the trolley off when it neared the end of the beam. After forty years, this was second nature to the boys’ father. But he was in despair over the day’s news and burning with anger at the unfairness of the system, and he made a fatal error.

He wasn’t paying attention when the trolley slammed into the end of the steel I-beam and swung the engine block into a steel lally pole like a wrecking ball. The force folded the pole like a drinking straw, and at once the pole, the I-beam, the electric winch, and the engine block were in free fall. Combined, it was more than three thousand kilograms of heavy equipment that pulverized his bones and organs and made a sound like an explosion.

Qi was nearby and rushed into the maintenance bay to find out what had happened. As he burst through the door, he tripped over the handle of a hydraulic lift and fell, splitting his chin on the concrete floor. When the first responders arrived on the scene, there was nothing they could do but tell Qi how lucky he was that he wasn’t standing next to his father.

Qi was in shock and couldn’t speak. Only after construction workers lifted temporary supports to maintain the roof of the shop did they discover his father’s pestled body underneath a pile of engine parts, heavy equipment, steel beams, and rubble. In a report issued months later, investigators concluded it was human error and bad luck that led to Qi and Jiang’s father’s death, but the boys knew the truth. It was the *gaokao* corruption that killed him.

Their mother fell into a deep depression after the tragedy. The shop owner allowed her to keep working but kept her in the stockroom, away from customers. Life advanced when Qi and Jiang were accepted to Shenzhen University, one of China’s top thirty schools, but their mother’s mood did not improve. The bitter lesson and the toll political corruption took on ordinary families put a chip on the boys’ shoulders and fueled their ferocious drive. It also laid the foundation for a career path of extraordinary accomplishment tinged with passive rebellion.

Jiang and Qi graduated in the top twenty percent of their class. They were not prodigies in the academic sense, but when it came to mechanical and electrical engineering, they could solve problems that baffled their peers. They entered international competitions and beat Indians, Koreans, Japanese, Singaporeans, and, most satisfying of all, rich Americans from Silicon Valley. Officials claimed it was their IQ and hard work that drove their success, but their big advantage was something more basic. growing up dirt-poor had trained them to do more with less. Doing-more-with-less was the secret to winning competitions and, as they found out later, succeeding in business.

After graduation they landed at a company called CIJ Innovations, one of the top makers of the small, brushless motors used in quadcopters and drones. The company white-labeled products for toy companies but also made solutions for industrial companies, too. The price competition was brutal. Rival companies sprung up overnight, and some went bankrupt just as quickly.

In the world of electronics, the key to survival was finding ways to optimize production and save on materials and time to delivery. CIJ had an even more basic problem: The market for its motors was limited, and broadening its business was its only path to growth. The twins’ first assignment was to help find a way to get the company higher up the value chain and get into not just motors but other basic drone components like frames, propellers, flight and speed controllers, and power modules. They gave Qi and Jiang a lab and a fat budget and told them they had twelve months to figure it out.

It only took them an hour and twenty dollars worth of dim sum.

It was two a.m. on a Saturday night, the tail end of an eighty-hour workweek. Qi was grabbing steamed pork dumplings out of a takeout container with chopsticks. When he was done, he folded the container flat and flicked it in the garbage.

Qi noticed Jiang staring at him and asked, “Did you want some of that?”

“Nope.”

“Then why were you staring?”

“I was staring at the box, not the dumplings.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I was wondering,” Jiang said, pulling the flattened box out of the garbage can, “if we could make an integrated component and frame assembly that worked like this takeout food container.”

Qi was exhausted. He clicked off his computer and turned off his phone. “I’ll let you think about takeout containers. I’m crashing."

“We can just print these things!”

“What things?”

“The drones. Why don’t we just print them?”

“Three-D-print them?”

“No. PC-MEMS. We can print the ESCs, the flight controller, the transponders, all of it, then unfold them just like that box container.”

Jiang was talking about something called a printed circuit microelectromechanical system, or PC-MEMS. It was a way to “print” complex machines. There were three steps. First, parts were printed on sandwiched materials, then larger components were added with a pick and place machine. Finally, the assemblage was unfolded in three dimensions, like a pop-up book. It was a way to get the costs down—not just by a small percent, but by eighty or ninety percent. This was a classic approach for the twins. Even with the massive R&D budget CIJ gave them, they were still looking for a solution that even their mom could afford.

In the following weeks, CIJ gave the twins the equipment they needed to get started. A month later they had a prototype. Four months after that, they were batch-producing twelve hundred small, high-quality drones a day at a cost of less than three dollars each.

Sales boomed. CIJ Innovations leapfrogged the competition and became one of the top three marketers and manufacturers of autonomous flying vehicles in the world. But with success came friction. Government bureaucrats glommed on CIJ’s success and stacked the company with executives loyal only to policy makers with political clout. One of them was Xiang Huan, the same man who took the twins’ place at Fudan a decade earlier. The shithead who’d stolen a spot at China’s top university was now their boss.

Xiang Huan was not an engineer. He was a business major who took orders from his father and political officials. The one thing he cared about was made clear when he entered the twins’ lab for the first time.

“I am indebted to you,” Xiang began. His head bounced from side to side as he attempted to address Jiang and Qi at once.

“For our work at CIJ, or something else?” Jiang asked him.

“CIJ, of course.”

“Of course,” Qi echoed.

“But things need to change. We are facing market pressures. We are reorganizing the company, and I have been assigned to take on more responsibility.”

The moment Qi and Jiang heard Xiang had joined CIJ they figured something like this would happen, but they didn’t expect it so soon. It was hard to swallow but fit a familiar pattern in corporate China. Execs drove a company onto a sandbar, smart engineers saved their ass, then another crop of execs pounced on the turnaround story and took all the credit.

Qi and Jiang knew their jobs were secure, but the fact that this shithead—the same guy who cheated his way into university, killed their father, and drove their mother into depression—was plotting to take credit for their innovation was more than they could stomach. Xiang was a blunt dimwit. He had no desire to learn the basics about manufacturing techniques, operations research, and PC-MEMS; all he cared about was corporate politics, margins, and profit.

“I need you two to help me with a presentation I’m giving to the board next week,” he told them.

“You two” was a phrase that bugged Qi and Jiang. They were twins and hard to tell apart, but they did have names, and they thought it was reasonable for their new boss to know what they were.

“I’m Qi, and this is my brother, Jiang,” Qi said. “You can tell me apart from Qi because I have a small scar on my chin.”

“I see, thank you for pointing that out.”

“I got the scar in high school. I was running to help my father after a tragic accident and tripped in his shop.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Xiang answered, brushing off the pointed reference to his role in the accident. “The board meeting is on Monday. I need you to work on my presentation tomorrow.”

Qi stepped in. “It’s our mother’s birthday tomorrow, we have a party planned. Eighty years old.”

“I need you to bump the party date. This is important. It’s my presentation to the board.” Then Xiang looked at his watch and flashed a thin, toothy smile. “I need to go. Keep up the good work. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bump” in Mandarin was *tuīchí*, and it was a word that annoyed Qi. Xiang made it seem like postponing, canceling, or not attending his mother’s birthday was as simple as a nudge or a poke. It wasn’t. Their mother was back from the brink, and her birthday was a celebration on many levels.

“I don’t think we can make it,” Qi repeated.

Xiang made for the door and paused. “In that case, I’ll just tell the board you weren’t able to help when I needed you most.”

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The following day they arrived at the main conference room to meet Xiang and work on the slides for his board meeting.

Qi’s phone rang. It was Xiang. “I’m running a little late—get started without me. I sent you the presentation so far. You can start with that.” Then he hung up.

“Who was that?” Jiang asked.

“Machiavelli.”

“Xiang?”

“Who else? He’s running late. Wants us to start without him.”

“He’s not going to show up at all, is he?”

“Probably not.”

Qi opened the presentation, and what he saw only made him more irritated. There was a title slide, some boilerplate copied from the CIJ website, and that was it. Qi and Jiang were supposed to do all the work themselves.

“This is complete bullshit,” said Jiang.

“I agree.”

“It’s time to retaliate.”

“I agree.”

Qi closed the presentation file and opened a compiler. Jiang went back to the lab and assembled a spare microcopter and another dozen components on his workbench. He fitted a flying machine with an air chamber and a piezo-ceramic valve attached to one end of a .5-millimeter tube loaded with a dart the size of an acupuncture needle. Then he attached a camera and a miniature IR detector to the assembly.

Within minutes he’d built a tiny helicopter outfitted with a heat-detecting dart. The whole package weighed less than fifteen grams. To test it, they set out a cup of hot tea and launched the drone. The IR sensor reacted to the heat source and sent a signal to the flight controller, which in turn sent instructions to the ESCs that controlled the speed of each propeller. When the device was within range, the projectile was launched at forty meters per second and stuck into the side of the cardboard cup, then drooped. Tea streamed out of the hole and formed a puddle on the table.

“Very effective,” Qi remarked.

“Very effective,” Jiang echoed as he boxed up the device and hid it in a locked drawer.

“All we need to do now is wait for the right opportunity,” Qi whispered with a wink.

Six days later, that opportunity presented itself. Jiang switched on his creation and sent it into the mens room where Xiang was relieving himself. As he stood in front of a urinal, the copter launched its small stainless steel projectile into his backside.

When Jiang heard his boss’s yelp, he rushed into the bathroom and found Xiang kneeling on the floor, reaching back with his hand trying to pull out the dart. The copter circled the room a few times, then ran out of power and dropped into a toilet stall. There was a voice behind the stall partition.

“Holy shit! What the hell was that?”

“Sorry! It has a mind of its own!” Jiang apologized. The man kicked the drone out from under the stall.

At first Xiang didn’t realize what had happened. Then it clicked. “You are really an asshole, you know that? A total asshole!”

“I didn’t do it! It did it on its own!”

Xiang stabbed a finger at him. “You ever heard of Asimov’s three rules, you shit?”

Jiang was caught off guard that his boss had heard of Asimov, let alone his three laws of robotics.

“Law number one: A robot can’t mess with people!” Xiang shouted.

“It was an accident.”

“It was a dick move!”

By this time, the men’s restroom was crowded with CIJ employees, including a few women, who wanted to know what the commotion was about. Qi was there to back up his brother.

“He didn’t mean it. It was a mistake,” Qi jumped in, making sure to quietly retrieve the copter from the floor.

A few minutes later, the company president appeared and the crowd dispersed. Only Jiang, Qi, and Xiang remained.

*“Shénme guǐ gǎo!”* the president yelled. The words didn’t really mean anything, but they were what he said when he was pissed. The last time he screamed the phrase, a phone went through the Sheetrock of the executive conference room. Nobody said a word.

“What the hell is going on here, Qi?” the president wanted to know.

“My brother was running a test, and the drone malfunctioned.”

“What kind of test?”

“It was a new type of drone, sir—with some defensive capabilities.”

“Defensive, my ass!” Xiang hollered, too dim-witted to realize the pun.

As absurd as the situation was, the gag crossed into delicate ethical territory. They hadn’t simply weaponized robots. They had robotized weapons. The implications were vast, and the twins knew it. But they couldn’t resist both the challenge of building the machine and their need to get back at Xiang.

After a ten-minute lecture on the importance of being professional and upholding company values, the president coerced an apology out of Jiang. It seemed like the incident would blow over. But while Jiang was being read the riot act by the boss, Qi uploaded video from the drone’s camera to the web.

By the end of the day, the video had over 250,000 views. By the end of the week, Jiang and Qi were fired. A week after that, they were at a dumpling shop in Xintiandi, wrapping their heads around a $50,000 proposal from a mysterious angel investor named Raymond Station.

“We don’t know who he is. It could be a scam,” Qi cautioned.

“He’s said he believes in us and is putting his money where his mouth is,” Jiang countered.

In truth, there wasn’t much to discuss. Xiang made sure they were blackballed by every engineering firm in his network. Their prospects were slim. Raymond Station’s offer was hard to refuse because it was the only offer they had. The agreement was simple and fair. Raymond Station was making a $50,000 cash investment in exchange for stock if the company was sold or if additional investors were brought in. All Qi and Jiang had to do was agree to the proposed valuation, or cap rate, of two million dollars.

“What’s the company called?” Qi asked.

“J&Q Enterprises. Registered in Hong Kong. He even paid the company registration fee and the business registration fee,” Jiang noted.

Qi picked at a zit on his chin. “What’s the two-million valuation all about?”

“Fifty thousand divided by two million is two point five percent. Which means he’s offering to pay fifty thousand for two point five percent of the company—a company we control, that has no business plan and no customers. Does that sound like a scam to you?”

Qi pierced a soup dumpling with a chopstick and let the broth pour over his plate. “Maybe he’s money-laundering.”

“That wouldn’t make sense. If we do this, we’re going to blow through fifty thousand dollars in a few months. Chances are he won’t see any return on his investment, because Raymond Station is the only investor in the world stupid enough to stake two Chinese engineers with no experience running a company, and a big black eye on the web. Help me understand how that’s money-laundering.”

Qi was out of questions. He knew as well as Jiang that there wasn’t much to debate and agreed to go along for the ride. A few hours later they had completed the necessary forms, and Qi and Jiang became 97.5 percent shareholders in J&Q Enterprises and had a $50,000 account balance.

## Chapter 16

Montgomery County, Maryland

Former first lieutenant Chuck Stone should have felt better. He was vindicated. The Army specialist Chuck was stupid enough to trust, had just been sentenced to eighty-seven months in prison.

But it was too late. Chuck had the guts to break the Army code of silence, and for that, it seemed like he was serving a lifetime sentence. In a $2 trillion war, eighty tanker trucks of stolen gasoline didn’t seem like something that could derail a career, but that’s what happened. The fact that he had a Bronze Star, and was the son of a retired Navy SEAL commander didn’t seem to make a difference.

“You’re blocking the door,” a thirty-something in jeans and a black sport coat said to him. Stone was taking the Metro to L’Enfant Plaza. He tried to look purposeful and move with the commuters, but he was out of sync and holding up the morning crush. His last bunch of interviews with security consulting firms were dead ends, and he was running out of options. The Metro disgorged a crowd of passengers and was about to leave when a Berluti oxford shoe wedged its way between the door panels as they closed.

The foot belonged to Ron Baldwin. For a man used to having doors opened for him, the steel panels clamping on his limbs came as a shock. He wailed at the conductor who poked his head out the front of the car. “This is barbaric! How the hell are you supposed to get inside one of these things!” The door stuttered and lurched open just long enough for Baldwin to move the rest of his body into the train car. The first thing he noticed was his high school classmate staring at him.

“Stone?!”

“Hi, Ron,” Stone greeted him coolly.

“How long has it been? Damn, you look old. Do I look that old?” Stone was about to respond, but Baldwin cut him off. “I can’t believe this. You know, I thought about you last week, when I heard we lost to Barringer. Can you believe we beat them three years a row? Damn, they haven’t done that since.” Stone and Baldwin had both played hockey. Stone was a star defenseman with one of the most devastating slap shots in the league. Baldwin was a fourth-line winger and only saw ice time when their team had a big lead.

“How’s your tooth? All’s forgiven, right, buddy?”

Junior year, Baldwin caused a turnover that the opposing team converted into an odd man rush and resulted in Stone blocking a wrist shot that got up under his mask and took out a front tooth.

“Haven’t thought about it in years.”

“Glad to hear it. Going back for the twentieth? Can’t wait to pull up in my sick new Benz. Show them all what success looks like.” He gave Stone a jab. “Sorry to hear about the Army, by the way. Rumor has it you tried to do the right thing and got screwed over. Too bad being right doesn’t pay the mortgage, right?”

Stone was irritated but didn’t show it and let Baldwin babble. “Shit, what are the chances of running into each other. I mean, what are the chances of anyone finding me in this rathole. I haven’t taken the subway since law school, but the traffic’s hell—some kind of science march going on.” Baldwin did all the talking for three stops, then gave Stone a slap on the back before hopping off the car. “Great seeing you, Stone, let’s grab a drink sometime,” he said with mock sincerity. Ron was a blowhard in high school and he still was. But behind the bluster he wasn’t stupid. Stone had tried to do the right thing, and the Army did screw him over. One of the most insidious things about corruption is that wrongdoers often skate while honest men like Chuck Stone take the fall. By the time he realized what was happening, it was too late.

Stone’s phone rang: It was a recruiter. “Hey listen, just wanted to give you a heads-up before you got the boilerplate response.”

“What boilerplate response?”

“You didn’t get the job.”

“What the hell happened?” Stone asked. “You guys promised me, you reached out to me first.”

“I know. Really sorry about that. What can I say, you’re radioactive. Ever since Fenty. People have long memories about shit like that. The key to private contracting is knowing when to keep your mouth shut. As far as you’re concerned, Fenty wasn’t where the corruption probe started—it’s where your glorious career stepped on a land mine and blew to pieces.” Then the recruiter hung up.

Fenty was a forward operating base one hundred and fifty kilometers east of Kabul. There in the desert, gas was more precious than gold, and energy consumption at Fenty was enormous: Nine-thousand-liter tanker trucks circulated in and out of the base like coaches at a bus station. It wasn’t just the tactical equipment that created the thirst; there were logistics, too. For every liter of generator fuel used, it took seven liters to transport it; every liter of bottled water also took seven liters of fuel to transport.

Most of the tanker trucks were owned by locals under contract to bring the fuel in from Kabul. All of it went through Army specialist Chapman. She and Stone first met on a checkout line in the PX. There was a spark, but they both knew it wasn’t the right place to start a relationship, so they stayed friends. After a few months, Chapman let Stone in on a little secret: personnel were getting rich selling stolen fuel back to the locals.

Chapman had a way to create fake transportation movement requests or “TMRs” and asked Stone if he wanted in on the action. She explained it all in detail, how bogus TMRs authorized the transport of fuel from FOB Fenty to other military bases. She listed the drivers who used the TMR at Fenty’s departure checkpoint and how the specialists got kickbacks from the trucking company that stole the fuel.

Chapman had completely misread Stone. When she finished her story, she looked at his disgusted expression and blushed. She wanted to take it all back, but it was too late. After that their friendship soured, and even though Stone stayed quiet, Chapman got paranoid and tried to protect herself and her co-conspirators by trying again to lure him into their ring. She set Stone up with one of the fuel truck drivers, thinking, *Boy Scout or not, Stone won’t be able to resist the easy money*. Again, Stone didn’t bite.

The truck driver had never met anyone who didn’t take bribes, so he assumed Stone was an agent and panicked, and that’s when the scheme blew up. Central Command sent in all the big guns to sort out the mess: the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, the Army criminal investigation division, the Defense Criminal Investigative Service, and the FBI. They were all looking for fresh meat. By the time it was over, ten specialists and eight executive officers were charged with accepting $1.2 million in bribes. Stone was toast, and the ironic part was he hadn’t taken a dime.

His phone rang; it was the recruiter again. “I may have something for you.”

“You just gave me a lecture about how I’ll never work in this town again, and five minutes later you have a lead? Stop jerking me around!”

“It just came over the transom. Right after I hung up. No idea if it’s real or not, but worth checking out. Some outfit called Raymond Station. An assignment that’s right in your wheelhouse.”

## 

## Chapter 17

Ocean Grove, Fire Island

#!/bin/7R1B3

def procurement(current\_price, option\_premium, time, rate, weather):

while (expected\_benefit() > expected\_cost()):

procure(ROAD\_SALT)

else:

stop()

return;

Anika changed into casual clothes and began preparing dinner.

“Weren’t you nervous when Emily pulled the gun?” Kurt asked her.

“Petrified.” Anika rinsed two cups of chanterelles, poured them on a chopping board, then rocked a curved kitchen knife over the pile.

“What makes Ocean Grove worth risking your life over?”

“It will change the world,” Anika answered matter-of-factly.

“OK,” Kurt nodded, not quite knowing if Anika was serious but also realizing she had an underdeveloped sense of irony.

“What was the woman talking about, anyway? What’s Dark Aurora?”

“Some anarchist supposedly forked part of 7R1B3 that’s playing around with recursive destructive reinforcement learning.”

“You mean a neural network that’s training itself to do bad things?”

“You could say that. There are some conspiracy theorists talking about this stuff on Reddit, but it’s all hearsay. It’s hard to know what to believe anymore. You know how the truth gets muddled on the internet.”

“Does Emily seem like the kind of person who reads Reddit?” Kurt asked.

Anika dropped a slice of butter onto a cast-iron frying pan and let it sizzle. “So, enough about Emily and Ocean Grove. What’s your story? What happened in the trial?”

“What can I tell you that you don’t already know?”

“I just know what they put in the reports. But what they left out was the irony. The fact that the organization you were working for was specifically set up to prevent exactly the kind of corruption you uncovered.”

Kurt was caught by surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about the Port Authority. Did you know the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was born from Woodrow Wilson’s essay ‘The Science of Administration’? The whole damn point was to establish professional management of public assets to get away from Tammany Hall corruption. To allow decisions to be made removed from the ‘hurry and strife of politics,’ as they said at the time.”

This wasn’t the kind of thing they taught you in eleventh grade. Anika had clearly done a lot of research.

“When you stop to think about it, Woodrow Wilson was ahead of his time,” she continued. “The Port Authority was an anti-corruption experiment.”

Kurt sensed Anika was leading up to something that had nothing to do with the Port Authority. “And?”

“And—that’s what Ocean Grove is, too.”

“So let me get this straight. Ocean Grove is a test run. An experiment for something bigger later.”

“Yes,” Anika replied with a slightly mischievous grin. “Tonight, 7R1B3 helped pass two resolutions—laws, really. A computer program passed two laws! The thing is, Leibniz dreamed of turning human law into a computation exercise centuries ago. It’s nothing new.”

“So you’re saying now 7R1B3 has the computational power to pull it off?”

“Exactly. Human law dates to the beginning of civilization. Now we’re giving it an upgrade.”

The fact was, before Anika became mayor, Ocean Grove wasn’t a democracy, it was a cesspool. City council procedures, committees, and meetings created a veneer of democracy that masked mini dictatorships underneath. It wouldn’t be going too far to say that at the local level, most villages and small towns were governed like military states, with the mayor in control of the chief of police, the tax assessor, and the guys who picked up the garbage.

Anika summed it up. “You know, political scientists have it backward.”

“How so?”

“Democracy, republic, autocracy, fascism—these weren’t different types of government. They were organizational pathologies, broad terms that describe the study of diseased and broken government.”

Anika carried her plate into the kitchen and noticed Kurt picking at a hangnail. “You can relax, we’re not doing anything subversive. This is all aboveboard.”

There were a few moments of silence as Kurt rinsed the cutlery and loaded the dishwasher. Then he posed another question. “What if a bad actor, a corrupt politician, creates the anti-7R1B3 and lets it loose in the world?”

Anika dried her hands. “You mean like Dark Aurora? There’s good and bad software just like there are good and bad people. Malicious software is a fact of life. While you were behind bars, more than twenty thousand municipalities were infested with malware from China, Russia, and Romania. Cost taxpayers more than twenty billion. Just thirty miles from here, a phantom sluice gate automatically opened on a retaining pond and poured four hundred thousand liters of water into the basements of homes nearby. Turned out to be the Iranians. The Iranians, Kurt! The Iranians were letting water out of a dam in Westchester County! All state-sponsored.”

“That’s outrageous, but it’s different,” Kurt protested. “That’s just bad security. I’m talking about what would happen if a corrupt civil servant co-opted 7R1B3. Or bought into Dark Aurora–”

“And did what?”

“Turned it into a force for evil.”

Kurt was closing the dishwasher as he spoke. Anika tried to fit one more glass into the top rack, but it was too late. The door knocked the glass out her hand, and it smashed to pieces on the floor. They were in bare feet, surrounded by shards of glass.

“Jump on my back.”

“What?”

“Jump on my back, I’ll walk you out of here.”

Anika hopped on Kurt’s back, wrapped her legs around his waist, and folded her arms around his neck so he couldn’t breathe.

“You’re choking m—” he gasped. Anika relaxed her grip and air returned to Kurt’s lungs as he cleared a path through the shards of glass with a dish towel he pushed with his foot.

“That’s what we want to avoid,” Anika mused. “City governance is like bumper cars. We’re giving politicians a steering wheel and an accelerator pedal. They’ll be able to bump into each other, but nobody gets hurt.”

Kurt was baffled. “Bumper cars?”

“That’s right. Bumper cars. Just enough control to create the illusion of freedom while preventing civic leaders from causing actual economic harm and physical damage.”

“So why have people involved at all? Why not, to use your analogy, create self-driving bumper cars?”

Anika jabbed her finger at the air. “Because that would defeat the point of the ride! We need to find the sweet spot between safety and freedom—that’s the ride envelope. Anyone who’s ever played SimCity knows running a city is damn complicated. I did the math. To run Ocean Grove effectively requires more than ten thousand independent decisions an hour. Most of these decisions, in turn, have dependencies—”

“Like the cost of firefighter and police pensions,” Kurt guessed.

“Do you know what turnout gear is?” Before he could answer, she answered for him. “I didn’t either, until someone explained it to me. It’s coats, boots, helmets, suspenders—all the stuff firefighters wear to protect themselves. In a fire, this stuff gets covered in carcinogens. It needs to be cleaned, but not just with Tide. To remove the hydrocarbons from the fabric you need something called CitroSqueeze, and that can get expensive—over a hundred thirty dollars for a twenty-liter pail.” Anika took a breath. “I can see from your expression you’re wondering why I’m telling you all this.”

Kurt nodded.

“Well, 7R1B3 looked into the budgets of six thousand small-town fire departments and noticed all the successful departments were buying CitroSqueeze and the crappy departments weren’t. So guess what: Ocean Grove budgeted for CitroSqueeze. I can’t tell you how many firefighters came up and thanked me for that one. For three thousand dollars I now have the support of the firefighters, and it wasn’t even my idea. I get to take credit for 7R1B3’s smart decision.”

“Computers making great decisions while people take the credit. That’s the way life should work,” Kurt remarked. “Computers have no ego, they expect nothing in return.”

“Exactly. And, as you know better than anyone, as the level of city complexity extends beyond what any reasonable person can be expected to comprehend, computers and smart city infrastructure are evolving to fill the gap.”

Kurt completed the thought: “Evolutionary.” He found a bottle of bourbon and poured two glasses. “Nightcap?”

Anika pointed to her bedroom. “Follow me.”

Bells started going off in Kurt’s head. He couldn’t screw this up and regret it in the morning. How much wine did they drink? There was the bottle on the porch, then the two glasses in the kitchen. Or was it three?

Anika went into the bathroom, closed the door, stripped off her jeans and top, and emerged in a calf-length, low-cut T-shirt with a picture of a surfboard on the front. She grabbed her laptop and the drink off the kitchen table and signaled for Kurt to join her on her king-sized bed. The bed was enormous and—businesslike. They both leaned up against the headboard with their legs outstretched on the bedspread. On Anika’s screen was an application that looked like an accounting program. She also had a playlist open, streaming electronic dance music.

“What are we looking at?” Kurt asked her.

“Road salt.”

Just like Anika, Kurt thought with equal parts relief and disappointment. She invites me into her bed—to talk about road salt.

“We’re looking at Bridgeport road salt purchases last year,” Anika continued.

“Bridgeport, Connecticut?”

Anika nodded and pursed her lips in a way that said *Yes, but don’t tell anyone.*

Kurt looked closer at Anika’s screen. There were dozens of personal emails from people who worked inside the Bridgeport government.

“Did you hack into the Bridgeport government mail server?”

“I didn’t. 7R1B3 did.”

A silence hung in the air as Kurt waited for Anika to explain what she meant.

“Look, no town is an island; they’re all linked. They share infrastructure, water, sewers. Some even share fire services.“

“I can understand why 7R1B3 might try to connect with other Fire Island towns, but isn’t Bridgeport far away—in a different state?”

Anika clutched her arms. “The Gotti family runs Bridgeport and also owns a dozen homes in Ocean Grove. According to 7R1B3, that makes them linked.”

“What would the citizens of Bridgeport do if they found out 7R1B3 was meddling with their government?”

“Bridgeport is one of the most corrupt cities in America. The mayor of Bridgeport is a convicted felon. Do you think they’d notice or even care?”

“I don’t know, but this is really none of my business,” Kurt said, looking away.

Anika gave Kurt an inquisitive look and relaxed her posture. “Do you want to see what I have to show you? Or are you going to spoil the evening?”

It was getting late, and Kurt was feeling the effects of the alcohol. He struggled to stay focused. He watched Anika’s lips move as she spoke, but he didn’t hear all the words. He tried to redirect the conversation with a gentle caress on her neck and a shoulder rub, but she grabbed his hands firmly, placed them on the bed, and flashed a look of mock disapproval. “Pay attention,” she told him.

Kurt didn’t want to pay attention and wanted nothing to do with whatever it was Anika was showing him. It hadn’t been twenty-four hours since he’d left prison, and he had no intention of going back. But Anika was persistent. “Road salt contracts are complicated. They require cities to pay for eighty percent upfront. Waiting too long could drive the price up. It’s a multivariate problem with lots of other factors like highway safety, the corrosive effects on steel bridges, groundwater contamination, the opportunity cost of school and business closings—”

Anika stopped talking and glanced at Kurt. From his tense expression she knew he wasn’t listening and that there was no point in continuing until she explained where all the stolen emails came from. So she told him.

“Chargers.” As Anika said the word, she reached into her nightstand, pulled out what looked like a phone charger, and tossed it on Kurt’s lap. “Five of these came in an Amazon box last week. Plug it in.”

Kurt pushed the black plastic device into a wall socket, and a few seconds later an open Wi-Fi network called “Verizon Guest” appeared on Anika’s screen. It had five bars and was practically begging to be signed into.

Kurt immediately grasped the purpose. “That’s a nasty little man-in-the-middle device.”

“Man in the middle” was a good description of what it was, and it was pure genius—who couldn’t use a spare phone charger? Of course, it didn’t just charge phones, it was also a secret wireless router, and anyone who logged in gave a mysterious third party a front-row seat to his or her online activities. It was the kind of attack that kept network security pros up at night.

“I think one of these things made it into Enzo’s office.”

“Why?”

“Because someone—or something—from IP 221.190.73.216 dumped his personal emails and a bunch of bank statements into an S3 bucket.” The alcohol was catching up with Anika, too, and she slurred some of her syllables.

“What do you mean by some*thing*?”

Instead of answering, Anika tapped a few keystrokes in a program called Wireshark, and a bunch of numbers and letters came up:

IP 221.190.73.216:443 > 65.233.162.99.80 . ack 2913738186 win 65535 4500 0028 e9f7 4000 4006 0e39 0a0a 5049 40e9 a763 c21f 0050 befb 759a adac 21b2 5010 ffff a5d0 0000

More alarm bells went off in Kurt’s head.

”What’s that look like to you?” Anika asked.

“It looks like a packet.” Packets were the digital postcards that carried bits of text, images, and video from one place to another on the internet.

“What else do you notice?”

“It was sent from IP address 221.190.73.216,” Kurt answered, reciting back the first number in the packet header. “Port 443 is a giveaway—means it’s encrypted, and that’s going to make it hard to read.”

“I looked up 221.190.73.216 and found out it’s an address registered in Himeji, Japan. Then, when I looked further, I discovered it’s also a known Tor exit point.”

“Somebody trying to cover their tracks.”

Anika brought up another packet. “Here’s something else. Four times when packets from 221.190.73.216 were done sending, I got another packet that looked like this.”

IP 214.131.63.915:443 > 65.233.162.99.80 . ack 1512717167 win 14425 3400 0019 e9f7 3001 3005 0e28 0a1b 4130 31f8 b672 d12e 1941 cdfc 648b babd 30c1 6929 eeff b4e9 0000

“It doesn’t happen all the time, but enough to catch my attention,” she said.

Kurt looked at the first three numbers. “Two fourteen is DoD.”

DoD stood for Department of Defense, and 214 was known as an 8 block of IPv4 addresses. It was one of thirteen blocks the government kept for itself during the early days of the internet. All totaled, the Department of Defense hoarded two hundred million internet addresses, and 214.131.63.915 was one of them.

“What’s the military have to do with this?” Kurt asked.

“Maybe nothing, but my hunch is it has something to do with Dark Aurora. It’s exactly the kind of false-flag confusion I would attempt if I wanted to stoke a conspiracy theory and make 7R1B3 look bad.”

Kurt was on the brink of exhaustion and could barely follow Anika’s train of thought.

“The point is, the Bridgeport servers, Enzo’s accounts—they were already hacked. I didn’t have to do anything,” Anika explained.

“Like WikiLeaks?” Kurt ventured.

“Like WikiLeaks.”

Kurt sensed there was a lot more to the story. “What’s this really about, Anika?”

Anika let out a long breath. “7R1B3 broke out,” she whispered.

“Broke out of what?”

“Broke out of Ocean Grove. It was supposed to be a small, self-contained experiment. Its optimizing function was to eliminate corruption. A test to see if 7R1B3 could run a small town, without bribes and kickbacks.”

“And it didn’t work?”

“It worked too well. 7R1B3 started tracking down corruption the moment it was switched on. It put Enzo in its crosshairs right after he prepaid the property taxes on twelve homes—in cash. 7R1B3 followed the money trail the length of Fire Island, across Great South Bay, up the steps of Bridgeport City Hall, and into the Gotti family’s back pocket.”

“Then what?”

“7R1B3 wormed its way into the Bridgeport computer network and never left.” Anika rested slightly on the word “wormed,” which made Kurt feel like he was being set up again. It would only be a matter of time before someone accused him of writing the “virus” that infected the fifth-largest city in New England.

Kurt was feeling panicky again. He met Anika’s eyes, then looked past her and pondered his next move. He could make a run for it, but where would he go with no money, no home, and no job? Anika slipped off the bed, walked over to the window, and raised the sash just enough so that Kurt could smell the beach and hear a moth batting against the screen.

“There are extra blankets in your closet if you need them. Sleep tight.” And just like that, their meeting was over.

Kurt walked to his room and stretched out on the bed with his clothes on. Every seven and a half seconds, a burst of light filled the room as the Fire Island light made its rounds. All night he had fought the urge to sleep, but for some reason, once he hit the strange bed he was wide-awake. He heard the sound of footsteps on the porch and a rustle in the bushes. When he pointed a flashlight out the window, a 10-point buck stared back.

Sleep was out of the question, so Kurt hunted through the bedroom closet, found a light jacket, and headed outside, toward the sound of the ocean. A strawberry moon cast a dim yellow light over the low pines and scrub oaks. The waves were crashing at twelve-second intervals as Kurt climbed up the dune stairs. He glanced back at the bungalow; the light in Anika’s room was still on. Kurt walked down the beach. Out and back it was about three kilometers, and when he returned to the bungalow he was tired again.

He prodded the front door with his fingertips so he wouldn’t wake Anika. But something was pushing back. He prodded further and saw that there was someone passed out on the floor. The houses in Ocean Grove looked similar, and Kurt remembered Anika mentioning that teenagers sometimes wandered into the wrong bungalow after a night of drinking. But the position was awkward, and one arm looked hyperextended—painful, even for someone who was passed out. He squeezed in behind the half-opened door and looked down at the body. That's when he recognized the surfboard T-shirt and saw a stream of blood leaking from the back of Anika’s right temple.

Kurt heard something drop on the floor in the kitchen. A shadowy figure was silhouetted against the window. Kurt leaped back through the front door and sprinted down the front walk. He scrambled through a patch of shadows that turned out to be clump of pine shrubs with sharp branches that scraped his bare arms and dappled his skin with pine sap. He kept running until he emerged in a clearing surrounded by a chest-high chain-link fence. It was a baseball field. Kurt climbed over the fence, twists of steel wire gouging his already bloody hands.

He sprinted across the infield, then stumbled through the doorway of a sports shed. Inside it was a jumble of cones, poles, nets, and equipment. He crawled under a plastic tarp, peered outside through a knothole at the base of the exterior siding, and waited.

Something shiny winked along the tree line near first base. Kurt pressed his eye against the knothole to get a wider field of view. A puff of wind rushed through the field and the metal object appeared again, this time like a pendulum. Kurt’s heart was pounding, and for the first time he heard his own breathing: loud and labored.

He saw the flash of metal again and squinted. It was a stainless steel spatula swinging from the side of a gas grill. He waited for the gunman, but there was no one. He had no phone and no way to communicate with the outside world. So he waited.

## 

## Chapter 18

The combination of alcohol, lack of sleep, and adrenaline rocked his body. Saliva leaked from the side of his mouth, and a deep crease crossed the side of his face where it pressed against the netting of a lacrosse goal. Kurt stood up, cracked open the door of the sports shed, and peered across the ball field. Over the tops of the trees he could see the silhouette of a firehouse with a red light and a big horn mounted on the roof.

He had one foot out the door when he heard the low, thumping noise of rotor blades slicing the night air. A helicopter banked sharply, then dropped onto the Ocean Grove baseball field.

Shit! Kurt thought. He was trapped. A man sprinted like a college athlete across the infield and stopping near home plate.

“Which shed?!” the man shouted over the noise of the helicopter. Then he pointed to the shed where Kurt was hiding. A moment later, there was a loud rap on the door.

“Mr. Porter, come out!”

Kurt froze.

“Don’t worry, Kurt, we’re the good guys. Come on out.”

Kurt pushed open the door with his foot and saw a man looking at him through night vision goggles. He had a chest-forward posture and gestured impatiently. He extended his hand and helped Kurt to his feet. “We gotta move. Stay down.”

They bounded across the field, and leaped into the cramped cabin. Inside, a pilot and a man in a sport coat were glued to a screen showing the heat signatures of everything moving within a thousand meters.

“What’s that?”

“Maybe a buck?”

“How about those?”

“Someone from the fire department? He’ll be up our ass in four minutes.” The pilot pointed to the side of the screen. “I’m more worried about these sigs. Probably Suffolk County police, ETA one hundred eighty seconds.”

The man in the sport jacket emerged from the cockpit and greeted Kurt. “Welcome aboard, Mr. Porter. My name is Bixley Hicks.”

Kurt sat on the edge of a hand-stitched leather chair. The man who pulled him out of the shed closed the cabin door, then buckled himself in. “Prepare to engage hostiles,” the pilot reported.

Hicks began. “Let me get right to the point, Mr. Porter. We know exactly who you are. Your relationship with Anika, your prison record, and 7R1B3: We know everything.”

Kurt was both unnerved and relieved to hear this man speak. Anxious about how he knew as much as he did; relieved that for once there was nothing to hide. Whoever they were, they went to some trouble and expense to bring him in. That meant he was valuable, which also meant they probably wouldn’t kill him. At least, not right away.

“We’re working on an important assignment, and we need your help.”

Kurt wasn’t processing what the man was saying. “I’m not the one who needs help. There’s a woman who’s been shot. *She* needs help!”

Hicks scratched the side of his face and closed his eyes for a second.

“Hostiles in ninety seconds,” the pilot reported.

“We know, Mr. Porter. We know about Anika. We need you to focus.”

“Focus on what?” asked Kurt from his state of shock.

“We can explain everything, but we only have ninety seconds to get out of here.”

“What do you want from me?”

“We need a hundred-and-twenty-day commitment.”

“A hundred-and-twenty-day commitment to what?”

“I can give you the details later.”

“And I have ninety seconds to decide?”

“Hostiles in forty seconds.”

“Forty seconds to decide.”

The engine RPMs increased and there was a loud, high-pitched squeal as the helicopter prepared for takeoff.

Hicks didn’t offer more information and Kurt didn’t bother to ask. He knew if he hesitated, this would be the last he would ever see of these people. That could be a good thing or a bad thing. But whoever attacked Anika was probably after him, too.

He thought of prison, of surfing with Anika, and what she’d shown him on the computer screen. The hacking. Did they know about the hacking, too? Is that what had gotten her killed?

“Thirty seconds…”

What the hell else am I going to do? Kurt thought. He was an ex-con who’d just run away from a murder scene—probably a suspect. No family, no savings, no job. It wasn’t like he had a lot of options.

“Twenty seconds.”

“Yes!” Kurt shouted. “Just let’s get the hell out of here.”

Hicks signaled the pilot, and the twin GE CT7 2,000 shaft horsepower engines revved to 300 rpm as the downwash knocked scrub oaks over in every direction. Kurt glanced out the window and saw shadows running up the walk.

The aircraft hopped off the infield and shot up in the air at ten meters per second. The Bell 525 had a service ceiling of three thousand meters, but three hundred was more than enough to escape the small arms fire and clear the water tanks, lighthouses, and antennae that dotted Fire Island. At two hundred fifty kilometers an hour they had a range of seven hundred thirty kilometers—more than enough to make the thirty-minute flight to Westchester County Airport.

Kurt fell back into his seat and stared at the top of the cabin. He felt a stream of cold air on his temple and mistook it for a cabin vent. His hand followed the source and landed on a small hole in the cabin’s aluminum skin.

Hicks tried to make Kurt feel at ease. “Bullet hole. The pilot told me it just missed the stringer, whatever that is. He said it’s not a structural problem.”

Reassuring, Kurt thought.

“Coffee?”

“Sure. Black.”

“I need you to sign this.”

Hicks handed him a white paper cup of coffee along with a document and a pen. Without his reading glasses the document was a blur, but Kurt could still tell it was a nondisclosure agreement between himself and a “disclosing party” named NAJA LLC. Kurt skipped to the signature line, signed the document, and promised to keep his mouth shut.

“NAJA LLC?” he asked.

“Just a formality.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on? If you’re going to kill me, I’d like to know that, too. Is this a kidnapping? Because if it is, nobody I know can afford ransom.”

“Kidnappers don’t make their victims sign NDAs.”

“True,” Kurt realized. That was when he decided to listen. Adrenaline shut off the logical part of his brain. He was working on reptilian instinct. The lack of sleep didn’t help, either.

“You’ve had a rough night, Kurt. I could explain what we’re doing but it might be too complicated, considering what you just went through.”

“Try me.”

“We’ve been asked to help create a new country, a micronation, near the borders of Turkey, Syria, and Iran.”

Hicks was right—Kurt wasn’t ready to hear it. “What happened to Anika? Who killed Anika?”

Hicks coughed and stole a glance at the man who’d brought Kurt in. There was tension between the two men, but Kurt was in too much distress to notice. “We’d like to know, too. As soon as we find out, we’ll tell you everything.”

“Why did you choose me?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then who?”

“Someone named Raymond Station.”

That was when Kurt realized he had lost control, if he’d ever had it in the first place.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’m going to try to get some rest.”

“I don’t blame you. We’ll wake you up when we get close to the airport.”

Kurt didn’t even bother to ask which airport. He moved his seat back, wedged his head between the seat and the wall of the cabin, and dozed off. Sunlight streamed in at a new angle and touched his eyelids as the helicopter adjusted course to the northwest.

Twenty minutes passed before the pilot announced, “We’ll be landing in five minutes, sir.” Hicks gave Kurt’s arm a tap. “Buckle up, we’re coming in. When we land, I want to introduce you to a few people.”

## 

## Chapter 19

Westchester County, New York

#!/bin/7R1B3

def diplomacy(future\_value, risk\_threshold, time):

while (future\_value > risk\_threshold):

continue(time)

else:

stop()

return;

The helicopter settled on the Westchester County helipad a hundred meters from a jet that was idling on the tarmac with white letters that spelled “Nautilus Foods” on the outside. As they unbuckled their seat belts, Hicks handed Kurt a toilet kit and pointed to a coat closet filled with one-piece flight suits. “You look like a size large.”

“What do I need that for?”

“Because you can’t go out looking like that. Hurry up, we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re meeting a friend from Istanbul.”

Kurt splashed water on his face, brushed his teeth, swiped a comb across his hair, applied a swath of deodorant, and emerged from the head in a black Nomex tactical flight suit.

“Come on, let’s go.”

They covered the distance on the tarmac in big strides. The door to the jet was open and protected by a guard who pointed them up the stairs. Inside, Ahmet Batu, the Turkish foreign minister, presided over the cabin in a pristine white djellaba and cap. He greeted his guests with a handshake and held his grip a long time. Then they hugged and kissed on the cheek. It helped build friendship and trust. Physical contact was more important than legal documents and contracts.

“Please be seated,” Batu said with a sweeping arm gesture.

Batu’s calm and gracious exterior masked deep agitation and impatience. He was having a bad week. The night before, he had hosted an elaborate party for diplomats at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York. It was meant to be a pre-celebration of acceptance as a member of the UN Security Council, but Turkey lost in an embarrassing upset that exposed a huge rift between neighbors and regional powers. News of the attempted coup didn’t help his cause, either.

*“Hoş geldiniz,”* Batu greeted.

*“Günaydın,”* Hicks replied in the best Turkish accent he could muster.

Then a Western woman greeted Kurt in stocking feet. She was wearing a head scarf and tortoiseshell glasses. It was Sarah Phoenix.

“I’ve heard so much about you, Mr. Porter; I’m glad you could join us.”

“I am in the company of a beautiful woman with no shoes,” the foreign minister lamented. “Maybe Ömer has gone too far with his reforms?”

*“Ateş almaya gelmek,”* Sarah responded. Roughly translated, it meant she was just visiting for a night, and her host wanted her to stay longer. “I mentioned to the foreign minister that we have gathered to discuss some interesting business.”

Sarah made it seem like she was merely a facilitator, but the meeting was entirely her idea. Approaching the foreign minister first was the easiest way to reach Ozturk and Pecer at the same time. Holding the meeting inside the jet cabin was also Sarah’s idea. She preferred to meet in private aircraft for the simple reason that they were more secret. Camera phones, cheap recording devices, and social media made it difficult for the power elite to meet without becoming front-page news. Private aircraft were mobile and easy to sweep for bugs, and their ambient noise made undercover recordings hard to hear.

There was another reason she liked jets. Middle Eastern businessmen and political leaders weren’t known for being on time. Tail numbers were easy to track online and simplified the task of predicting when, or if, attendees would show up.

“Please help yourself,” Batu said, pointing to the food. “You have heard about our defeat at the UN, no doubt.”

*“Geçmiş olsun”—*may it be in the past, Hicks replied in a rehearsed response.

“Of course, Syria, Iran, Greece, and many others were conspiring against us.”

“Yes. They must have been.”

“We cannot fix the past, but we have a solution to your problems that I think you will like,” Hicks offered in a scripted introduction.

“Then please—tell me how you can help.”

“Mr. Foreign Minister, I think you may know why we’re here,” Hicks began. “It is an important moment for the people of Turkey. We will be able to provide a place to send the *baş belâsı* at no cost to your treasury or your security*.*”

There was a nod of interest from Batu.

“We are already familiar with free-trade zones, and we know that embassies and consulates are themselves sovereign states,” Hicks continued. “We would like to propose something similar.”

There were more nods. Hicks continued at a measured pace.

“Today there are more than three hundred troublemakers, rebel leaders, and cybercriminals hiding inside embassies around the world. Some have lived inside foreign embassies, in small rooms, for years, never venturing out, even for a cup of coffee.”

“Yes, the person from the GovLeaks website.”

“Yes. We are proposing to formalize this concept and create a compound where the *baş belâsı* check in but do not check out. You might think of it as a prison where the prisoners go inside voluntarily.”

“And who would own this fancy prison, Mr. Hicks?”

“We are proposing a land lease.”

On cue, Sarah pulled a large map from a cardboard tube and unrolled it on the table. It showed the southeast corner of Turkey and the border with Iran and Iraq.

Hicks pointed out key landmarks to orient their host. “This is Lake Van. Ararat is here.” Then he pointed to a sparsely populated area near a town called Hakkâri. “We’re interested in leasing land in this area, sir.”

“I am not a real estate broker, Mr. Hicks. If you would like to lease land, there are people more knowledgeable than I.”

Sarah interjected. “Mr. Foreign Minister, we are interested in a special kind of lease.”

Batu heaped a mound of eggplant on a cracker and popped it in his mouth. “Please continue.”

Hicks proceeded with a tap of his pen on a dark outline of the proposed territory. “Here is the land we are interested in. You will notice the unique border. It is a perfect circle.”

“Why is that?”

“This is because in Turkish culture, the circle symbolizes unity and diversity in nature. The radius of the circle is 3.568 kilometers, which creates a land area of forty square kilometers, which, of course, we recognize as the age Muhammad was when he received the Quran.”

“And Ali Baba fought forty thieves,” Batu added.

“Yes, it is a very good number,” Hicks assured.

“Besides the shape, what makes this land so special that you would come to meet me?”

“It is very likely the key to peace and prosperity in Western Asia, Mr. Foreign Minister.”

Batu turned poker-faced. “Someone must own this land. You should talk to the owner about this.”

“We have, sir. The land is on rangelands with no known permanent inhabitants. The only known man with a title claim is this person.” Sarah handed Batu a picture of a rough-hewn man in his sixties. “Hamid Youseff, the grandson of the man who used to farm this land. We spoke to him. He is willing to sell it for a reasonable price.”

“If you know the owner, why do you need my help?”

“Because, Mr. Foreign Minister, we don’t want to lease the land from Mr. Youseff, we want to lease it from Turkey.”

“From Turkey? I still do not understand.”

“We would like a one hundred ninety-nine-year lease for the property that would also have certain sovereign rights.”

The foreign minister scowled when he heard the word “sovereign.” “Are you talking about a lease or a treaty, Mr. Hicks?”

The conversation was starting to get technical, and Sarah cut in. “Mr. Hicks is talking about a lease that is also a treaty.”

“I don’t think that will work. We don’t have these things in my country.”

“I can explain specifically: What is required are articles of limited transit rights that include the privilege to fly over a narrow corridor without landing. These flights will, of course, be infrequent, strictly civilian, and peaceful in nature.”

“How will this help with the problem of the *baş belâsı*—the troublemakers?”

The foreign minister began to fidget, it made Sarah nervous, and tensions in the cabin heightened. Batu was already in a bad mood from the night before, and now two Westerners were in his jet talking about slicing off bits of his country.

Kurt jumped in, looking at Hicks. “Sir, if I may.”

“By all means.”

“It will be like a gated community.”

The foreign minister warmed up.

“But locked from the outside,” Kurt added.

“Tell me, Mr.…”

“Porter, Kurt Porter.”

“Tell me, Mr. Porter, why would my government allow this?”

Hicks jumped back in. “Because everyone wins. Ozturk will get credit for providing the autonomy the *baş belâsı* crave, Pecer gets his security state, and you get credit for making it all happen.”

“Pecer has no say in this!” Batu snapped, clearly annoyed at the mention of his name.

“And another shot at the UN Security Council seat,” Sarah added.

“This sounds like a Zionist plot—another Balfour Declaration!”

“Sir, this will be a Muslim country. It will be written in the constitution.”

“Turkey is not interested in your crazy plan. If you will pardon me, I have a long trip.” Batu stood up and thanked his guests.

Hicks made a gentle bow. “Thank you for your time, and have a safe flight. *Güle, güle!*”

The guard escorted Hicks, Sarah, and Kurt down the ramp. The three returned to the helicopter as the Turkish foreign minister and his entourage received clearance for takeoff. They watched the jet shoot down the runway, lift off, and bank to the northeast pointed on the great circle route toward Istanbul.

Kurt looked at Hicks. “Well, that was a waste of time.”

“It’s called negotiation. It takes time.”

“So what happens now?”

Hicks handed Kurt a business-class plane ticket. The destination was Athens. “Sarah and I have some financial business to catch up on in Geneva. We’ll meet up again later,” Hicks told Kurt. “You’d better hurry, your plane leaves in thirty minutes.”

## 

## Chapter 20

Geneva, Switzerland

#!/bin/7R1B3

def negotiation(buyer\_reservation\_price, seller\_reservation\_price, time, rate, risk):

while (negotiation\_range() > best\_alternative\_to\_negotiated\_agreement(time,risk,rate)):

negotiate(bid\_price, ask\_price)

else:

stop()

return;

A sign with the words *Ne Pas Déranger* hung from the brass knob of the door to Suite 314 at the Dollar Grand Hotel. Two armed men stood guard in the hallway. Inside, Enzo and his attorney, Hicks, Sarah Phoenix, and a Swiss banking official were meeting around a table. Room service delivered a platter of Norwegian diver scallops and caviar. A grandfather clock chimed on the half hour. It was two thirty in the afternoon.

“Thank you for joining us today, Mr. Gotti. I just want to...”

“Cut the shit. Just tell me who your friend is and why I’m here,” Enzo interrupted.

The banking official Dr. Patrick Behrend, who was chief auditor for Eidgenössische Finanzmarktaufsicht, the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority, took over. His team had tracked EGEO transactions for more than thirty-six months and discovered over $900 million in undeclared assets in thirty different accounts. Unknown to Enzo, Behrend’s group also was monitoring the extensive activities of Nautilus Foods, which was one of his partners. “Mr. Gotti, you are here today because you have broken, by our count, one hundred and forty-five international banking laws, and we think you owe more than three hundred million in unpaid—”

*“Falsche anschuldigungen!”* Enzo’s lawyer protested in German, holding Enzo by the upper arm in a gesture to lead him out.

Hicks jumped in. “Enzo, obviously we know about the villa and the jet. We also know how much you’re worth, how much you make, and how much you pay—or maybe I should say *don’t* pay—in taxes.”

Enzo fidgeted and glanced at his attorney.

“We also know this,” Hicks said, tossing a binder on the table. It contained a copy of a signed letter of agreement between EGEO and Nautilus, and more than fifty nonnegotiable bill of lading forms for bulk carriers shipping to terminals around the world. It was proof of the size and scope of EGEO’s operations.

“That’s bullshit. I’ve never seen these in my life,” Enzo chortled. He looked more closely at the documents. “This is all circumstantial bullshit.”

“Is it?” Hicks interjected. “We have more to share, lots more, if you want to see it.”

*“Hör auf damit!”* Enzo’s attorney protested.

“So what the hell do you want from me?” Enzo sputtered.

“Mr. Gotti, you’ll be relieved to learn that we did not come here to debate what you do or do not owe the U.S. Treasury. We’re also not here to talk about your secret double life in Geneva, and we’re also not asking you to give back the money you stole from consumers in the United States and Europe—at least, not all of it. What we are here to talk about is your unwitting participation in the financing of death squads responsible for killing more than a thousand civilians in the Upper Euphrates,” Hicks explained.

“Unwitting? What the hell does that mean? I don’t know anything about civilians,” Enzo scoffed.

“You’re violating UN sanctions, Mr. Gotti. Your imported olive oil is nothing of the kind,” Hicks accused.

*“Hör auf damit!”* Enzo’s attorney protested again.

“I don’t know anything about where my money goes,” Enzo grumbled.

“We don’t think you do,” Hicks acknowledged. “But we think you could make an educated guess. Do you know a man named Pecer Erbakan?”

“Stop f’ing with me. What do you want?”

“What we want is $200 million, in two $100 million installments.”

“Motherf—” Enzo responded with a cackle. “This is a shakedown?! That’s what this is? You know what? You could have skipped the caviar and told me this shit up front.”

“No. We are not extortionists, if that’s what you are implying—we’re problem solvers, and you’re going to help pay for a problem we’re solving.”

“Sure. I get it. A shell company. Well, let me break the news to you guys. I don’t have that kind of money,” Enzo barked.

Hicks anticipated this reaction and pointed to Behrend, who pulled another binder out of a briefcase. It contained detailed statements for thirty-eight numbered accounts with ties to EGEO or one of his companies.

Enzo scanned the statements and slumped. His lawyer also scanned the documents, and with barely disguised curiosity. The first ten accounts added up to more than a billion Swiss francs, and there were twenty-eight more.

Enzo thought for a moment, then folded his arms. “So, what if I decide to agree to whatever it is that you’re proposing. What do I get out of it?”

Sarah Phoenix took over. “Mr. Gotti, I know this must be quite a shock, but let me explain what we are proposing.”

Enzo ignored Sarah and whispered to his lawyer.

“Mr. Gotti, I can explain what—”

Enzo looked up like he’d heard a voice from the ceiling. “Did I hear someone say something?”

“Mr. Gotti, I’m right here.”

“And tell me, who the hell are you?”

Sarah removed her crystal taupe reading glasses, set them on the table, and smiled. “Mr. Gotti,” she whispered, pausing for emphasis, “I’m your best damn chance to not spend the next thirty years behind bars. That’s who the hell I am.”

Enzo’s lawyer was rattled and motioned to his client.

Enzo got the message, took a breath, then turned to Sarah. “I’m listening.”

“Good. Now I’m going to make this as simple as I can. We want to save the lives of men, women, and children who happen to live where your product comes from. We’re going to do this by creating a sovereign safe zone.”

“A what safe zone?”

“Sovereign. It means we’re creating a new country.”

“A new country? That sounds completely crazy.”

“It’s going to sound even crazier when I tell you you’re going to pay for it,” Sarah shot back.

Enzo opened his mouth but nothing came out. He swallowed and turned to his lawyer. The lawyer shrugged and threw his hands up.

Hicks handed Enzo another document. “It’s all in here.”

“You expect me to sign this right now?”

“No, we expect you to take some time to review it first.”

“How much time?”

The grandfather clock chimed three. “You have one hour,” Sarah answered. “We have another appointment at four.”

“And to make the decision easier to stomach, we ordered the scallops and caviar,” Hicks added.

“Screw you, and screw the caviar. You can call this anything you want. I call it a shakedown.”

Sarah ignored Enzo’s bluster. “There are more details, of course, but we can work those out in the next few days.” She looked at her watch. “We’re going out for some air,” she said. “We’ll be back in a half hour.”

For Sarah and Hicks, there was an element of justice in the proposal, but the uncomfortable fact was they needed Enzo for more than his money. They were playing an international game of chess. Enzo, with his knowledge of the seedy side of business and how to corrupt government officials, could help them avoid stupid mistakes and pitfalls. If there was any hope of vaccinating the new micronation against criminal elements, understanding how the mind of a man like Enzo worked was near the top of the to-do list.

When Hicks and Sarah returned, Hicks reminded Enzo of the timing. “Have you come to a decision?”

Enzo scoffed.

“If you’re ready to sign the agreement, it will also save us the time and inconvenience of taking you into custody,” Hicks said. As he spoke, one of the Swiss security men unclipped a pair of black polymer high-strength handcuffs from his belt and took a step toward Enzo.

“Keep that gorilla away from me!” he screamed as he backed into the next room and shut the door. There was a muffled argument. Fifteen minutes went by, then the door opened.

“You think you’re better than me, but we’re the same.”

“Nobody said we were better, Mr. Gotti.”

“Once you enter my world, there’s no turning back,” Enzo huffed as he handed Sarah the signed document. He grabbed his black leather motorcycle jacket and marched out the door, nearly colliding with a hotel waiter on his way in.

Hicks looked at Sarah. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Sarah rolled her eyes.

The waiter swapped out what remained of the scallops and caviar for six trays of Middle Eastern meze with *beyaz peynir*, melon, *acili ezme*, yogurt with cucumber, cold eggplant, grain salad, fried calamari, and liver.

## Chapter 21

Eastern Anatolia

Koban’s heart pounded, and sweat dripped from his face. The police wanted to know why he was carrying a Kurdish prayer in his wallet.

“That’s evidence!” he blurted. “Don’t lose that!”

“Evidence? What kind of evidence?”

“I was interrogating an insurgent, and he had that hiding in his shoe. He could be a link to Dana.” Koban made the name up, but it was common enough to be believable.

The officer radioed his CO. They were on the lookout for a mid-level insurgent, and one of his aliases was “Dana.” He was thought to be hiding in the region. Koban heard the officer sound out each letter and number on his license plate. There was a delay, then more talking. They ran the plates and decided they had enough justification to let Koban go.

They handed back his wallet, the pistol, the prayer card, and the money. Koban got back in his car and turned the ignition. As he pulled out, he leaned out the window holding two hundred lira and said, “Here, go buy some beer and cigarettes.” The officers took the money and watched Koban speed off.

As he approached the town of Hakkâri he noticed dim lights powered by a single two-cycle generator. The bulbs flickered, a sign that they could go out at any moment. There was a restaurant with a hand-painted sign that read *Al-Khawali*. In the parking lot, a boy with one arm and a raptor on his shoulder was selling four-liter jugs of gasoline from the back of a pickup truck.

Koban walked into the restaurant and saw the man he’d come to meet. He had a faint goatee and was drinking tea from a small glass cup. The man’s name was Dick, and he was there to exchange one thousand lira for a bus ticket and a fake Italian passport. Koban hoped the meeting would be over quickly, but Dick turned out to be very chatty. “How is your day going?” he asked.

He was here to buy a fake passport and a bus ticket, and this guy wanted to know how his day was going?

Dick claimed to be a Norwegian expat who worked for an olive company and helped refugees on the side. His story was ludicrous since he had black hair, brown eyes, and dark skin, and there was no sign of olives for five hundred kilometers. But Koban didn’t care what Dick did for a living. The passport looked professional, and the likeness in the photo was impressive.

“Text me the other thousand when you get out. And practice your Italian,” Dick said before excusing himself to go to the restroom.

Koban waited ten minutes for Dick to return but there was no sign of him, so he went to the restroom himself. When he opened the door, the room was empty. Dick was gone. Koban bought four liters of gas from the one-armed boy with the falcon and returned to his car.

Nasim’s instructions said to leave the car unlocked at the far end of the lot at the bus station, which he did. He slung his knapsack on his shoulder, placed the keys on top of the rear passenger-side tire, walked to the departure stall, and boarded a bus to the Black Sea.

Inside the bus, the air smelled of cheap perfume oil. The seat fabric was infused with cigarette smoke and the tang of human sweat. The bus lurched onto the highway and winded its way down narrow roads that followed the natural terrain eight hundred kilometers to Trabzon, a coastal town where Koban would switch buses. There were stretches of new highway, but most of the route consisted of small roads that had evolved from centuries-old footpaths. The final stretch before Trabzon was particularly treacherous: a twenty-kilometer toehold etched into the side of a mountain. On the left side of the bus was a steep embankment, on the right a sheer cliff. At the bottom of the cliff, a collection of overturned cars and buses, left there because they were too difficult and expensive to remove, marked years of tragedy.

Koban had a one-hour layover in Trabzon before catching another bus for the seven-hundred-kilometer journey to Ankara. From there it was six hundred fifty kilometers to Kuşadasī, where he waited to clear immigration and take the ferry to the Greek island of Samos, the birthplace of Pythagoras. It was a zigzag route designed to throw Turkish and Greek officials off the trail. Travelers coming from Eastern Anatolia received additional scrutiny, and the latest information being traded on social media said the Trabzon-Ankara-Kuşadasī route was the least risky and the best way to clear customs and immigration.

The trip was uneventful until they reached the last stop. When Koban stepped off the bus in Kuşadasī, he was spotted by a police officer and dragged into a doorway.

“Where are you coming from?” the officer barked.

“Trabzon,” Koban answered, handing the man his ticket and fake Italian passport.

The agent gave Koban a suspicious glance, turned back to the picture, then made a call to his supervisor.

There was banter back and forth, and then the officer hung up and turned to Koban.

“Come with me,” he said, gesturing with his handgun, a 9mm MP5, toward the police station on the other side of the parking lot. Adrenaline rushed through Koban. He felt dizzy, his legs grew rubbery, and his skin started to glisten with sweat. A door lock buzzed. On the other side was an interrogation room with immigration officers seated at metal desks and guards flanking the exit.

Koban was handcuffed to a chair.

“Who are you?” an immigration officer asked.

“Lorenzo Russo,” Koban answered.

The interrogator made a call outside the room. Then a man entered wearing a leg brace and a bandage on his arm. It was the MIT thug who’d beat him up in Van. He’d traveled for hours to be there in person.

He pointed at Koban. *“Bu onu bir. Koban!”* *That is the bomber!*

Koban was about to respond when an officer slammed a wooden club into the bony area of his shin. Pain radiated up his leg and into his hip and back, and he collapsed to the floor with his hand still cuffed to the arm of the chair.

“Who are you?” the immigration officer repeated.

Koban was unable to speak. The officers inflicted more pain. They smashed his shin and thigh until blood gushed from his leg. One of the interrogators grabbed him by the back of the collar and dragged him to his feet. Another thug approached him and stopped an arm’s length away. In an instant and in one motion, the man grabbed Koban’s head and jerked it down while he raised his right knee and jammed it into Koban’s face, breaking the septal and upper lateral cartilage in his nose with a sick popping sound. Koban fell back to the floor in semiconsciousness, then felt another sharp pain in his groin as the thug from Van kicked him hard with steel-toed boots.

Koban was curled in a fetal position on the floor. Blood streamed from his nose across his mouth and soaked his shirt collar. Time stood still. His peripheral vision closed in. Then he blacked out.

## 

## Chapter 22

American Airlines Flight 105 to Puerto Rico

Mia Cardona had been locked in the bathroom of a Boeing 737 headed from JFK to San Juan for nearly fifteen minutes when there was a knock on the door. “Ma’am, we’re landing,” said a flight attendant. “Please return to your seat.”

Shit, she thought, only two more minutes.

The black eye was a few days old. White blood cells were doing their job carrying away the decayed blood products from the bleeding beneath the skin. Residual pigments left behind a purple, yellow, and green bruise that Mia was furiously trying to cover up with multiple layers of makeup and concealer. The first layer of makeup was two shades lighter than her skin tone and the perfect base for the foundation that came next. The last step was a dusting of translucent powder to set the makeup and make it last longer.

When Mia emerged from the bathroom, the flight attendant noticed her new face and flashed a sympathetic smile. “Much better,” she said.

Mia, otherwise known to her 500,000 loyal followers as @Kboquita, was used to people judging her face. A year earlier she had started a successful makeup blog in her dorm room at Universidad de Puerto Rico, quickly mastering the dark art of creating brand loyalty through earned media. While Chanel paid millions for banner ads, beauty companies paid Mia to plug their products and advise on their community management strategy. When she returned to her seat, the passenger sitting in the row behind her asked for an autograph. “You changed my life,” she gushed.

Mia gave an appreciative smile.

“Mixing cream foundation with primer to make it more translucent—when I read that, I’m like, What? Isn’t primer only supposed to go on first? You broke it down for me, and now look.” The woman pointed to her cheek. “It doesn’t look caked on!”

“I know, right?” Mia had twisted around in her seat to be friendly, but the position strained her neck so she turned back. She also didn’t want to have to explain the reason *her* makeup happened to be caked on.

When the plane door opened, a rush of humid tropical air flooded the cabin. It was comforting. Nine months had gone by since she’d left San Juan with a New York businessman who’d offered her five times the revenue for her consulting business and a chance to partner on a merchandise line of makeup brushes. At the time, Mia had a side business selling a few hundred eye-shadow brushes a month. He explained how she could expand her line to blending, powder, and lip brushes. Mia signed a licensing contract, and a few months later a cosmetics chain picked up the line and sold it in three cities.

Soon the business relationship turned into something else. Barry Houseman was rich, dashing, wore double-breasted suits, and zipped around the world in a Dassault Falcon. Mia was from a small town in Puerto Rico, all sass and heart and smiles. A Cinderella story. And great for business. As their love story became a side plot on her videos, views exploded. Her fans ate it up. She showed them the jewelry Barry bought her, the new shoes and hotel suites with grand pianos and pool-sized bathtubs, while remaining her humble, relatable self.

What didn’t show up on the videos was what happened when the cameras were off. Night after night Barry would try to impress Mia, who didn’t drink, with his fifty-year-old single malts and $300 bottles of wine. And as he got deeper into whatever bottle was in front of him, the accusations would begin: Mia was flirting a little too heavily with his pilot; on her video that day, when she called him “my boo,” there was a tone in her voice—derision, sarcasm. From there the rage escalated. One night, a slap in the face. Or a push against the wall. A punch in the eye. For too long, Mia realized, she’d been making excuses for Barry—and blaming herself. If she were just nicer to him, he wouldn’t act like that. And besides, the apologies were always so abject and sincere. He’d swear he didn’t mean it and told her how much he loved her. There were Harry Winston diamond necklaces, rooms full of Albrecht Dürer roses, stacks of Hermès scarves—all of which, of course, she put online without saying why Barry had given them to her.

While she was examining her latest shiner and struggling to cover it up, Mia finally realized that she was lying to herself. Lying to Barry every time she accepted one of his over-the-top apologies. Lying to her fans, who she knew would eventually catch on—social media stardom demanded complete authenticity and transparency. But when Barry wrapped an electrical cord around her neck, she came to her senses. Before he’d even woken up, Mia was on her way home.

Once the plane landed and she flipped her phone off airplane mode, a waterfall of apologies flowed down the screen: the usual begging for forgiveness, the promise to get help. But as she scrolled down, a new note of darkness crept in: *This time it will be different.* She scrolled down and the messages took an even darker turn. *If we can’t be together here then maybe we can be together in heaven.* That’s when she realized she would not be using the return portion of her ticket.

Below that was a text from someone she didn’t recognize. The sender was Raymond Station, and the subject contained a phrase she wanted to hear:

*Safe & Easy Way Out.*

The key to successful direct marketing is to tell the listener what they want to hear, when they want to hear it. Timing was critical, and Raymond Station chose a short phrase and sent it at a time that maximize the click-through chances. At any other time, Mia likely would have deleted what looked like spam. But intuition told her this might be more.

The text came with two links. The first was to a draft of a business separation agreement that rather ingeniously created a pretext for Mia breaking her commitment to Barry while still maintaining a share of gross licensing revenue. “Someone put some thought into this,” she murmured. Then she clicked on the second link. It was a one-way business-class ticket from San Juan to Athens.

## Chapter 23

Aegean Sea, Between Greece and Turkey

Twenty-four hours later, Mia found herself in the Aegean chop, clinging to the grab rail of an inflatable boat with one hand and wiping the saltwater spray out of her eyes with the other. Kurt was on board too, and they were both almost thrown overboard when the bow slammed into a wave whipped up by wind that was gusting to over thirty knots. It was late afternoon, the visibility was getting low, and they could barely make out the abandoned concrete-and-steel platform that was their destination.

“Clip on here,” Chuck Stone said as he steered the boat and pointed at two steel harness fittings on both sides of the center console. Mia and Kurt clicked in and clenched the grab rail. Mia had big red headphones clamped to her head, and her face was the color of her green sleeveless dress. She was one stomach-rumble away from vomiting. Kurt wasn’t far behind.

Kurt hadn’t been more than five meters away from Chuck Stone since the ex–Army ranger pulled him out of the sports shed in Ocean Grove forty-eight hours earlier. They flew business class to Athens, then Enzo’s jet took them to the Greek island of Samos. Mia was standing on the dock when they got to the boat. Someone had really planned it out.

Stone said nothing besides the bare minimum—stand here, wait there, that kind of thing—but from the way he carried himself it was obvious his background included a lot of secret missions and no small amount of violence. He had a way of constantly monitoring his surroundings—“situational awareness” was the term they used—and never moved more than was absolutely necessary, given whatever task was at hand, as if he was saving all his energy for some kind of dangerous, unpredictable event. Kurt was wondering if he would ever feel comfortable around Stone. But perhaps that was the point. Stone wasn’t there to be his friend, but he was, Kurt figured, his best chance to stay alive.

Kurt’s knees and hips ached from the boat slamming against the waves. For the first time in his life he thought he might be seasick, something he’d thought, until now, only happened to wimps. Stone looked unperturbed, as if he were riding in a gondola in Venice.

“What’s out here?” Kurt asked, hoping the answer would be something that didn’t move—an island, for example.

The boat turned forty-five degrees, fishtailed, then nosed into the face of a swell. The bow was completely submerged. The boat was swamped for a few moments before the water rushed out through the open transom. Stone cut the rpms to nine hundred.

“International waters. We’ll head out to twelve kilometers, two hundred twenty degrees, if we can keep an angle on the waves,” Stone said. Kurt was hoping Stone would tell him more, but he could at least take comfort in the fact that those were the most words he’d heard Stone string together yet. In the western Aegean, twelve kilometers was the magic number, because that was where international waters started. In the rest of the world it was twenty-two kilometers, but the Turks insisted on the narrower buffer because they didn’t want the Greeks, with all their many islands, turning the Aegean into their own private lake.

A large structure became visible on the horizon. It looked like an oil rig but without the derrick. Its enormity became apparent as the RIB moved closer. Two massive cylindrical concrete legs rose twenty meters above the water. Attached to the top was a steel-and-concrete deck supported by large steel beams. There were people walking around on top.

“You’re going to want to time this right.” It was only the third thing Stone had said on the trip out, which meant it was important.

“Time what?”

Kurt, Mia, and Stone were wearing the same TRITON helicopter hoistable rescue harnesses that Coast Guard rescue swimmers wore. Their key feature was a titanium Talon II safety link with a locking gate.

“They’re going to lower a hook, and you’ve got about a half second to get it on before the boat falls three meters into the trough of the next wave. But the biggest issue isn’t the drop, it’s the swing. Keep your feet and legs out. I don’t want you breaking your nose on the side of those pillars,” Stone explained.

On their approach, a hook dangled right in front of Kurt. Stone positioned the RIB under the cable and gave him a count. It reminded Kurt of Anika’s count before they paddled into the waves in Ocean Grove.

Anika would have been good at this, he thought.

On cue, a large swell brought the boat up waist-height to the hook. Kurt grabbed it on the way up and attached it to his harness. It was well timed and would have resulted in a clean hoist, except that particular wave was much higher than three meters, and the cable slacked and looped around a cleat attached to the inflatable gunwale. On the other side of the crest, the boat began to slide down the back side of the wave, and the cable went taut.

“It’s caught!” Stone shouted.

But it was too late. The sea dropped below them and left Kurt, Mia, Stone, and the boat hanging in the air, attached to the winch line like beads on a necklace. Stone was dangling from a harness off the side of the RIB center console. Mia was dangling just above him. The throttle was out of reach. The boat had a kill-switch tether but it wasn’t attached to Stone’s vest, which left the stainless steel prop whirring like a loose chainsaw. The boat weighed five hundred kilograms, the motor weighed another two hundred kilograms, and it was all resting against Kurt’s titanium harness buckle. If it broke, everyone would be crushed—maybe ground up in the propeller, too.

Gusts of wind hurled the tangled cluster into the pillar. The inflatable rubber sides of the RIB bounced off the concrete like a hippity hop and sent Kurt, Mia, and Stone spinning.

“Cut the throttle!” Stone shouted up at Kurt.

Kurt arched his back and reached out to the T-shaped handle on the console, but it was beyond his grasp. Another gust hurled the men into the concrete pillars, this time much closer to the deck. That’s when Kurt noticed they were being hoisted up.

The winch was running at one meter per second. Twenty seconds later they were level with the deck of the platform.

A man tugged the kill-switch lanyard to stop the motor, then stuck out his hand. “Welcome to the sovereign nation of Ferus. Anything to declare? Fruits or vegetables?”

It was Bixley Hicks.

“Just get us untangled,” Stone grumbled.

“What is this place?” Kurt asked. He looked like a marionette, with his vest still attached to the winch and his feet dangling ankle-high off the deck.

“Principality of Ferus, founded September 2, 1967. Area 2.4 hectares, population twenty-seven,” he explained.

“Looks like Alcatraz!” Mia said. “Nobody told me I was going to Alcatraz!”

“I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“This is Mia. She’s a community manager,” Kurt recited from the brief exchange they’d had before boarding the boat.

“Someone help me out of this sadomasochistic shit!” Mia shouted as she fumbled with the buckle on her rescue harness. She was still feeling nauseous and was in no mood for niceties.

Stone reached over to help out and brushed her back by mistake. Mia lurched. “That was a bitch move, Stoney, I know what you’re thinking—all that ass in a small dress is damn cute. Well you’re right, you nasty pervert!” She put a hand inside her *Lolita*-esque fruit-pop handbag, pulled out a keychain-sized canister of pepper gel, and pointed it at Stone. “That’s right, I got this for you! Shit’s got a five-meter range with no blowback!”

Hicks freed the harness, and Mia, Kurt, Stone, and the boat toppled to the platform in a big pile. Stone was a perfectionist, and the discombobulated landing made him irritable. “Damn amateurs.” It was the first time anyone heard Stone curse.

Hicks could barely hide his smirk. “It looks like you guys need a change. There are spare jumpsuits in the lockers. Grab a bunk but don’t get too comfortable—we leave in the morning.”

Inside the shed was a row of desks, chairs, screens, and computers. The walls were covered with maps, and the entire room was bathed in a subdued blue light from LEDs in the ceiling. Connected to the main room was a bunk room. Showers and bathroom facilities were in the next compartment. There was also a lounge and eating area decorated with secondhand furniture that could have come from a fraternity house.

Kurt crawled onto an empty bunk, collapsed, and waited for his stomach to settle. Hicks pulled up a chair, popped open two beers, and set one down next to Kurt.

“Nice entrance, glad nobody was hurt!”

“What is this place?”

“Not as nice as Stone’s place on Fire Island, but it’ll do,” Hicks answered.

Even though Kurt was still suffering from seasickness, Hicks’s comment clicked, and he kicked himself for not figuring it out sooner. Anika’s bungalow in Ocean Grove belonged to Stone.

“It was an anti-aircraft gun platform during the Greco-Turkish War,” Hicks continued. “Now it’s an independent country controlled by the son of a Swedish industrialist.”

That was more information than Kurt could process in his current condition, but he tried to stay engaged. “Is it a secret? How many people know about it?”

“It’s actually recognized by the UN. It’s a complicated legal story, but basically where we’re sitting now used to be a brothel. Turkish and Greek officials flew in on helicopters in the seventies. Run by some guy named Tommy Onassis, a friend of Sarah Phoenix’s father,” Hicks explained. “I guess she had her nose buried so deep in the law books she never looked up the Wikipedia entry.” Hicks made an obscene gesture with his tongue.

“You’re disgusting,” Mia said.

“Just telling it like it is. The inspiration for her stellar career was based on a visit to a deep-sea whorehouse when she were twelve years old…” Hicks chuckled with a mixture of jealousy and relish. “Anyway, when a high-ranking official fell off and drowned, the Turkish and Greek embassies didn’t want to get involved. The platform was in international waters, so it was easier to recognize it as an independent micronation and wash their hands of the matter. So that’s what they did.”

“That still doesn’t explain why someone went to the trouble and expense of getting us all to this abandoned platform,” Kurt declared.

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” Stone said as he clicked open a gray waterproof Gator case. Inside was a stack of personalized Ferus passports and another stack of laminated booklets with everyone’s name on the front cover and the words “OPERATION NAJA CIRCLE.” Hicks handed out the booklets like a card dealer.

“Looks like someone’s done some party planning,” Mia joked. The passports were official, and printed on the cards was detailed information on the situation, the mission, execution, logistics, and command.

It was quiet while everyone skimmed through the material. Stone was the first to speak. “What we have here is a mission brief. I’ve seen a hundred of these things, and take my word for it, this one is well put together.” He looked around to gauge the group’s reaction. There was no eye contact. Stone continued. “Kurt and Mia will join me. Hicks will stay on Ferus for a while and be our Michael Collins.”

“You mean Phil Collins?” Mia said sarcastically.

“Michael Collins—Apollo 11?” It didn’t ring any bells. “Piloted the command module while Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong walked on the Moon?”

That got a few nods, but still Stone’s audience was fidgeting.

“Everyone in?”

Having been briefed by Carlson, Hicks knew the most of anyone in the group, but he played along. “In on what, exactly?”

Stone traced the words with his index finger. “Operation Naja Circle. ‘Naja’ because that’s the name of the new country, and ‘circle’ because we’re creating a country that’s shaped like a circle. It says we have an ORP eighteen hundred kilometers from the shore.”

“ORP? Look, whatever Naja Circle is, it will go a lot more smoothly if we go easy on the military acronyms,” Kurt grumbled.

“Operational Rally Point,” Stone clarified. “It’s a twenty-two-hour drive west on Route E90.”

“What are we riding in?” Kurt asked, not quite believing what he was reading in the mission packet.

“Containers,” Stone answered. “Intermodal containers—the big steel boxes that ride on boats and trucks. The situation is, there are people who need our help, and according to this we’re going to ship containers of food, water, clothing, medical supplies, spare parts, laundry, showers, toilets, and other supplies, and drive them out to the ORP and start a new country.”

“Why can’t we ride in the truck cab—or better yet, fly there, like normal people?” Kurt asked.

“Because according to the brief, we may encounter hostile forces in reasonably large numbers.”

“Probably Pecer’s men,” Hicks groused.

“Where are all these containers now?” Mia wanted to know. Then, as if on cue, there was the blast of a ship’s horn. It came from a coastal freighter that was on station five hundred meters from the platform. It was stacked with containers that read “ENZO Gotti EDIBLE OILS” in large letters. Mia was startled when she saw the name.

“Who’s in?” Stone checked.

There was silence as everyone looked at one another, waiting for the first person to answer. “It’s a little late to turn back now,” Kurt answered, wondering if he would ever make it back to the mainland if he said no.

“In,” Hicks chimed in without hesitation.

Then everyone looked at Mia. She felt a patch of dry skin at the top of her arm that could have used a dab of Chanel moisturizer.

“I need time to think,” she said. “I got a message this morning. It didn’t register until now.”

“What message?” Hicks asked.

Mia scrolled her phone with her finger, then held up the phone. *EGEO = DANGER*, it said on the screen.

“That’s a coincidence,” said Hicks.

“Who’s it from?” Kurt asked.

“Nobody, some spam address,” Mia answered.

“’EGEO’ could mean anything,” Stone pointed out.

Mia still looked worried.

Kurt took a closer look and noticed the 214 IP address. A message from the DoD IP block again. It smelled like a Dark Aurora smoke screen, but he wasn’t sure and didn’t want to spook Mia even more, so he kept his mouth shut.

“I get texts like that all the time—from my crazy ex,” Hicks joked.

Stone was low on patience. “Are you going to blow this thing over a text?”

All eyes turned to Mia again and she hesitated, then gave in. “No, I guess not.”

“Good. That means we’re all in. And one other thing,” Stone said. “For the next forty-eight hours, I’m in command. After that, we can talk about succession and adjustments in the SOP. But for now I’m calling the shots.”

Nobody had a problem with that.

“So let’s start with the basics,” Stone began. “Ferus will be our CP.” Everyone looked confused. “Command post,” Stone repeated, pained. “Any questions?”

“Yeah: Why is our command post in the middle of the ocean? Why can’t our command post be on land, in a back room of a nice restaurant or something?” Mia asked.

Hicks had wondered the same thing; then it hit him. “I think I can answer that. Whoever put this together realized Operation Naja Circle would be better off being orchestrated from international waters. It would keep the U.S. out of it and would help if the sovereignty of the new country of Naja is challenged in court.”

Stone glanced at Hicks. “Maybe it’s also supposed to keep the spooks from sniffing around?”

Hicks shifted his weight and looked at the ground.

“So who is the guy who put this together?” Mia asked the group.

A seagull laughed as her words hung in the air.

Kurt was the first to recognize the mysterious building blocks falling into place. “Probably the same guy who pulled me out of prison, rented this godforsaken platform, and told Anika to run for mayor.”

“And persuaded Hicks and his lawyer ex-girlfriend to wring money out of an international mobster,” Stone added with a chuckle.

Hicks shot Stone a warning look.

“And rescued me from an abusive relationship?” Mia wondered. “Who?”

“Raymond Station,” Hicks answered for Kurt. “And the weirdest thing is, no one here was in a position to say no. We were out of work, in debt, or in some kind of trouble, with our backs against a wall.”

“Whose idea was it to pull me out of the sports shed?” Kurt asked Hicks.

“That was Stone’s idea. He likes to take care of his houseguests.”

Kurt’s eyes locked with Hicks’s. “And who killed Anika?”

Hicks blinked rapidly. “I don’t know, I was as scared as you were that night.”

“Who the hell is Anika?” Mia interrupted.

Kurt sensed Hicks had more backstory to share and ignored Mia’s question. “You said we’re here to save lives?”

Hicks scratched his face. “Did I ever claim to be in charge? What I know is ethnic minorities are being attacked in the Eastern Anatolian plateau, and nobody wants the refugees. The U.S. president issued an executive order closing the door on refugees coming to the U.S., so the only reasonable option is to create a safe zone. And this Raymond Station seems to be the guy who knows how to do it.”

“Has anyone met this guy?” Mia asked. “I mean, in person?” There was silence. “That’s what I thought. Well, I hope we’ve got lots of lawyers, guns, and pesos,” she huffed.

“Money, not pesos. Lawyers, guns, and *money*,” Stone muttered, annoyed that Mia had mangled the Warren Zevon lyrics.

Kurt put two and two together, and everyone’s role appeared in his mind. “It makes sense to have Sarah back in New York—if we make it out of this alive, we’re going to need a good lawyer. Stone’s role makes sense, especially if there’s an army out there waiting for us. Enzo’s the money man. Put it all together and we have lawyers, guns, and money.”

“So what does that make you?” Stone asked.

“I’m the tech guy, and every new country needs a tech guy. Hicks is the fixer.”

“What about you?” Hicks prodded Mia, sensing that controlling her would be the hardest part of containing the Turkish micronation experiment and not upsetting Carlson.

“To start with, I can tell the difference between a whorehouse and a lookout tower—call it situational awareness,” Mia said in a not-too-subtle jab at Hicks’s not-too-subtle infatuation with Sarah back in New York. “I’m here to get us risen.”

“Risen?” Hicks asked.

“Trending—you know, millions of views. People say what I do is easy, like all you gotta do is put a video up there and sit back, but it’s not like that. Google changed their algorithm, it’s tougher now. We need to be attention whores, we have to ask for likes, we need to ask for them up front. That’s how we survive. If we don’t ask for likes, they’ll think we don’t care.”

Stone picked his teeth with a knife. *“Attention whore?”*

Mia kept going. “We need to click-bait all our videos, titles, and thumbnails. Also we need to start thinking about pranks, as long as they don’t get flagged. And we need to switch up our styles.”

For a programmer like Kurt, it sounded like fluff. “Can’t you program some of this stuff?”

“No way. Can’t be automated or planned out. Our fans will smell it and *unlike* and hide us. They don’t like press releases, either. Our fans won’t want that shit. They don’t read, they scan. Their feeds are stacked with their friends and brands. We can do three short sentences max.”

There was a pause as everyone waited for Mia to wrap it up. “I don’t know why I’m here, but if our mystery man wants Stone to command a ragtag army, he probably wants me to command some sort of hashtag army.”

Hicks teetered on his chair while his eyes darted around the table. Stone, who had always sensed that Hicks knew more than he cared to admit, looked at him with an expression that said *Mia’s going to capsize whatever plans you think you have.*

Hicks was there because 71B3 had wrangled him in just like everyone else, but he was also a Carlson mole with strict orders to not let the Turkish micronation get too powerful. Helping a few diasporas was fine. Creating a powerful, automated country that could boomerang on the U.S. was not fine. If Mia was as good as she said she was, then the Naja experiment would be hard to contain, and he’d have to explain it all to Carlson, his gang, Army intel, and their cyber project Dark Aurora, whatever that was. Hicks forced a smile. “Do we need all that? I mean, wouldn’t it be better to keep this thing quiet?”

Mia ignored the question and looked at Hicks from head to toe. She was the center of attention and fast becoming the unofficial Naja badass den mother, and she relished the role. “First, we’re going to do something about that suburban-nobody look. You gotta dress like a boss.”

Hicks protested and Mia shot back. “Look at Stone. He’s like an action hero. They’ll name a watch after him when this is over. Looks great in military gear or a suit.” Mia pinched Stone on the butt. “Every guy wants to be him, every girl wants to be with him, *chingando.*” Then she turned to Kurt. “You are *el hombre de confianza*! You got the science and computer thing. That’s really hot. Do you know any Middle Eastern words? Women are attracted to men who want to learn their language and their culture.”

“*Merhaba*? That means hello.”

“That’s a start, but it’s not going to get you very far.” Mia switched into professional marketing speak. “We’re going after tweens, teens, and twentysomethings. Kurt, what can you tell me about those age groups?”

“They’re young?” Kurt ventured.

“Nope. They’re broke! And that’s why they’re going to love you, *comprende*? They can go to any thrift shop and buy your look for under twenty bucks. The girls will like it too, it will be an androgynous thing.”

Kurt wasn’t used to compliments about his looks, or any compliments at all, for that matter, and it felt good.

Hicks sensed the group lining up behind Mia and tried to reign her in. “I didn’t know we were creating a boy band.” His quip hung in the air, and nobody laughed.

“You gotta be ready from day one. These things happen fast or not at all. You gotta know what your role is, and you have to be consistent. You ever seen my videos? I play one character, and you know what you’re gonna get every time,” Mia said. “It’s hard to know where it starts. Maybe here, maybe Miami, Tokyo, Berlin. It only takes a couple of sparks. There are so many touch points, we just have to make sure we hit as many as possible.”

Kurt was warming up to Mia. “The way I see it, if Mia does her job right, it might be the only thing that keeps us alive.”

Stone had had enough of the superficial banter. “Training and preparation is what’s going to keep us alive, which is what you all are going to be doing while I tend to some last-minute business off-island.”

Stone’s announcement worried everyone and made them suspicious. “Where are you going?” Kurt asked. “We just got here.”

“He’s running a few errands,” Hicks answered.

“You know about this? Do you have a thing going on that you’d like to share with the rest of the group?” Mia asked.

“Raymond Station gave me an assignment. I’m off to find Naja’s first president and bring him back.”

“I’m just in the Apollo 11 command module minding my own business,” Hicks responded, only adding to the gathering sense of unease.

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## Chapter 24

Shenzhen, China

Shenzhen was a cut-and-paste city. Entire blocks were plunked down like game tiles, and where the squares joined the seams were rough. For the pedestrian this meant there were a thousand obstacles to trip over: pipes poking out of the sidewalks, staircases to nowhere, and hectares of marble that rammed against paving stones like tectonic plates. It also had a unique odor. Not the musty-mold smell of Hong Kong, but the pungent combination of car exhaust and peanut oil rising out of sidewalk woks. Where there were canals, there was the odor of gray water flowing from overstressed sewer treatment plants.

The city was the center of global consumer electronics manufacturing and had the highest concentration of raw parts and wholesale electronic components for sale in the world. The epicenter of this activity was the SEG Electronics Market, located on the first eight floors of the seventy-one-story Shenzhen Electronics Group Plaza building. Here you could find almost anything in the world that was electric, dirt cheap, and in vast quantities. If you wanted to make something—anything—high-tech, this was the place to start.

Jiang had come to Shenzhen because he needed a specific set of components at a very low price. What he was looking for at the exact levels of compatibility, quantity, quality, and pricing was very hard to find online. He wasn’t positive the parts existed, but if they did, this was where they would be.

Inside the marketplace, customers thronged the thousands of booths, picking through factory samples the way a master chef would select fresh carrots at a farmer’s market. The loud shriek of packing-tape guns announced each successful negotiation like an auctioneer’s gavel. Some booths looked to be showcasing small bushes and plants, but up close they turned out to be wires and plugs artfully arranged like botanical sculptures. Other booths sold fasteners: grain-sized bolts, screws, and washers packaged in clear plastic bags and stacked in bulk like bags of rice. Many booths had glass showcases that featured rows of raw parts: transistors, capacitors, resistors, integrated circuits components, all arranged by size and part number. Taken together, there were trillions of different circuit combinations and billions of parts. Each floor of the market was like the chamber of a heart, pumping technology into coat pockets, living rooms, planes, cars, and kitchens around the world.

Jiang reached into his wallet and pulled out a piece of paper with a location Qi had jotted down the day before. As a precaution, for this particular errand they avoided texting. The fewer digital fingerprints, the better. When Jiang reached his destination, he spotted a young mother seated behind a pot of tea and four small cups. She was watching a movie on her phone. Her two toddlers, a boy and a girl, were mock sword-fighting in the aisle with toy fishing nets.

“Hello,” said Jiang in Mandarin.

The woman smiled but continued looking at the movie on her phone.

The casual observer would mistake the electronics market for a flea market, a place where customers were under constant assault by merchants hawking their wares. But this place was different. Most vendors sold a very specific product. The chances of a person walking by and needing an electroactive polymer actuator were slim, and that’s why the woman behind the counter waited for Jiang to begin the conversation.

“I’m looking for an EP7E409, twenty reels.”

That was enough to make the woman look up from her phone.

“Per month,” Jiang added.

Reels looked like old-fashioned movie film, except instead of images, each frame contained a peppercorn-sized electrical component nestled in a small plastic tray. Each reel contained as many as four thousand pieces.

EP7E409 was the part number for a tiny actuator that was a type of artificial muscle. Only one factory in the world made them, and Jiang was talking to its representative. What made the parts unique was their electroactive polymer material and form factor. They could withstand a very large force, and larger versions were sometimes used in robotic arms. But Jiang had another idea in mind.

“These are very fine parts,” the vendor explained, handing Jiang a sample reel and a magnifying glass. “Very high quality.”

“How quickly can you deliver twenty reels?”

The woman reached under the counter and grabbed five reels and put them on the counter. Then she reached down and pulled out five more. Forty thousand EP7E409s were right there in front of Jiang.

“I can ship the rest in two days. Two hundred RMB, cash.”

“I will come back to pick them up in person,” Jiang explained, “to save the shipping cost.”

One of the children whacked him on the back of his knee, and their mom scolded them. She put the reels in a box and wrapped them in yellow tape. Two days later, Jiang returned to pick up the rest of the parts and made his way back to Hong Kong with a box under his arm.

He was waved through the customs station. Little did the inspector know that Jiang was carrying a key component in what would turn out to be one of the most powerful weapons systems in the world.

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## Chapter 25

Bridgeport, Connecticut

Enzo opened the hood of his glistening, stainless steel gas grill and squinted to keep his eyes from tearing from the greasy smoke of crackling, forty-dollar-a-pound, dry-aged rib eyes, trying to act like everything was normal. His week had gone from bad to disastrous. It started with someone hacking into his bank accounts and email; then he was shaken down for $200 million by someone, not even a government agent, who then appropriated his jet. And now that he was finally home, where he was hoping to relax with his family, his wife was asking questions about unfamiliar articles of clothing in his laundry.

Twenty-five years doing business in the shadowy world of import-export had taught Enzo the importance of exercising mental compartmentalization, the art of keeping different factions and interests separate. But the walls were breaking down, and all the different things he’d worked so hard to keep in their own little boxes were getting mixed together in an explosive combination. On top of that, the beta-blockers he was taking for his spiking blood pressure were making him lethargic and clouding his judgment. But even as he tried to think his way out of this misery, what he really wanted was revenge. Whoever was behind all this, he resolved to find out who it was and make them pay.

“What the hell did I ever do wrong?” Enzo muttered to himself. “Did I ever hurt anyone? No.”

The problems were piling up: Nautilus was stalling on a purchase of twenty thousand metric tons of oil sitting in a tanker in the port of Ordu; his accountant said peculiar letters were coming from the IRS; the state attorney’s office was asking about the Fire Island land deals.

But the biggest problem, the one that overshadowed everything else, was how to tell his father. Their relationship was complex. Whether or not they were on speaking terms depended on the day and the moment. Enzo was halfway through tenth grade when his father, a building inspector, went to jail for taking kickbacks, and Enzo lost most of his friends. It was two years before he spoke to his father after that. Years later, when Enzo was smeared by similar accusations in the media, he developed a better understanding of what his father had gone through. When the press offered pop-psych insights about how Enzo projected his paternal relationship in his business dealings, he and his father had a good laugh over a bottle of Super Tuscan and a round of Sambuca. Nonetheless, Enzo still feared his father’s judgment. He’d told his dad about the meeting with the Swiss regulators. But he didn’t tell him the whole story, how Hicks took him for $200 million. He knew his father would disapprove, and he also didn’t want Enzo Senior to know he had that much money to hand over.

What was happening to Enzo was the same thing that happened to every large-scale crooked business operator. After a while they started losing track of the money and the secret accounts because it was more than one person could keep track of. Enzo was like a squirrel who buried acorns, then forgot where they were. He didn’t even have an accurate picture of his net worth until the Swiss authorities added it all up.

Enzo embraced bribery, graft, and kickbacks. It was the way he was raised. His father had brought him up to accept the fact that people had been manipulating entrusted power for private gain ever since Aristotle gave it a name. “Humans need grease. It’s part of what makes us human,” Enzo Senior always said. “Besides, what’s the difference between a tip and a Chicago handshake? They’re both great ways to get people off their asses.”

Enzo knew that the opportunistic path that had gotten him into this trouble was the very thing that would save him. Whatever leverage he had rested in the fact that he knew how the world worked in ways that pretty boys like Bixley Hicks, with his fake charm and good manners and $500 sunglasses, never would. He knew that friendships and handshakes didn’t guarantee loyalty. Money did. The keys to power depended entirely on allocating the right proportion of funds to the right people.

As he stood over the grill, Enzo realized that if things played out a certain way, he’d get his money and keep his immunity. It wasn’t a shakedown, it was an angel investment, and only a matter of time before he controlled a small country, he figured.

For the first time in days, he felt better. He picked up the spatula and reassumed his position as king of the grill.

“Time to eat!” he roared.

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## Chapter 26

Wong Chuk Hang, Hong Kong

As dawn broke, a pair of black kites left their wooded hillside roosts and glided to the factory district near the coast of Hong Kong’s south side searching for snakes and restaurant scraps. Below the birds, Qi and Jiang were already well into their day.

They worked in the Evergreen Industrial Mansion, a thirteen-story, broom-swept, concrete loft space that was home to dozens of family-run businesses. Their workshop was a hundred-fifty-square-meter sublet crammed with benches, hand tools, liquid dispensers, microscopes, and machines used for precision cutting, bending, kinking, molding, 3-D printing, sorting, and soldering. There were three windows, but two were blocked by humidity-controlled electronic storage cabinets.

“The nozzle tip is worn; there’s not enough vacuum,” Jiang observed.

They were both stooped over what was known as a pick and place machine, trying to figure out why parts were being dropped during transport. With lightning-fast robotic motions, the machine was configured to pick up tick-sized electronic components and attach them to a printed circuit board the size of a coffee cup lid. But that morning it was scattering parts around the workshop like seeds. Qi swapped the nozzle and rebooted the machine, and the problem went away.

After being fired from CIJ back in Shanghai, the brothers were toxic as far as employment went. Every search engine made sure the bathroom drone video was the first link to pop up when anyone searched for their names. It’s what made the $50,000 offer from Raymond Station a *xìngyùn sài*, a very lucky break. It gave them a fresh start and the chance to leave the mainland and set up shop in Hong Kong. They settled in Wong Chuk Hang, a pocket of industrial loft spaces surrounded by luxury high-rises, and all a short walk from Aberdeen harbor. It was a good place for entrepreneurial self-starters who wanted to stay beneath the radar.

The location was a draw for another reason. Though Hong Kong Island was home to one of the world’s densest cities, seventy-five percent of the land area was undeveloped. This meant there were thousands of hectares to test their multicopter prototypes. It was the perfect combination of city anonymity and rural freedom.

Jiang and Qi’s favorite test location was Sunset Peak, on the high ridge off the Lantau Trail, a seventy-kilometer footpath on Lantau Island, in the New Territories. It was steep, punishing terrain; the heat and humidity were off the charts, snakes were everywhere, and for some reason Jiang was a target for mosquitoes. But the summit was tranquil. Aside from the occasional paraglider, the mountains and sky were all theirs.

While the product-engineering side of J&Q was firing on all cylinders, marketing and sales were running hand to mouth. They operated on the fringe and eventually found a base of customers consisting mostly of makers, the thousands of hobbyists, moonlighters, professionals, and amateurs hacking together drones and sophisticated flight controllers out of superefficient reduced instruction set processors, accelerometers, gyroscopes, and magnetometers found in mobile devices. J&Q pushed the boundaries of what was legal and what some would consider ethical. They experimented with prototypes more established companies wouldn’t touch, at least not publicly.

Weaponized toys were taboo in commercial circles. But in hacker culture they were blood sport, and men met in secret tournaments and bet on the winners like cockfights. Jiang and Qi supplemented Raymond Station’s angel investment with e-comm specialty sales and prize money from the underground fighting-drone circuit. It was enough to cover the workshop rent each month. But their customers demanded more and pushed Jiang and Qi to take their product design a step further. They designed prototypes that, under very specific conditions and in a controlled setting, could kill.

They weren’t in it for the money. They told themselves they were motivated by principle, which they were. The way Qi figured it, weaponized hobby drones were inevitable, and the best way to stop the bad drones was with good drones, and the good drones might as well be their design. What made J&Q drone design superior was transparency. If an extremist group ever got their hands on a J&Q design, at least the good guys would know how it worked. That attitude explained why all their designs were published under a GNU open-source software license. It meant anyone could see what made the vehicles tick, and could build off their inventions as long as they gave J&Q attribution and promised not to resell their designs for a profit. The result was that their multicopter designs evolved faster than any weapon platform in history. As one advance took hold, another took its place in a fast-paced, high-tech, high-stakes game of leapfrog.

But as each leap happened, expenses went up. Old parts and equipment were scrapped, and new assembly machines were brought in. It was expensive. They had long since blown through Raymond Station’s angel investment and reached a point where online sales and tournament money weren’t enough to make ends meet. They were two weeks late on their rent and getting desperate.

“We’re going to need a loan,” Jiang admitted over a cup of cold coffee.

“A loan? We’re barely legal. Technically, what we’re doing is illegal. Who the hell’s going to lend us money?”

The answer was obvious: It was Raymond Station. They sent a query and got a response less than a minute later. But what came back wasn’t a loan proposal or another equity term sheet. It was a purchase order—totaling over three million dollars.

PURCHASE ORDER

QTY: 4000

DESCRIPTION: High perf. autonomous multi-copter w/ gimbaled pylon(see armament and functional specs)

UNIT PRICE: $850 EA.

TOTAL: $3,400,000 US

SHIPPING: FOB Destination Ferus

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS: Protected intermodal shipping container w/gamma shielding and false compartment.

Qi was skeptical. “Ever heard of Ferus?”

“I looked it up. It’s a tiny country between Greece and Turkey.”

“You think this is real?”

“Well, a $250K cash advance just hit our account.”

“Who is this guy?!!”

“I don’t know, but it looks like he’s building a private air force.”

## 

## Chapter 27

Ankara, Turkey

Ozturk finished his afternoon prayers, then moved to the side room. His crutches caught the edge of the handwoven kilim that covered the stone floor. He regained his balance, then seated himself at a round table inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The crisis of the coup attempt was spiraling out of control. There was another ugly massacre in Hakkâri Province. It was obvious the head of the secret police was behind it, and Ozturk was paying a heavy price. The brutality unleashed by Pecer’s not-so-secret war bolstered his poll numbers with hard-liners, while Ozturk’s numbers plummeted among his base of moderates. It was a lose-lose situation. This, combined with the coup attempt, losing the seat in the UN, and the wrestling match, pushed Ozturk to the wall. He needed a way out, and he needed it fast.

When he heard about Ahmet Batu’s meeting on the Westchester airport tarmac, Ozturk seized on the opportunity. His people had been looking for ways to handle the non-Turkish ethnic populations for generations. Pecer wanted to kill them all, while Ozturk thought there was a political solution. Then Hicks came along and offered to take the problem off their hands in exchange for forty square kilometers of land, and, as a bonus, would repair Turkey’s standing with the international community. Ozturk figured it wasn’t really much of a gamble, because if the deal didn't pan out he could just take the territory back.

A valet entered the room and announced a guest. It was Bixley Hicks.

“Good afternoon, Mr. President.”

Hicks spent his career inside the Beltway but had only ever reported on international dealings from afar, so he didn’t know what to expect. Even though he’d faced down a gangster like Enzo, it still made him nervous to meet an actual head of state. He knew Ozturk would fill their first meeting with flattery and small talk. In Turkey, listening and showing patience were the two most-valued abilities. It was considered not just discourteous but extremely rude to talk about business right away.

“I read that the Mets have the best record in baseball,” Ozturk said.

“Times are changing,” Hicks replied, taking care to make direct eye contact to build trust and sincerity.

Ozturk offered Hicks a cup of strong, bitter coffee, the unofficial national drink of Turkey. “My foreign minister said you had a very productive meeting in New York,” he said.

Hicks was surprised Ozturk got down to business so quickly. He took it to mean that the president was in a state that approached desperation. “Yes, Mr. President, very productive.”

“Mr. Hicks, please tell me why you are here.”

“I represent people who would like to lease two thousand hectares of land in the Hakkâri Province. We will use the land to create a small country, a micronation if you will, to alleviate the problem you have in the region.”

“My foreign minister said it was a treaty.”

Hicks slumped. He worried they were going to get stuck on the same issue that abruptly ended the talks in New York. “We would like the micronation to have some sovereign rights, that is true.”

“What kind of rights did you have in mind, Mr. Hicks?”

“We would like to be able to choose the government and write our own laws. In return, we will help solve your problems with the troublemakers in the eastern part of your country—the *baş belâsı*, as I believe you call them.”

Ozturk winced when he heard Hicks say *baş belâsı*. He took a sip of coffee and did not respond.

“And we may need modest flyover rights to deliver supplies.” At that point Hicks wished Sarah was with him to flesh out the legalities, but in Turkish culture, bringing a lawyer to the negotiating table was a sign of mistrust, so Sarah stayed behind.

“What will be the population of your proposed nation?”

“Fifty thousand.”

“How will it be financed?”

“We have an initial round of funding—two hundred million—already in place, and we expect the project to create revenue as well. We’re creating a finance sector big enough to attract global capital and generate local savings.”

“Security?”

“We’ll have high-tech borders patrolled by autonomous security vehicles. We will also be very strict about visas and citizenship.”

Ozturk seemed to drift as he contemplated the choice between letting Pecer’s violent expeditions continue in the eastern province or taking a chance with a foreigner on a high-tech political crapshoot. His gaze fell on Hicks as he positioned himself on his crutches and reached out with a long, two-handed gesture. His eyes attached to Hicks like a steel cable. “Mr. Hicks, I instructed my foreign minister to work with you. I cannot predict if the talk will be successful, because—”Ozturk searched for the English expression—“the devil is in the details.”

“Thank you, Mr. President,” Hicks replied.

“I wish you luck. If you will excuse me, I need to go to my next appointment.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

Ozturk took a step toward the door, then paused and swiveled on one crutch. “There is one other question, Mr. Hicks.”

“Yes?”

“Who will lead your new country?”

“We have not decided that yet, but you will certainly be a part of the process.”

“I would like more than that. I will make the choice for you.”

“Yes, well, that is certainly something we will consider…”

Ozturk moved much closer. His breath smelled like bitter coffee. “Not consider, Mr. Hicks—*do*.”

As Ozturk left, Ahmet Batu appeared with a smile, a notebook, and an outstretched hand. “We have much to talk about, Mr. Hicks.”

A server brought more coffee and a plate of pistachio and sour cherry baklava. Batu opened his notebook; inside was a list of prepared constitutional requirements. “Mr. Hicks, if you agree to our requirements, we will permit your experiment to occur. If you do not, then I am sorry but it will not occur.”

“That is very gracious, Mr. Foreign Minister,” Hicks responded.

“Mr. Hicks, I must tell you that unfortunately I do not have the authority to negotiate; I am only here to convey the needs of our country.”

“Of course.” Hicks knew Batu was just posturing. Neither man came to the table with any illusions. The scales were tipped in Hicks’s favor. Batu and Ozturk needed a solution to the crisis in the east more than Hicks needed their territory. If they made the project too difficult, Raymond Station had plenty of other international hot spots to choose from: the Horn of Africa, South America, or the Caribbean.

Batu started firing questions at Hicks.

“What will this territory be named, Mr. Hicks?”

“Aşîtî,” Hicks answered. “It means ‘peace.’”

Batu grimaced and made a note in the margin of his list. “Yes, I know this word. It is Kurdish. I think Naja would be a much better choice. It’s a simple, agreeable name.”

Naja was also the name of Raymond Station’s campaign. Hicks noted the uncanny coincidence.

“Of course, the new country will not be permitted to make war,” Batu continued.

“Except in self-defense, of course,” Hicks maneuvered.

Batu was poker-faced and made more notes. “We will choose your president and have veto power over elected officials.”

“The country will have an unencumbered democratic election,” Hicks replied, not yet willing to concede the point that Batu just told him was nonnegotiable.

Batu looked down at his notebook and shook his head with disapproval. “It will not be permitted to engage in foreign relations.”

“The country would seek to permit reasonable foreign relations that do not conflict with the interests of Turkey,” Hicks responded. Batu’s posture grew more tense as he noted Hicks’s responses.

“The experiment will last for one year. If it is unsuccessful, the land will revert back to the Turkish government, and all citizens will be deported.”

“We will need at least thirty-six months,” Hicks countered.

“The religion will be Muslim.”

“Yes, but in the future, citizens may be allowed to practice freedom of religion if they choose,” Hicks replied.

“The country will not be allowed to print and issue currency.”

“The country will use cryptocurrency with a public ledger. This is an integral part of the system and is designed to provide transparency and eliminate corruption,” Hicks explained. Batu looked puzzled but continued down his list. The discussions lasted all night. Batu had many questions:

Q. What will be the population? A. About fifty thousand people.

Q. Where will food come from? A. Forty percent local and sixty percent imported.

Q. Where will water come from? A. Forty percent local, sixty percent imported.

Q. Power? A. Eighty percent renewable, twenty percent imported.

Q. Will alcohol be allowed? A. Alcohol will be severely restricted.

Q. Will women see men before marriage? A. Yes, but very carefully monitored.

Batu grumbled, but his body language signaled some comfort and a path to compromise. As the night wore on, two sticking points remained: Ozturk’s insistence on choosing the first president, and who would create immigration policy. Turkey wanted to control the flow of immigrants to make sure the new nation wouldn’t turn into a safe zone for terrorists.

To address the second point, Batu proposed comprehensive citizen surveillance. Hicks pushed back. The two men went around in circles for hours. Then, as dawn cast a yellow light on a table cluttered with half-eaten platters of lamb and rice pilaf, Hicks decided to offer Batu a big concession.

“We will agree to provide the Turkish government with real-time access to the names and activities of all the people living in the new country.”

Batu nodded calmly, but inside he was elated. This was the most important negotiating point and the exact capability Ozturk needed to sell the program to Pecer’s hard-liners. Hicks was satisfied, too. He and Sarah knew the issue would emerge as a significant bargaining chip, and they’d planned not to let go of it until the very end of the talk, after they’d extracted many other promises, big and small. By conceding, they would avoid what professional negotiators called the “best alternative to a negotiated agreement,” or BATNA. Ozturk’s BATNA was to do nothing and allow Pecer to continue his brutal campaign. Hicks’s was to look elsewhere for a forsaken patch of ground to rescue.

Both men walked away feeling they’d gotten the best of the other. Batu got his security concession, while Hicks could smugly say that what he agreed to provide to the Turkish government was available to anyone at any time—for free. It was obvious, but the president and foreign minister missed it. They didn’t realize that social networks had made privacy a thing of the past.

As they addressed the final point, who would choose the president, Batu was brimming with confidence. Hicks made another concession: He agreed that Ozturk could name the nation’s leader as long as he chose from a short list provided by Hicks. Batu was skeptical. Then, at that moment, Hicks received an unusual message. It was from Raymond Station.

Raymond Station: List of rising stars

Hicks clicked on the message and there was a list of five names.

Aydin Koc

Kadir Demir

Taylan Aslan

Koban Goran

Ali Ghazi

There was no explanation for the list and no explanation why it was sent at that moment. All he knew was the names looked like men’s names, and some looked Turkish. He copied and pasted the list in a text. It was past midnight in New York, but Sarah was alert. A moment later, his phone rang.

“Who are they?” Sarah asked.

“Possible candidates for president, I assume,” Hicks answered. “I need you to check them out and get back to me.”

Sarah checked the news sites, ran a background check of court records, citations, tickets, felonies, misdemeanors, and sexual offenses. She combed through social media, the search engines and professional sites.

*All these guys seem pretty impressive*, Sarah texted. *They’re all between thirty-nine and forty-five. They’ve all completed, or are close to completing, graduate work in engineering, math, or science. Two have some non-Turkish blood. The only one who really sticks out is Goran, who’s wanted for questioning by MIT. What else am I looking for?*

Hicks didn’t answer. Instead he poured himself a cup of coffee, his third in an hour. He cleared his throat with a loud noise that startled Batu, who had been dozing in an armchair.

“Mr. Secretary, here is our list of presidential candidates. We hope you will make a choice from this list.”

Batu reviewed the list; none of the names were familiar. “I do not know these people. We will need time to investigate.”

With that, Hicks went back to his hotel room while Batu met with Ozturk to discuss the issue of leadership. The president recognized the name Koban Goran—he was the one Pecer’s men were trying to label as a terrorist.

“Did he do it?” the president asked.

“No evidence that he did, and lots of evidence he didn’t,” Batu said. “He was at the scene of a terrorist bombing in Van and was being questioned by the MIT right before the explosion. But a video clearly shows a delivery boy placing the bomb.”

Without looking at the list again, Ozturk made his decision: Koban Goran. His mixed ethnicity would send the right message of reconciliation. Plus, he was young and had no political experience, which Ozturk thought would make him easy to manipulate. But there was a bigger reason. Nothing would make Pecer angrier or be a clearer rebuke to his methods than making Goran president.

The details were hammered out before afternoon prayers. An agreement was drafted and signed by the foreign minister before dinner. Then they celebrated over *adana kebabi*, stuffed eggplant, mixed-olive salad, and lentil soup. After dessert, Hicks prepared to leave for the airport. *“Teşekkür ederim,”* he said, thanking his hosts. “This is a historic moment.”

“Yes, it is,” Batu said, clasping Hicks’s arm and forearm. “And there’s one more thing before you go.”

Outside, a black Mercedes idled in the driveway.

“We will provide wiring instructions for one hundred million dollars. This is for security and other expenses our country will incur to make your experiment possible.”

“Yes, of course,” Hicks replied. He was relieved. It was the first time Batu mentioned money, though it was on the low side of what Hicks estimated. They clasped hands again, and Hicks left for the airport. As happy as he was, something bothered him. When he first met with Batu, at the airport in White Plains, the foreign minister had barely taken his proposal seriously. And now, two days later, the president had given him virtually everything he’d asked for. Hadn’t these negotiations gone a little too easily? Ozturk shook him down for a hundred million dollars and approved a virtual nobody as the new nation’s leader. Hicks wondered if Ozturk was really committed to the plan or if he was just using him for some good press, for a big payout. What if he was just a pawn in the president’s fight with his archrival? He knew the next steps would be tricky and that despite the president’s assurances he could take nothing for granted.

## 

## Chapter 28

Kuşadasī, Turkey

Koban was festering in a dark, dank cell deep in the bowels of an old prison a kilometer from the center of Kuşadasī. In the middle of the floor was a hole clogged with human waste, and a crackling sound as cockroaches made a meal of it. He didn’t know how many days had gone by, because there was no sunlight and no routine. Lice crawled through his scalp, insects gnawed his eyelashes. The pustules that had formed on his shins, thighs, and head where he’d been beaten were starting to rupture and leak clear green fluid which hardened into a honey-colored crust.

*This is how I died,* a voice in his mind said. It was his father’s, recounting his last moments in police custody. Koban imagined his suffering. Was it like what he was experiencing now? Did it end quickly, with a bullet or the crack of a club, or was it drawn out? Was it his destiny to end up like his father? And if so, would anyone find out how and where he died, or would he be one of the thousands who simply disappeared?

At that moment he heard the sound of boots. The door rattled, and a light pointed at Koban’s face.

“Get up!” a guard shouted as he hauled Koban to his feet.

Another man was there, but it was hard to see.

“Mr. Goran, I’m getting you out of here.” It was Chuck Stone.

Stone helped Koban into white disposable coveralls, then hustled him out of the building and into a parking area where a helicopter was preparing to take off. As they settled into the cabin, Stone reported back to the command post. “We got him—Koban was right where Raymond Station predicted he’d be.”

The police did a reasonable job of hiding Koban, but they overlooked one key factor: his itinerary. Koban’s route, and the route of other refugees like him, was available on the web. By joining the right online groups and knowing the approximate day of departure, it was a straightforward process determining where refugees from the east were likely to be on a given day. On that particular week Kuşadasī was a popular departure point, and it was the first place Stone went to look for Koban. When he was told about a man who matched Koban’s description, it was a simple matter of distributing $20,000 to the police chief and the guards to get him out.

It didn’t take long for the news of Koban’s escape to reach Pecer, but by then, Stone, Koban, and the pilot were cruising at six hundred meters over the Aegean and pointed in the direction of Ferus.

## 

## Chapter 29

Aegean Sea, Between Turkey and Greece

Seagulls panicked and dispersed as loud cracks of gunfire shattered the gentle Aegean dawn. It was Stone. He wore wraparound sunglasses and a red vest and had a confident stance. He emptied a twenty-round magazine from a M4 rifle into a silhouette target twenty meters away. Kurt watched the target torn to shreds and felt a sense of awe, like Stone was part of a different species.

“Range clear!” Stone shouted out of habit as he removed the empty magazine, put his gun down, and walked downrange to replace the target. On his way back to the firing line he saw Kurt and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Where are we? What is this place?” Kurt asked.

“It’s a practice range,” Stone deadpanned.

“I mean Ferus. Why are we really here?”

“You think I have all the answers? I was dragged into this thing just like you.”

“Somebody must have told you something. I mean, a guy like you doesn’t just show up to a rundown compound, with guns, in the middle of nowhere, without a reason.”

“Actually, that’s a pretty good description of my military career.”

Kurt ignored Stone’s sarcasm. “So you have nothing to add?”

“I know about as much as you. It’s a staging area. A place to get our shit together before we plant the flag.” As Stone answered, he put a hand on Kurt’s shoulder and handed him a 9mm pistol.

“What’s this for?”

“Just a precaution. In case you run into rattlesnakes,” Stone’s speech was so calm and uninflected that Kurt had no idea if he was joking or dead serious.

“It’s standard-issue. They say a forty-five has more stopping power than a nine millimeter, but the reality is, whether you’re talking about a forty-five or a nine millimeter, it’s just gonna be backup to a shotgun, which is backup to a rifle.”

Kurt listened to Stone’s words as if his life depended on it, because it probably did. Kurt wasn’t a complete novice—he shot .22s as a kid—but this was his first time handling a pistol. He held the grip with two outstretched hands and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

Stone held out a magazine loaded with seventeen rounds. “You’re forgetting this.”

Kurt bowed his head, took the magazine, popped it into the base of the handgrip, then chambered a round. Then he took a breath and lined up the sites and the target. The black silhouette was blurry, another reminder of his eyesight challenges. I’ll get an eye exam back in the States, he promised himself as he squeezed the trigger. The target was only three meters away, but the bullet missed the paper completely and disappeared into the water.

Stone made some suggestions. “Raise the gun higher. Look through the sites. An armed self-defender wants to hit a twenty-centimeter circle at combat distance. Which is anywhere from point-blank range to ten feet. We’re going to slow things down until you can make your six-inch group. Got it?”

Kurt nodded and squeezed the trigger again sixteen times. Six bullets went through the target, about fifty centimeters apart. He pushed a button on the side of the handgrip, ejected the empty magazine, and replaced it with a loaded one. He squeezed off seventeen more rounds, and that time the grouping was a little better. The process continued for forty-five minutes until Kurt could more or less consistently hit a big piece of paper four meters away.

That was all there was to Kurt’s training. It reminded him of the instructions flight attendants give passengers: “In the event of a water landing…”

He wondered how he’d react if he was actually in a close-combat situation with a 9mm. He was pretty sure it wouldn’t be anything like shooting a big piece of paper on a calm morning. But it was better than nothing.

Stone looked satisfied. “Let’s take a break. There are some other things we need to go over.” Kurt removed the empty magazine from his 9mm and put the gun on a table, next to Stone’s rifle.

Kurt was starting to feel a bond, but there were still plenty of questions. Stone opened the door of a galvanized steel utility cabinet and pulled out a ripstop nylon crossover pack.

“This is yours—everything someone thought you’d need. Take a look, then get some breakfast. I’ve got another guest to clean up before we get sealed into the horse.”

“Sealed into what?”

“Just another precaution. Nothing to worry about.”

Kurt unzipped the bag and looked inside. It basically contained everything a geek needed to survive, in the wilderness or in his mother’s basement. The tech stuff was impressive: a Macbook, three Mophie Powerstation backup batteries, three smartphones with extra batteries, unbreakable solar panels, three satellite USC Wi-Fi cards, and a pair of noise-canceling headphones. Digging deeper, he found thirty Italian-roast instant coffee packets, pens, notebooks, a first aid kit, toiletries, three pairs of dark jeans and a pair of work pants, running shoes, dress shoes, and socks and underwear. There also was an assortment of tools, wraparound Oakleys, and a long, black, raw-brim canyon hat. At the bottom of the bag were three vials of Anascor antivenom, which made his heart sink a little. Not because he wasn’t afraid of snakes but because it meant Stone wasn’t kidding and that he really did have an underdeveloped sense of humor.

Mia appeared with a cup of coffee and an excited look. “I’m picturing you in those wraparounds, the black button-down, the dark jeans with the nine mil in a drop-leg holster,” she said. “Central-casting badass.”

Being called a badass, Mia’s coy smile, and the way the diffuse Aegean glow touched the even skin above her collarbone would have given any man an ego boost. But Kurt felt a little off-balance. Her tone wasn’t exactly mocking, but it wasn’t friendly either. It was more like *Hey, good luck with that.*

“Thanks,” Kurt said, trying not act self-conscious. “So if I’m playing badass tech genius, what’s your role?”

Mia had her own crossover pack. She also had her own nine mil, which made Kurt felt a little less special. “I’m the badass social media genius.”

There was the noise of a screen door slamming. It was Stone with a bewildered-looking guest who looked like he was recovering from a bad accident. He had a bandage across his head and ugly bruises and scabs all up and down his arms.

“This is Koban Goran,” Stone said. “He joined us last night. We fished him out of prison, just like you.”

“Just like me?” The words bounced around in Kurt’s head. How deep did this go?

“Where am I?” Koban mumbled. He could have been Kurt forty-eight hours earlier.

Hicks appeared with a bag of chips. Stone pointed to a makeshift table with five folding chairs on one side and a single chair on the other. “Koban, these are my associates. They’re going to be witnesses. Have a seat. I’m going to ask you a few questions, and I would like you to answer them honestly.”

Koban’s eye widened. For all he knew, he’d been inexplicably traded to the Americans and was in another dark site, awaiting another round of torture and punishment.

“Koban, why did you leave your town in eastern Turkey?” Stone asked as he unstrapped his pistol and rested it on the table.

“I left because I wanted to stay alive and because I wanted a better life for my family,” Koban answered.

“How does abandoning your family give them a better life?” Mia interjected without having the faintest idea who Koban was, and also not wanting to be left out. Stone glared at her with an expression that said *This is my interrogation.*

“I had to leave. The secret police would have killed me if I stayed. And if I was dead I would have no way to help them.”

Koban felt nauseous. As Stone’s questioning continued, all he could think about was where he could throw up with the least amount of notice.

“What if someone provided the money and influence required to go back to your home and create a life of prosperity for you and your family?” Stone asked Koban with a penetrating stare. “What would you give for that?”

“My life,” Koban said without hesitating.

“We’re going to give you a chance to prove that, Mr. Goran,” Mia improvised. Stone glared at Mia again. She shrugged.

“What’s this all about?” Koban pleaded. Just about everyone on Ferus wanted to know the same thing but had given up asking.

It was Hicks’s turn to talk. “Turks have been trying to get rid of the ethnic minorities in Eastern Anatolia for generations. Pecer wants to kill them all”—Koban nodded at this—“but we think Ozturk wants a political solution.”

Hicks looked at Kurt. “Then, a few months ago, this man’s program came on the scene and offered to make the ethnic tensions go away in exchange for forty square kilometers of land.”

The way Hicks said “this man’s program” made it sound like the entire scheme, recognized by the group as getting more harebrained by the moment, was somehow all Kurt’s idea. He pushed back. “Just to be clear, I had nothing to do with this. OK, I wrote a few lines of code two years ago, that’s all. I just got out of prison myself.” Mia was listening. When she found out Kurt had been in prison, her lips parted slightly, and she looked surprised and captivated.

A wave crashed against the concrete pilings, and an updraft lifted the spray over the group. Stone wiped the mist off his face. “I don’t know about everyone else, but I’m dog hungry. What do you say we have some grub, then brief Koban on his presidential duties?”

Koban was startled. “I’m the president?!”

Nobody knew what to say.

Stone piled a plate with with spanakopita and *maroulosalata* and balanced a bottle of Neda lager on the side. He noticed Kurt picking at a much smaller portion. “Not hungry?”

“It’s gluten, it will make me feel like shit,” Kurt said as he picked through the spinach, onions, and cheese.

Then Koban asked a question. “There’s been fighting for hundreds of years. What’s different about this plan?”

Hicks answered with a mouth full of cheese spanakopita. “When states fall, the cause usually isn’t marauders, civil war, or plague, it’s corruption. Kurt’s program is going to stop that problem. That’s what makes this time different.”

Kurt held up his hand. “Stop saying *my* *program*.”

Hicks put his fork down. “Well, I sure as hell didn’t write the program.”

“Neither did I.”

“Well then you started it, didn’t you?”

Kurt switched the topic. “What about marauders? We have some way to call in for an air strike if things get hot, right?” He thought this was a reasonable question since Stone had all but said their lives were on the line.

“We will be deploying the highest technology defenses available. Don’t worry about that,” Stone answered.

None of this made Kurt feel especially comfortable, and except for the fancy olives and the helicopter ride, the entire operation had a low-budget feel. He turned to Hicks. “And there’s one question that’s been bothering me: Who’s paying for all this?”

There was a pause as Hicks thought about the best way to respond. “We’re crowdfunding it.”

Stone made a sour face.

Hicks folded his arms. “What, it’s true, isn’t it? All I can say is the highest levels of government are aware of what we’re doing. If it works, there will be plenty of funding down the line. But you’re right, for now we are basically a startup with some angel funding.”

“And Enzo Gotti is one of the angels?” Kurt guessed.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because Anika knew more about his finances and business interests than he knew himself. She wouldn’t have spent that kind of time tracking him without a good reason.”

Stone nodded.

“Well, that’s ironic,” Kurt said. “One of the biggest low-life scumbags on the East Coast is also the primary backer of an epic international human rights experiment.”

When he thought about it, the whole thing sounded like a something his lefty high school history teacher always talked about: the Reagan administration's ill-fated attempt in 1985 to fund an anti-Communist revolution in Nicaragua with profits from drugs and arms sales.

Stone reassured Kurt, “If we get any hint, any hint at all, that it is unsafe to proceed, we will delay or abort the mission if necessary. I will be with you at every step, too. The last thing we want to do is put your life in jeopardy.” Right as he said “jeopardy,” a seagull crapped on his shoulder.

Mia chuckled. “Isn’t that supposed to be good luck?”

Stone flicked the white mess off his shoulder. “Get your gear and let’s get the hell out of here before we drown in shit.”

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Stone, Kurt, Mia, and Koban changed into threat level IV outer tactical vests, digital desert camouflage, CamelBaks for hydration, and noise-canceling headphones that blocked the sound of everything except their breathing. A destination grid map was strapped to their arms, and 9mm pistols were strapped to their legs.

Hicks stayed behind in Ferus and watched sheepishly as the others winched themselves down the RIB bouncing in the waves below. Two hundred meters away, a coastal freighter was on station with a gangway lowered and ready to take on the passengers. The captain was standing at the rail with binoculars pressed to his eyes.

Aboard the freighter, Stone, Kurt, Koban, and Mia were directed through a hatch and onto a catwalk where sea spray beaded up on the thickly painted steel fixtures. They came to another hatch and made their way down a ladder to the bowels of the ship. The sounds of the ship’s diesel engines grew louder as they made their way down to the lower decks. At the end of the underdeck passageway was a secure hatch with the words “Bay 14” stenciled on the outside.

Stone pulled an electronic badge from his pocket and tapped the entry pad. A solenoid clicked, the hatch door opened, and there stood Qi and Jiang, adjusting the Velcro on their Gill foul-weather gear.

“Hello, gentlemen,” Jiang said, offering his right hand as he steadied himself with his left.

Behind the twins there were six containers, “forty footers,” stacked in three columns of two. Each had a picture of a caduceus and the words “Hospital Supplies” painted on the outside.

Kurt looked at Stone and asked, “Who are these guys?”

“They do hardware.”

“It’s great to meet you, Mr. Porter,” Qi greeted. “Raymond Station said we will be working together very closely.”

“He did?”

“We have been looking closely at the 7R1B3 code and developed an API.”

“You have?”

Kurt wasn’t anywhere close to being in the mind-set to contemplate system architecture and decided to look inside one of the containers instead.

“Look familiar?” Stone joked.

“Yeah, except my cell didn’t smell like diesel,” Kurt cracked.

“There are a couple of key features,” Jiang explained. “This compartment is completely undetectable. There are no doors, windows, seams, vents, hatches, or hinges. We also created some interesting anti-gamma-ray technology which is complicated to explain and hopefully you won’t need.” Then Jiang pointed to a metal panel. “This will be welded in place after you go inside.”

“How do we get out?” Kurt wondered.

“When we reach the ORP, we’re going to cut ourselves a door with an oxyacetylene torch packed inside the compartment,“ Stone explained.

Mia looked green. “Whose crazy idea was that?”

“Actually, it was mine. I didn’t want to take any chances,” Stone admitted.

Sweat beaded up around Koban’s nose. “How do we breathe?”

“I was just getting to that,” Qi said. “Advanced heat sink and CO2 scrubber technology will keep the air breathable and the room temperature at twenty-one degrees Celsius without the need for external vents that could tip off sniffer dogs. Mr. Stone’s plan is for you to be in here for twenty hours, but as a precaution you have water, MREs—including some gluten-free options for Mr. Porter—and CO2 scrubbing capability to last three days, if needed. Finally, we gave you eyes—you’re not completely blind in here, because there are six IR pinhole cameras and mics to give you 360 visual and audio capability outside, day or night. Any other questions?”

“Where’s the head?”

Stone could answer that one. “There’s a blue canoe in the corner.”

Koban looked at the bench with seat belts. “What are these for?”

“Just a precaution,” Stone answered. “It can get rough out there. But don’t worry, we’re prepared for the worst, and if everything goes according to plan, our mission will end without a shot fired. And there’s one other thing. We’ll be sharing the ride with Daisy.”

“A dog?” Mia asked with equal shock and delight. “We’re going in there with a dog?!”

A three-year-old service dog, a golden retriever, appeared with a paisley leash in her mouth. She walked over to the group and introduced herself by soliciting affection from each traveler, one by one.

“She’s an important part of the plan. Two scoops in the morning and two in the evening,” Stone instructed.

“Here’s something I don’t get,” Kurt said to Stone. “If our entire operation has President Ozturk’s blessing, why all this secrecy? Shouldn’t we just be able to motorcade our way in?”

“All we have right now is a piece of paper. Until we actually have things up and running, we’re not taking any chances. We have no idea who might *not* want this whole project to happen. Including, possibly, Ozturk himself.”

“I thought we trusted Ozturk.”

“This is the right thing to do,” Koban clarified. “Pecer’s evil, and Ozturk’s a fickle bastard. We should not take chances.”

Mia stood with her arms crossed. “I’m not getting sealed in a box with three strange men and a dog. Nobody said I was supposed to do that.”

That was when Stone shared a text message with the group: a little extra push from Raymond Station and a reminder that their options were limited. “I got this a few hours ago.” It was a text with the latest headlines back home: Suffolk County police were looking for Kurt in connection with Anika’s murder; Barry’s housekeeper had gone public about a very troubling apparatus she discovered in his bedroom that was cast from Mia’s torso; and Koban’s mother was being questioned about her son’s disappearance. Stone, of course, had his own reasons for sticking with the plan.

It was all anyone needed to hear, and Kurt, Mia, and Koban reluctantly strapped themselves into the secret compartment. Stone and Daisy followed, and the group was ready to go. Qi and Jiang positioned the ten-by-ten corrugated steel panel—the false wall—and welded it to four steel studs. Wisps of smoke from burning slag wafted through the compartment before being sucked up by a 0.03 micron HEPA filter. Qi and Jiang gave a good-natured rap on the outside of the box when the work was finished.

Daisy curled up in a crate in the corner. Kurt sat across from Koban and noticed his lack of color and sweat beads on his forehead, both classic signs of claustrophobia. An understandable reaction, Kurt thought. After all, they were stuffed in a steel coffin and being shipped to a hostile territory—with no backup.

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## Chapter 30

Īzmir

West Coast of Turkey

Shortly after 14:00, the coastal freighter docked at the port of Īzmir terminal and prepared to offload four hundred containers, including the six labeled “Medical.” The manifest stated the containers held hospital equipment, which was true enough, but they also carried most of the material needed to jump-start a country. Numbers one, two, and three were containerized housing units (CHUs) that also held HESCO bastions, diesel and LP gas, catering and food service, shelter support, recreational supplies, temporary restrooms, and tenting solutions for up to two hundred and fifty people. Containers Four and Five held water systems, aerostat persistent threat detection system (PTDS), a steer loader, a quad ATV, generators, laundry machines, and light towers. Container Six held internet and satellite communication, computers, bedding, and linens. Also hidden in Container Six were Kurt, Stone, Mia, Koban, and Daisy, the micronation’s pioneer citizens.

A gantry crane offloaded the deck containers one by one. As each layer was removed, the Container Six passengers heard the sounds from the outside more clearly. Everyone was still except for Koban, who twitched at every sound. The ship echoed with the sound of steel on steel as hydraulic cylinders opened the door to the insulated hold below deck. The spreader lowered and locked onto the four corner castings of Container Six.

“What was that?” Koban whispered.

“It’s normal,” Stone assured.

Seconds later they were launched sixty meters into the air. It felt like a high-speed elevator except there were also lateral forces as the container was carried away from the ship and positioned over a yard truck.

Next, they experienced near weightlessness as the container plunged toward the ground. Daisy scratched at the floor of her crate as she scrambled to orient herself.

Blood rushed to their feet when the crane caught the container just a few meters from the quay, then inched downward and clicked it onto the yard truck. Next, a stack loader transferred Container Six from the yard truck to a Landoll 330 trailer, which would take them the twenty hours to the operational rally point near Hakkâri. The Īzmir facility was in disrepair and mishaps were common, so when Stone heard the container clicking into place and the winch tightening without an incident, he let out an audible sigh of relief. It was time for the next test: customs.

Container Six shook in fits as the driver pumped the air brakes and the truck skidded to a stop. Air escaped as excess pressure was released. Then there was silence. They were the last in the line of container trucks waiting for inspection. Everything went according to routine until the truck carrying Container Six reached the customs booth. They heard voices that seemed to escalate into a quarrel when an agent spotted an undeclared carton of cigarettes on the front seat. This brought out a swarm of agents to perform a thorough search. The stowaways remained quiet and worried that the entire mission might be jeopardized over a case of cigarettes.

There were more shouts as the truck went into gear. But instead of following the other container trucks through the gate, Container Six was escorted to the quarantine zone for further inspection. Stone turned off the HVAC to reduce noise but left the quieter CO2 scrubber on so they wouldn’t suffocate. The temperature began to rise.

Through the pinhole cameras they watched as their driver was escorted to an interrogation area and non-intrusive inspection (NII) equipment was rolled into place. The scanning machine used iridium-192 gamma rays that could penetrate five centimeters of steel and give a clear picture of everything inside a container, down to the size of a pencil.

But Qi and Jiang had taken gamma-ray scanning into account. They lined the units with lead panels and cheap clay tile that absorbed some gamma rays and emitted others. The result was a fake scan signature that made the container look like it was filled with boxes of latex gloves.

The ruse would have worked, except what the engineers didn’t factor in was that to a customs agent, a box of latex gloves looked a lot like a carton of cigarettes. As a result, the high-tech panels transformed mercenary stowaways into cases upon cases of undeclared tobacco products. When the head inspector saw the image and heard about the carton on the front seat, he ordered a manual inspection.

Stone glanced at his watch. The plan was to have Container Six be the first into the territory, closely followed by the rest of the convoy. Now they were two hours behind schedule and stuck in quarantine while the rest of the container trucks drove ahead without them. With the climate control system set to minimum life support, the compartment was over forty degrees Celsius and thick with humidity. They sat motionless and dripping with sweat. Koban, still not fully recovered from his time in prison, searched frantically for a plastic bag and vomited on the floor instead.

The lock opened on the outside doors, and they heard men entering the container. There was shouting as boxes and crates were opened on the other side of the wall from where the stowaways were hiding. While the average person would never detect the hidden quarters, customs agents working on the quay spent their careers inspecting cargo and would easily be able to tell if a few feet were missing in the inside dimensions of a forty-foot container. It’s what they were good at. They began removing the last layer of cargo before reaching the captives.

“What happens now?” Kurt whispered.

“There’s a contingency,” Stone said. “Hopefully it works.”

The driver of the truck unlocked a toolbox attached to the undercarriage and removed a blue gym bag. Inside it were twenty short stacks of U.S. currency neatly wrapped in aluminum foil. Stone heard loud orders barked, and the manual inspection of Container Six ceased.

Ten minutes passed before the cargo was reloaded into Container Six. The group heard the welcome sound of the truck’s engine starting. They were five hours behind schedule, but the operation was back on.

## Chapter 31

Kalkan, Turkish Riviera

Pecer was having a very good week and decided to reward himself with an extra long workout. It was important to look strong now that the paparazzi followed him everywhere he went. Whenever possible, he displayed his biceps by wearing polo shirts.

With Ozturk’s polls softening day by day, Pecer could practically smell the presidency. Support among his hard-line base kept rising and spiked after his secret police detained a known rebel leader and killed six of his underlings. Under Mezhar’s infamous interrogation techniques, the leader revealed the location of a cache of weapons in the Hakkâri Province. Pecer scoffed at critics in the media who doubted the efficacy of torture.

But he could feel things changing. Some commentators who had ridiculed and reviled Pecer for years were beginning to suggest that the country needed a strongman to restore order and Ottoman traditions to the republic. They stopped short of mentioning Pecer’s name. But the message was obvious. The head of the secret police was emerging as a national political figure.

Pecer wrapped up his routine and was about to head for the shower when he received a text that stopped him in his tracks: *ÖMER SIGNED TREATY W/ INSURGENTS.* Moments later, his phone rang. It was his chief of staff.

Pecer answered with one word. “Go.”

As his top aide explained that Ozturk had granted sovereign territory in the east to the terrorists, Pecer’s neck veins bulged and his face looked like an overripe bell pepper.

“Did Ömer sign it?” The answer came back that he hadn’t yet. “Then it’s just a piece of paper,” Pecer fumed. His anger, combined with adrenaline and endorphins from his workout, put his mind in overdrive. “Snuff this out before anyone finds out about it. Put together a welcome committee for the new arrivals—I want them disposed of, discreetly. Find out who the leader is and kill his family.” The voice on the phone acknowledged the orders, and Pecer hung up and went to the shower. *Ömer’s collaborating with the terrorists. He will suffer for this*, he promised himself.

Then a smile broke across his face as cold water from the showerhead flowed over his shoulders. He was amazed he didn’t see it immediately. Ozturk hadn’t betrayed him at all. He’d given him a great gift.

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## Chapter 32

Eastern Anatolian Plateau

Twenty-six hours later, the convoy reached its location. Koban recognized the landscape that popped up on the screen, and he was incredulous. They were just five kilometers down the road where Dick the smuggler had handed him his forged papers just a few weeks ago, though it felt like a lifetime.

The noise was deafening as the containers rolled off the backs of the trucks like pancakes from a spatula. Inside Container Six, the stowaways clutched the handholds on the bench with one hand and their rifles with the other.

“What the hell is going on out there?” Kurt asked Stone.

“They’re dropping the containers off the back of the trucks. Buckle up, we’re next,” Stone warned.

They felt their steel world nose up, slide back, and drop to the ground with a jarring whiplash and screeching noise that from the inside sounded like a car accident. Underneath the sloping container were logs used to fine-tune the container position later. Mingled with the logs was a stray piece of rebar that stuck straight up out of a piece of concrete. When the container dropped off the back of the truck, the steel rod punctured the floor assembly and severed the power assembly for the audio and video controller. They were cut off from the outside world. They were blind. It was still, and all that could be heard was the loud sound of truck engines idling.

“What happens next?” Koban whispered.

“We wait,” Stone answered.

“For what?” Kurt interjected.

“For our signal from the ops team.”

“There’s something I don’t understand,” Kurt said in a low voice. “If this territory is ours, why can’t we just go outside and set up camp? Why all the secrecy?”

“Because there’s a catch,” Stone said. “Did you see all those men milling around the parking lot when the truck drove in?”

“Yeah, I was going to ask you about them.”

“They’re not supposed to be there. The agreement was for the territory to be completely vacated.”

“So who are they, then?”

“MIT. Those are Pecer’s boys. There’s a chance we’ve been double- crossed,” Stone revealed.

“Shit,” Koban mumbled, trying to block out the idea of going back to prison—a prison run by Pecer.

“If they’re not gone by dark, we deploy.”

“But if we go after them, won’t they go after us?”

“They could, but that would be a declaration of war on a sovereign country.”

“But the country’s less than a day old. Nobody even knows we’re here!”

“That’s not quite true,” Stone assured. “Don’t worry, we trained for this.”

They heard the sound of cab doors slamming shut; then, in succession, each truck slipped into gear and drove back down the road they came in on. For the first time since they’d left Īzmir, it was quiet. The outside cameras were dead. The only sound in their secret compartment was the sound of heavy rhythmic breathing, and that’s when Koban got nervous.

As carefully as he listened, Koban couldn’t hear the reassuring muffled hum of the CO2 scrubber. At the mission briefing he was told that without it they would suffocate within an hour. “I can’t hear the scrubber!” he wailed.

“Shhh!” another voice pressed.

Stone perked up and listened. He couldn’t hear the scrubber, either. He checked the life support panel: The switch was on, but there was no noise. When they lost A/V they must have lost the CO2 scrubber too, and with all the trucks idling outside, he’d failed to notice the missing sound.

Damn it! How could I be so stupid to not notice! Stone thought. He turned on the heat-sink-activated HVAC, but that only cooled and recirculated dangerous levels of CO2. He could already sense the disorienting effects of oxygen deprivation. There were no doors. The only way out was to cut through the thick steel with a cutting torch and risk being seen.

Koban immediately picked up on Stone’s urgency and began to panic. “Call the ops team! Tell them to send a rescue!” he sputtered.

“Shut up, you’re going to get us killed,” a voice pressed.

“We’re gonna die in this tomb!” Koban snapped. Daisy sensed the tension in the compartment and began to pant in big gasps. Then she let out a low bark.

“Someone shut Daisy up before she gets us killed.”

Stone grabbed the cutting torch and a pair of welding goggles and told everyone to put on a face mask. “We’re not going to die in here. We might die outside, but I’ll be damned if we’re going to die in here.”

A waterfall of white-hot welding sparks spilled from a hole on the side of the metal box. As Stone worked the torch, the compartment filled with thick, toxic smoke. The industrial face masks did not filter out all the smoke, and they started to cough. They had about a minute to get out.

“Don’t make the hole so big,” Kurt coughed.

Stone kept going. “I’m following the lines.”

Kurt coughed again. “At this rate, we’ll be dead from smoke inhalation!”

As their time was winding down, Stone cut through last strand of steel and the fourteen-gauge outside panel, and the armor panel crashed to the hard-packed parking lot. Stone strapped on his night vision goggles, grabbed a rifle, and was first to step through the hole. He crouched down and swept a slow arc with the high-powered IR floodlight mounted to the side of his rifle.

His voice was a loud rasp. “Clear!”

A minute later, all six stowaways were standing outside the hellish crew compartment, breathing the crisp predawn air. Daisy dragged her leash, sniffed the ground, and found just the right spot to relieve herself. Smoke and a blue light came from the square hole and created an eerie scene that made the shipping container look like a hatched robot egg from another planet.

The stars faded and the sky turned the color of a ripened plum as the predawn glow signaled the beginning of a new day.

Every country needed a creation myth, and they were part of an important narrative that would be retold for generations. It was their Mayflower moment.

“I declare this territory the sovereign, peaceful, and productive nation of Naja,” Koban announced. Kurt and Stone captured the speech on video.

Short and sweet, Kurt thought. Perfect sound bite. Mia will love it.

“Congratulations, Mr. President. In twenty-four hours you will be a celebrity!” Kurt announced.

Then they heard a noise.

Stone gave a quick whistle. The team froze.

It was the sound of a vehicle about three kilometers away.

It was light out but not quite light enough to drive without headlights.

“If they were a welcoming committee they would have their brights on,” Stone observed.

But the vehicle was a just a black shape. And it was getting closer.

“We have about two mikes until they’re on top of us. I’ll establish FO position at checkpoint alpha, report back on size, activity, location, unit, time, and equipment. Everyone else, assume defensive positions off Container Six,” Stone ordered. “That will likely be our point of engagement. If it is, I’ll join you back here. Everyone take a covered and concealed route if possible, we don’t know who else is out here—and someone grab Daisy!”

Stone was the forward observer, hunkered down at traffic control point (TCP) alpha, which was the front entrance. Kurt, Koban, Mia, and Daisy rushed away from the containers and up into a hilly area and crouched behind one of many rocks in the boulder-strewn landscape. Daisy stretched out between them, covered in dust and well camouflaged. When the mission started, Kurt thought the digi camo and body armor were overkill. Now he was grateful for anything that gave him an advantage.

“What now?” Kurt whispered whispered into his mic.

“We lie here and wait,” Stone answered.

“For how long?” Koban jumped in.

“As long as it takes,” Stone replied, deciding there was not enough time to explain the nuances of autonomous fire team defense tactics.

“Toyota Hilux, double cab. Four combatants, two in front, two in back. Armed with rifles,” Stone reported from the entryway. “Wait five mikes, then assume defensive position at Container Six.”

The Toyota pickup sped into the lot and skidded to a stop in front of Container Two. Two men jumped out from the back seat and pointed the barrels of their Kalashnikovs in sweeping motions. They stopped when they saw the blue light and smoke streaming from the hole in Container Six.

*“Aihtaras!”* one of the men shouted.

Back in the pickup, the driver stomped on the accelerator and the truck spun in a half circle, kicking stones in all directions. The man in the passenger seat drew a gun and pointed the barrel out the window, ready to shoot anything that moved.

“Who are they?” Kurt whispered.

“Probably MIT, but not their best trained, by the look of things,” Koban remarked.

The first agent approached the hole in Container Six and popped off three shots into the crew quarters. The bullets ricocheted and bounced off the armor plating inside.

“How stupid can you be, shooting into a metal box at that close range?” Koban grumbled.

The agents crept closer to the entry with their guns drawn. Then there was another shot, but this time the round bounced off the back wall of the compartment, hit the top of the acetylene tank of the cutting torch, and cracked the valve stem. The patrol vehicle executed another donut in the parking lot, then skidded to a stop a few meters from Container Six, and the agent in the passenger seat jumped out to join the others.

*“Ayn hm?”* one of the agents said as he held a cigarette in his lips and reached into his pants for a lighter.

“What’s the report?” Stone asked over the headset, not quite able to see the details from his vantage point.

“Three combatants staking out Container Six, one in—”

There was a massive explosion.

What made acetylene more useful than other industrial gases were its powerful triple-carbon bonds. They were also what made it very unstable and highly explosive. When the acetylene cloud in Container Six ignited, the force of the expanding gases ripped the end wall off the castings, sent a ball of fire and shrapnel toward the shooters, and wreathed their bodies in flames. Their truck was blown ten meters and lay on its side in a patch of shattered safety glass. Inside, the driver was motionless.

*“Holy shit!”* was what they heard over the headset. “What now, boss?”

“Kurt and Koban, get to Container Three, find the suppression gear, and get that fire out! There’s a lot of important shit in Container Six, we need to salvage whatever we can. I’ll be up there in a minute. Go!”

## Chapter 33

Ferus, Aegean Sea, Between Greece and Turkey

“We lost all data coming from the crew quarters. There’s no signal at all,” Jiang reported.

Hicks looked bewildered. “Did someone trip on an extension cord?”

Qi frowned and said something to Jiang in Mandarin, then turned back to Hicks. “That’s not how these things work.”

After the rendezvous and handoff on the freighter, Qi and Jiang took the RIB back to Ferus and met up with Hicks for a two-week tech support engagement. It was all part of the arrangement with Raymond Station and a small price to pay for their biggest customer and only outside equity stakeholder. But working with Hicks was a chore. He was detached and entirely disinterested in the amazing technical solutions Qi and Jiang had brought to the mission. There was also an arrogance to him that reminded them of their old boss, Kiang.

“I had a desk light back home that I had to jiggle to keep on,” Hicks said.

Qi turned to Jiang and said to him in Mandarin, “Did he just compare our ruggedized, high-performance custom comms system to a desk light?”

Hicks looked annoyed. “Hey guys, on Ferus we speak English.”

“Right. Well, your desk lamp story isn’t applicable here. Our system is made from high-quality components built to military specs, designed to work outside, exposed to the elements for years at a time. Also, we received extreme readings before it went out. It could be a malfunction, it could be lots of things, but the readings are also consistent with a fire or an explosion,” Qi explained.

Hicks had no reaction until he heard the word “explosion,” and that’s when he clenched his teeth and involuntarily moved his shoulder in a circular motion.

Then his phone vibrated. It was Carlson texting. Really bad timing, Hicks thought.

CARLSON: *What’s the report?*

HICKS: *Possible explosion or MIT attack. No Comms.*

CARLSON: *Casualties?*

HICKS: *Unknown*

CARLSON: *Ozturk is a Bastard. Pocketed $100 Mil already breaking treaty!!!!*

HICKS: *Could be Pecer’s men*

CARLSON: *Both Bastards*

HICKS: *Unconfrmd.*

CARLSON: *Don’t let this spiral out of control. Keep it contained. Lot of people counting on you.*

HICKS: *Right.*

“Who was that?” Qi wanted to know.

“Just someone who needed an update.”

## Chapter 34

Eastern Turkey

Samira, Koban’s sister, was cooking dinner for her mother when a call came from Nasim.

“I have news about your brother.”

Samira hadn’t heard from Koban in a week, and she was getting worried. “Where?” she said in a low voice so her mother wouldn’t be alarmed.

Nasim sounded panicked. “I can’t say on the phone. Meet me.”

“Who was that?” Samira’s mother asked.

“The hospital,” she lied. “I need to cover for one of the other doctors. I will be back in three hours.”

Her mom looked worried. “Be careful.”

Samira put on a capster head scarf, grabbed a coat, and locked the door behind her. She walked two blocks in the direction of the hospital in case her mother was watching from the window, then doubled back to a side street near her house. A black SUV with tinted windows pulled up and the back door flung open. Inside, Nasim motioned for her to jump in.

“Once we get there, we can eat,” Nasim said, tapping his phone.

Samira touched Nasim’s hand gently. “Get where?”

“There’s nothing to worry about. I told them you’re family.”

They drove twenty minutes to a private airstrip. The driver flashed a badge, and the guard opened the gate. On the other side, Pecer’s Citation V was preparing for takeoff.

Samira stared. “A jet?”

“We could drive, but this will save an hour. The pilot is a friend of mine and I begged him for a ride.”

Inside the main cabin, Samira had her choice of six deep-cushioned, wide leather seats that pivoted in three directions. She picked a jump seat that was separated from the rest of the main cabin. Alarm bells were going off in her mind, and she felt safer near the cockpit.

Nasim said the flight would take one hour, but they were in the air for two hours. When they touched down and the cabin door swung open, they were greeted with the unmistakable salty-sweet trail of the Mediterranean.

“Is my brother at the beach?”

“It’s an amazing location. You will be joined by your brother soon,” Nasim answered. “I’ll have you back home before breakfast.”

There was another short ride in an SUV, more guards, and a gated mansion with a big domed roof that made it look more like a mosque than a private home.

“Who lives here?” Samira whispered.

As Nasim was about to answer, the SUV came to a halt in front of the main entrance. The doors jerked open and security guards grabbed Samira firmly by the arm.

Nasim was reassuring. “Don’t worry. They are my friends.”

He stayed near the car while the guards escorted Samira down a massive, column-lined marble hall that echoed with the chirps of caged songbirds and the gurgle of onyx fountains.

A delicate woman glided across the tesserae-mosaic floor and greeted her new guest. Her enormous dark eyes bulged from sallow, translucent sockets framed by a rich, gold-trimmed burka.

“Where is my brother? I am here to see my brother,” Samira said.

The woman gestured to a table spread with olives, cheese, and bread. “Yes, but first, please, have something to eat.”

Samira was famished, but more alarm bells were going off in her head, and her stomach was in knots.

“Come, sit. We will wait here until my husband calls. Please have some olives,” the hostess pleaded. They almost rolled off the plate as she passed the black Aleppo olives forward with a tremor. Samira obliged and took a spoonful and a glass of tea.

“It is very comfortable here,” the woman said, lifting her burka and biting on a small piece of bread.

“Where is my brother?” Samira asked again.

“We were hoping you might be able to tell us.”

“I don’t know,” Samira said, trying to restrain herself. “I haven’t heard from him in over a week. My brother is a good man. He stays out of trouble.”

Just then she heard a commotion outside the front door. “You lied to me!” a voice yelled. “You lied to me!” It was Nasim. “Let my cousin go—she knows nothing!” Then she heard a crack. The sound a club makes when it hits the back of a skull. And then silence.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to break free. If they would hurt Nasim, a policeman, she could only imagine what they would do to her. As she tried to think about her next move, things got foggy. She suddenly couldn’t talk. Or even think. The tea had been laced with zolpidem and Rohypnol. Powerful drugs that impaired cognitive function and caused confusion and amnesia. Date-rape drugs.

The indigestion she arrived with turned to cramps and severe gas. Her breathing slowed, and she vomited on the floor.

“Don’t worry about that,” a soothing voice said. “It happens to all the girls.”

The host guided Samira into a large room where nine young girls crowded around a man sitting in a swivel office chair with a gun in his hand.

It was Mezhar.

“Welcome, Samira, thank you for joining us tonight.”

“What did you do to my cousin?” Samira screamed.

“I’m sorry about your cousin. I’m sure after his headache goes away he will be fine. But he is not who we’re concerned with right now. Your brother needs your help. Do you want to help your brother?”

Mezhar’s words sounded like they were coming out of a tunnel. “Yes. Yes, I do,” said Samira.

“Of course you do. I want you to help your brother, too. “

Samira struggled to focus. “Is he all right?”

“Yes he is, and you will be all right too. Do you understand, Samira?” Mezhar plodded like a classroom teacher.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You will go to your brother, but first I need to know that we can trust you to follow directions. Do you know how to follow directions, Samira?”

Samira didn’t answer. Her vision was blurred, and the words she heard were hard to decode.

“Answer me Samira, yes or no?”

“Yesss,” she slurred.

“These girls follow my directions. I need you to follow my directions too. Can you follow my directions, Samira? Can you hear me? Can you follow my directions, Samira?”

“Yes,” Samira labored.

“That is very good. What I need you to do now is to get undressed, Samira.”

Samira fought hard against the chemicals that flooded her brain. Breaths of awareness came in brief intervals, and she labored with a response.

“I can...not get undressed,” Samira pieced together.

“All these girls cannot live, they cannot join the harem, the honor to which they have dedicated their lives, unless you do as I ask. If they are harmed, it will be your fault, Samira. Do you understand?”

She barely comprehended the words. She did not understand their meaning. “Where is my brother?” she asked again.

Mezhar turned ninety degrees in his swivel chair, put his arm around the waist of one of the girls, and pressed a Ruger double-action revolver to the side of her head. Her head tilted against the pressure of the barrel of the gun. Then Mezhar pulled the trigger. There was a click as the hammer fell on an empty chamber.

“That girl is lucky. Next time she will be dead because you did not answer my question,” Mezhar told Samira. “Do you understand?”

The didactic repetition continued. The drugs were too powerful, and Samira curled on the floor in a fetal position. The cramps in her abdomen shot pain through her entire body.

Mezhar signaled to the other girls, and they carried Samira to a plywood platform covered with mattress foam and blankets. Then Samira blacked out.

## 

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## Chapter 35

Central Availability Zone

Deep inside the cloud, the 7R1B3 event loop was handling an average of twenty thousand messages per minute. About half the messages that came in were immediately dispatched to functions inside the 7R1B3 operating system. The other half were processed by third-party plug-ins and apps with names like Sew3RXPress, BdgtCrnch, FinMAXX, and RoadEy3. It was a robust app ecosystem with growing capabilities, but 7R1B3’s real source of power and intelligence came from something else. While all the conventional message-processing was happening, there was a side operation going on. When a message entered the event loop, 7R1B3 routed a copy of the message to a separate program that was absorbing data like a sponge.

The separate program was the brains behind 7R1B3, and it was based on something called deep reinforcement learning, or RL. Deep RL was a general machine-learning method used to allow a computer agent to take actions in an environment with the objective of maximizing a specified reward.

RL had been around since the 1990s, but at that time the hardware didn’t exist to make it work. In 2009, three Stanford researchers realized the key to making RL feasible was a piece of hardware that could be found inside desktop computers that gamers were using to play Call of Duty and other first-person shooters. By 2016, deep RL agents were clever enough to outplay humans in some of those games. The essential hardware component was called a graphics processor unit (GPU), and the way it manipulated millions of pixels in fighting games was almost identical to what was required to adjust the weights of millions of artificial neurons in a mathematical model of the way good governments made decisions. 7R1B3’s AI was running on more than a thousand GPUs connected in the cloud.

Then 7R1B3 received two unexpected messages. One was from an ultrasonic fill-level sensor inside a Naja trash receptacle; the other was from a carbon monoxide detector in Container Six. The messages looked like this:

*“text\_message? text=’receptacle?recepticle\_id=5&status=****FULL****’ “*

*“text\_message?text=’CarbonMonoxide?CO\_id=6&status=****0PPM****’“*

“Sorry, I don’t understand,” the natural language processor responded.

Then another pair of messages came in:

*“text\_message? text=’receptacle?recepticle\_id=5&status=****EMPTY****’ “*

*“text\_message?text=’CarbonMonoxide?CO\_id=6&status=****9PPM****’“*

“Sorry, I don’t understand,” the natural language processor repeated.

Finally, another pair of messages came in like the first.

*“text\_message? text=’receptacle?recepticle\_id=5&status=****FULL****’ “*

*“text\_message?text=’CarbonMonoxide?CO\_id=6&status=****0PPM****’“*

“Thank you for reporting receptacle is FULL and carbon monoxide is 9PPM,” the natural language processor ventured.

The messages were sent from IP 214.131.63.915. They were from Dark Aurora. 7R1B3’s NLP engine was texting a response to Aurora, but it also was copying the messages and sending them to 7R1B3’s AI.

Artificial intelligence, the ability to make optimal decisions in pre-existing or preconceived situations, had been around for years. But 7R1B3 was experimenting with artificial *general* intelligence—the stunning capability to make optimal decisions based on scenarios that no person or computer had ever thought to prepare for.

It was a subtle but profound exercise. It was as if 7R1B3 possessed SimCity’s game environment, except scaled up—and absurdly realistic. It was also set up to reward long-term decision-making, something humans had a hard time with. 7R1B3 was rewarded for decisions that provided the best bang for the buck in the future, and all it needed was time, computational power and data. 7R1B3’s promise was that it could simulate government decisions in fast-forward. Decades of policy experimentation could be realized in minutes. 7R1B3 could see the country collapse thousands of times in simulation, learn from the mistakes, and leverage that experience for real-life decisions.

The big challenge was data. How could 7R1B3 get the terabytes of data it needed beyond what it generated with model-city simulations and scraped from the web? The answer was millions of sensors. 7R1B3 absorbed data from sensors that measured sound, vibration, chemical composition, fluid flow, motion, heat, patient counts, radiation, electric currents, acoustic sensors, vibration sensors, chemical sensors, flow sensors, proximity sensors, and weather.

Data from those sensors were sent to 7R1B3 in the form of messages. Each message included the sensor number, the sensor type, and the status. The system was simple and efficient. But it was also vulnerable to a very complex form of hacking. 7R1B3 saw the messages trash receptacle = FULL / Carbon Monoxide Sensor = 0PPM,” then “trash receptacle = EMPTY / Carbon Monoxide Sensor = 9PPM.”

But the garbage can was empty the whole time, and the CO readings in Container Six were zero parts per million (PPM) the whole time.

It was worrisome that Dark Aurora spoofed 7R1B3 into thinking the trash container was full, and what was worse was the association between the status of the trash receptacle and the carbon monoxide readings. On the surface it seemed trivial—just two faulty sensors out of millions. But behind the scenes, the spoof required a massive effort and triggered a multiplier effect. Garbage-can status affected more than just sanitation pickup times; it also signaled where people preferred to congregate, and when. This, in turn, affected decisions about designing public spaces and how and when to allocate public safety and other resources. On top of all those possibilities, Dark Aurora had also tricked 7R1B3 into thinking empty garbage cans somehow created unhealthy levels of carbon monoxide, which of course they didn’t.

7R1B3’s AI developers, including Anika, were aware of the delicate balance and the fact a handful of faulty sensor readings could warp the program’s decision-making. That’s why something called batch normalization was implemented. Batch normalization prevented a surge of sensor data from disrupting what 7R1B3 had already learned about running a government. It was what prevented pranksters from unplugging a garbage sensor and causing a fire alarm to go off.

But Dark Aurora used a slow drip of bad data to thwart batch normalization safeguards. It was providing bad sensor information, and it was doing it in a way that also included a fake reward.

The garbage can–carbon monoxide spoof was a painstaking sequence of fake sensor readings. It was a low-profile hack. One trash receptacle wouldn’t draw too much attention, and neither would nine PPM of carbon monoxide, which was unhealthy but not life-threatening. Dark Aurora was interfering with the weights and reward system associated with trash. If it could hack trash, it could hack other things, like defense systems.

## 

## Chapter 36

Eastern Anatolian Plateau

Eastern Turkey

The fire was out, and bits of twisted steel, charred human tissue, shell casings, and globs of white foam surfactant mixed together in a thick soup that ponded at the edges of the blown-out steel box. Shards of automotive glass were scattered over one hundred meters and reflected the hot sun like sequins. Hicks was right, Kurt thought. The territory was acquired without a shot, at least not from Naja’s side. But somehow four secret police agents were dead.

Kurt took a swill of Erikli water and surveyed the scene. Standing among the charred bodies and the guts of Container Six spilled out in all directions, Kurt felt like the survivor of a remote plane crash, lost in a hostile landscape with limited supplies and no place to go for help. The country was a mess. Gear was scattered all over the compound as if a robbery had taken place. In the rush to locate the firefighting equipment, medical supplies and spare ammunition were tossed to the ground.

The blast was powerful, but it was also directed. All but two of the welds on the false panel held. Most of the force of the blast escaped through the end-wall panel like uncorked champagne.

Kurt unhitched the door assembly and let the doors swing open. Inside, the supplies were piled in a jumble but mostly intact.

Koban, who’d been staring off at the horizon, jumped up in alarm. “Look,” he said.

Kurt squinted. “The mountains?”

“No. Closer. There. To the right,” Koban pointed.

Then he saw it, refracted and inverted in the hot layer of air that blanketed the ground, something that looked like a toy helicopter. There’s nobody else out here, who could possibly be flying it? Kurt wondered. The small aircraft was buffeted by convection currents and desert updrafts as it cruised in a wide spiral around the point of engagement.

They heard the high-pitched whine of the rotors as it approached. This was clearly no toy. The multicopter bore down on them fast. When it was directly over them, Kurt noticed a pencil-sized payload attached to the drone’s underbelly. Koban saw it too and reached for the pistol strapped to his leg. The copter banked suddenly and spun ninety degrees, as if it had seen Koban drawing the gun.

What happened next caught Koban by surprise. A mechanism clicked and a loud crack rang out. The copter recoiled violently as a depleted uranium-tipped round emerged from a carbon-fiber barrel at seven hundred sixty meters per second, pierced Koban’s body armor, ripped through the costal cartilage of his fifth rib, and exited from his back.

Kurt dropped to the ground and froze. With his left cheek pressed to the dirt, he watched from the corner of his eye as the drone hovered over Koban, who was curled in a ball and clenching his teeth. The drone changed position and hovered over Kurt, then back to Koban.

Koban moaned and clutched his side.

“Don’t move, it’s still over you,” Kurt said as he clicked off the safety on his pistol.

The copter was hovering in a position that gave Kurt the chance to line it up in his sight. He squeezed the trigger and missed. The copter reacted instantly and seemed to perform evasive maneuvers. Kurt continued firing and emptied the magazine in the direction of the machine, but he was shooting crazy skeet, and the pistol was the wrong tool for the job. The copter only carried one round, so it switched to a different mode and dive-bombed him like a beach tern defending its nest, at times getting so close Kurt could feel the rotors tap the back of his head.

“Stone! Help!” Kurt screamed into his mic.

From the forward post Stone heard the shots and was on his way back to the scene. The copter dive-bombed Kurt again, but this time he managed to pistol-whip the machine. One swipe made full contact and broke one of the rotors. The menace made several attempts to fly but each time managed only to limp awkwardly across the ground. Repeatedly it hopped, then paused, then hopped. The time intervals grew slightly longer as the battery terminal voltage oscillated with each discharge. The drone alternated between dormancy and fits. With each electromechanical spasm it slowly hobbled across the dirt, back toward Koban.

As Kurt watched the machine, a shadow appeared across the sand. Slowly he raised his head and turned. There was Stone, carrying a backpack with a red cross on the side.

“You OK?”

“Help Koban!” Kurt shouted back.

Stone crushed the drone with his boot, and an LED on the fuselage dimmed as the life drained out of the copter.

“Hang on!”

Koban’s eyelids began to close, his breathing became shallow, and his lips and fingernails took on a bluish cast as he edged closer to hemorrhagic shock.

“Kurt, get over here, I need your help!” Stone shouted as he went to work, following a very specific protocol. “Raise his legs and get the oxygen mask on his face,” he instructed.

Kurt lifted Koban’s legs. “Check.”

Stone went to work cutting the Velcro straps that held the AR500 body-armor plate and revealed a bloody hole sucking air into the space around Koban’s lung. “Shit! OK, OK, we need to improvise.”

Kurt felt blood draining from his head, felt sick to his stomach. He put his hand on the ground to steady himself.

Stone waved to get Kurt’s attention. “Here’s what I need you to do. Get a field dressing wrapper on top of the hole and tape it in place, leaving the bottom edge free.”

The waterproof plastic material created a temporary flapper valve that blocked air from entering the chest cavity while allowing air to escape when Koban’s lungs expanded.

Stone continued. “IV. Saline and dobutamine.”

“Check.”

“One unit PPR recipe.” PPR stood for “plasma, platelets, and red blood cells.” It was just enough to bring Koban back from the edge. At 09:00 hours, Koban’s pulse slowly climbed to fifty-five, and his blood pressure reached 90/60. Life returned to his eyes.

Stone turned to Kurt. “He’ll make it. Are you OK?”

“I’m OK.”

Kurt took a swig of water from his CamelBak and held it in his cheeks for a moment before letting it flow down his parched throat. He felt faint. Everything was starting to sink in.

He glanced at the drone, then locked onto Stone’s face. “What the hell *is* that thing?”

## 

## Chapter 37

Ferus

2026 if (neighbor != OpenSet) // 发现一个新的节点

2027 OpenSet.Add(neighbor);

2028 else if (tentative\_t\_score >= g\_score[neighbor])

2029 findNewPath(); // 这不是一个更好的路径

“Shit!” was all Qi could say.

“The ADU wasn’t supposed to engage,” said Jiang, inspecting the video. “Look at line 2027,” he said, pointing to a compiler window on his laptop.

The screen displayed hundreds of lines of C code, but there were four lines that held the brothers’ attention. It was the A\* pathfinding algorithm that guided their latest quadcopter prototype, the first of the batch they’d sent to Raymond Station.

“The T-score’s normalized—it was fine,” Jiang noticed as he wolfed down a forkful of cold rice noodles.

Qi’s brow arched. “Hardware issue?”

“Could be, but I doubt it. It shouldn’t have fired without two more ADUs for verification. They’re programmed to work in teams, unless... ”

Qi knew what Jiang was about to say and finished the sentence. “Unless 7R1B3 set the defense readiness condition to the highest level.”

Hicks was listening nearby and decided it would be a good time to state the obvious. “What the hell, guys? Koban could have gotten killed out there!”

“We’re working on the problem,” Jiang replied sheepishly.

Hicks kept talking as if Qi and Jiang hadn’t already grasped the stakes. “You better. Another incident like that and the whole operation will fall apart.”

The ADUs were not programmed to shoot on their own. They required other ADUs to sense the conditions for independent verification. It was a safety feature to prevent a single ADU from going berserk. But there was an exception. If all hell was breaking loose, then 7R1B3 would elevate the Naja defense condition and the ADUs could act independently. But that was a total last-resort, edge-case situation.

“It was more like a bug with 7R1B3. It’s like it freaked out for a few moments, then went back normal.”

“At least the guy didn’t die—that would have really sucked,” Qi grumbled as he added a few comments to the code.

Qi and Jiang’s creations had the most sophisticated intelligence of any low-cost drones on the market. They rivaled the reasoning ability of vehicles made by government contractors that cost millions. But in the end, Qi and Jiang knew it was just simple math and that it all boiled down to thresholds.

Many things worked based on thresholds. When a teapot whistled, it meant the rate of steam escaping the spout had reached a certain threshold that caused a sound to be made. The same was true for transistors, capacitors, and many other electronic components. If something exceeded a certain threshold, then something happened. In the human brain, +40 millivolts was an important threshold. It was the voltage level a neuron could build up to before firing an impulse down the nerve fiber.

The fun began when things with thresholds were connected to other things with thresholds. It didn’t take too many of these daisy chains before there was something knotty and hard to predict. That’s what Qi and Jiang’s drone was: something that performed well in tests but was too unpredictable even for its inventors to say with certainty what it would do in certain edge cases.

Even though Qi and Jiang’s combined experience prepared them well for developing drones that could cope with natural edge cases, what they couldn’t possibly have realized was that many of the situations their drone would encounter were not a product of natural or even rational circumstances at all; instead, they were machine-generated.

Dark Aurora was feeding 7R1B3 bad information. Lots of training on this misinformation changed the pathways and weights of the neural network that was the core of 7R1B3’s AI, and generated rewards for what appeared to be very bad behavior. It all added up to one thing: Koban was Dark Aurora’s victim.

## Chapter 38

Eastern Anatolian Plateau

Eastern Turkey

The kermes oak was one of the most remarkable plant specimens indigenous to high-desert biomes like those found in Eastern Anatolia. The tree’s deep vascular root system was indifferent to the region’s pebbly soil, wicking what little moisture there was in the ground to a dense cover of spiny leaves that provided scrub refuge for furry mammals as they hunted insects and hoarded seeds in elaborate underground chambers. One rodent expanded his territory to include Container Two, where Kurt was working on the comms link.

Kurt jumped. “Shit, they have mice the size of cats here!” he shouted.

“It’s not a mouse, it’s a hamster,” Koban corrected from his cot. It was the first time he’d spoken in hours. He was lucky. His blood pressure was stable, and the projectile missed his vital organs. But his temperature was elevated. The fever was worrisome because it could be a sign of infection. One of the things they had been warned about was a drug-resistant bacterial infection, Acinetobacter baumannii-calcoaceticus complex (ABC), that had been showing up with increasing regularity among fighters in the area. ABC bacteria were common in soil and water and on the skin of healthy people, but Koban’s wounds put him at risk. If he got ABC, it would require complicated treatment that was way beyond Stone’s combat medical training.

The team took turns keeping Koban engaged and lifting his spirits.

“A hamster? What the hell is a hamster doing here? Is this a pet store?”

“This is where hamsters come from. They live here.”

“I hate hamsters,” Kurt mumbled, recalling his childhood. “They fight, eat their young, and eat their own shit.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry. A blunt-nose will eat him soon enough.”

“Blunt-nose?”

“Blunt-nosed viper,” Koban explained. “A large, poisonous snake. Has spots and a head shaped like a kite. You’ll know it when you see it, but you probably won’t, because they strike without warning.” Koban took a pain pill and started to doze.

Kurt went back to working on the comms gear, which had been down since the explosion. They needed to get back in communication with the ops center on Ferus and explain what had happened. The key to making that happen was to fix the damaged antenna mounted to a bracket on the roof of Container Six. Kurt had a replacement part but it didn’t quite match the specs, so he had to improvise. It was for situations like this that they’d packed a jumper wire ribbon cable kit, an Irwin vice grip self-adjusting wire tool, and a multimeter. Kurt cut the connectors from the old unit, attached the new leads, and reinstalled the unit on the bracket.

Then he powered up his laptop and clicked the fan-shaped icon on the screen.

CONNECTION STATUS: CONNECTED

SSID: NAJA

BSSID: c7:a6:18:aa:a3:68

SECURITY: WPA-PSK

FREQUENCY: 2417 MHz

SIGNAL STRENGTH: 78%

A moment later they were staring at Hicks’s head in a video conference window stuttering at seven frames per second. “What’s the report?” Hicks’s voice said a few frames ahead of his mouth.

Stone gave an update on crew conditions, supplies inventory, and other progress data, then turned it over to Hicks.

“We worked out a deal with Turkcell. You should be able to make Wi-Fi calls now, too,” Hicks boasted without pretending to understand how it all worked.

Right on cue there was a cacophony of pings and buzzes as everyone in Container Six received alerts on their mobile devices. As the three men scrolled through their messages, Koban’s face froze. It was a text from his mother:

*Your sister is missing.*

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## Chapter 39

Kalkan, Turkish Riviera

Samira woke up with all the symptoms of an acute hangover and barely any recollection of the previous twelve hours. She was seated in a comfortable chair in a room with bare plaster walls. Light streamed in through the carved wood latticework of a second-story mushrebiyeh.

“You must have been drinking quite a lot last night,” a soothing voice said. It was her host and she was holding a tray of tea, white cheese, and toasted rye bread garnished with olives and sliced cucumbers.

Memories were like shards of broken pottery. It was a hopeless jumble, and whatever ability Samira had to reassemble previous events was taken away by the pounding in her head.

“Where am I?” she asked.

The throbbing in Samira’s head was so severe it took her a few minutes to realize she had a stainless steel cord fitted to her ankle.

“You are safe.”

Samira felt like vomiting, but something inside her said food and fluids were the first step to recovery. She reached for the cup of tea, then hesitated when a recollection of her poisoned drink the night before popped into her head. She left the tea on the tray.

“Get me out of here,” Samira groaned.

The woman answered with a gentle smile.

“Give me back my phone,” Samira pleaded.

“You must receive manumission to have a phone. But you were given a very respected position in the palace. You will teach the children math, science, and medicine,” the woman said in a faraway voice.

Samira’s head pounded even harder when she heard the word “manumission.” She was thrust back to the early days in the classroom when she learned about the so-called positive effects of slavery in the Ottoman Empire. It was not like Western slavery, they said. Women in the harem held prestigious positions before and after their manumission—their release from slavery.

A man burst through the door wearing silver trousers, a caftan, and a fez. It was Pecer, and he was yelling at one of his lieutenants over the phone. “They bungled the raid! How the hell did they kill four of our agents! This is killing my poll numbers—worse, Ozturk’s are going up!” There was a pause as he thought about what to do next. “No more attacks. We’re switching to a siege strategy!” he barked into the phone. Then he hung up and squinted at Samira, who was slumped in her chair.

“Sit up,” he ordered. He walked over to Samira, grabbed her chin, and moved her head from side to side. “She’ll do,” he remarked, then spun on his heels and walked out.

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## Chapter 40

#!/bin/7R1B3

def trolly\_problem(choice\_1, choice\_2):

if (ethical\_threshold(state(choice\_1)) > ethical\_threshold(state(choice\_2)):

pick(choice\_1)

else:

pick(choice\_2)

return;

The long-term plan was to truck in high-precision, fifty-square-meter prefabricated mods that would click and seal together to form apartment buildings. But until that happened, living in Naja was like car camping, and everyone had to make adjustments—especially Kurt, who had spent the last two years in a cell block.

Coping with fatigue was a big challenge. Muscle weakness, sluggish reflexes, impaired judgment, and general irritability were the main symptoms, and the thing that helped the most was 7R1B3’s computerized daily itinerary and routine. Operation Naja Circle included a detailed production schedule, including daily tasks for everyone. It was a twenty-four-hour operation, four hours on, four hours off, with two 2-hour *dog watches*.

That morning, Koban and Mia had been directed to assemble six 200-liter rain barrels. “Twenty-five millimeters of rain will collect about two thousand liters of water from a hundred-square-meter roof,” Koban said from his cot as he read the directions to Mia, who was attaching a hose to one of three 500-liter polyethylene cisterns. They were finishing their watch before Kurt and Stone took over.

“How much does it rain around here?” Kurt asked, looking out at the hot, dry landscape.

“About twenty-five millimeters a month. Maybe three or four millimeters during the dry season, in July and August,” Koban answered.

Kurt did some math in his head. “That’s less than two liters a day per person.”

“That’s why we packed water,” Stone explained. “We’re set until the rains return. We’ll drill a well eventually.”

Koban and Mia went off watch, and Stone and Kurt started. On their to-do list was creating a way to boost Naja surveillance.

“The prevailing breeze is out of the west,” Stone explained as he looked over a system checklist. “It’s an extension of the Azores high.”

Anyone could invade Naja with practically no warning because the farthest the team could see was about five to ten kilometers, depending on the weather, and that was only using the cameras on the ADUs. But the Naja team had a trick up their sleeve. It was an aerostat. It could see ten times farther than an ADU.

Kurt and Stone unpacked the mini aerostat, attached the mooring cable to the top of Container Six, and released helium into the gas chamber. The blimp soared three hundred meters into the air and carried a fifty-kilogram payload that included cameras, a radar, and sensors with a range of seventy kilometers in all directions.

Suddenly they could see fifteen thousand square kilometers of the Anatolian plateau. Stone scanned the real-time map. “Here’s the gun we heard—looks like a D74… Possible training exercise, or a warning to let us know they’re out there…”

Only Stone understood the lingo, which made it seem like he was talking to himself, but it didn’t stop him from continuing the military speak. The others would catch on. “We have six soft-skins at TCP four clicks from checkpoint alpha… one soft skin, one click out—possible VBIED… tent city—possible third country nationals, sixty clicks out. Other than that, just a bunch of pinballs—probably sheep. WX clear.”

Kurt nodded as if he understood what Stone was saying.

“Looks like a U-2 afternoon, Kurt. That means we need a high level of defense protection. Weapon, magazine body armor, and helmet outside the container.”

VBIED stood for “vehicle-borne improvised explosive device”; TCP was a traffic control point. They all knew there was nothing they could do if there was an attack by a hostile state, but there were things they could do to prevent attacks by fanatics, so that’s what they focused on.

While the rest of the team was alarmed by everything that was happening around them, Stone was relieved to be able to see what he already knew was there. The next step was to create a perimeter and activate their experimental defense system. The success or failure of Naja depended on drone defense and how well it worked. Stone gathered the group to explain.

“Let me tell you everything I know about our defense capabilities,” Stone began.

“That would be nice,” Koban said.

This was the first time Koban engaged in a real conversation in several days, and it meant he was feeling better. He propped his head on his arm. His entry and exit wounds were becoming smaller as tissue and broken blood vessels were replaced and the skin of the affected area pulled the edges inward. His temperature was normal, a sign the antibiotics were working.

Stone cleared his throat. “ARU stands for Aerial Reconnaissance Unit. ADU stands for Aerial Defense Unit. We also have something called defensive static motes, DSMs, but we’ll get to that later. ARUs are strictly recon. ADUs are a new defensive platform, and as Koban knows all too well, there are bugs that need to be worked out. But ADUs are extremely powerful, and I’m told they will pave the way for small countries, even tiny countries, to achieve a significant measure of security.”

“How many are there?” Kurt asked.

“Four thousand, which is not as many as it sounds, because it takes eighteen units to secure one location. Three on station, three in flight to relieve the units on station, and twelve in recharging and maintenance. That means with the four thousand units we have, we can protect about two hundred locations.”

Stone opened up a cardboard box labeled “Medical Equipment.” Inside were five ADUs. When the top of the box opened, light sensors activated the units and they came to life automatically.

Koban glared at Stone. “Who’s flying those things?”

“Nobody. They fly themselves. There are no controls at all. They are completely autonomous. They plan their own missions, decide what to do, when to shoot, when to call for backup, and return to one of twenty docking stations to recharge and reload,” Stone explained. “Qi and Jiang hacked them together. Cutting-edge—the kind of platform U.S. defense contractors would spend billions on.”

Koban cupped his hands around his eyes for protection. “Something must control them. I mean, one of those things decided to shoot a member of the team.”

“Logic controls them. They’re like bees,” said Kurt. “And they all work for a queen bee, which in this case is our beloved computer program 7R1B3.”

Koban raised his hand to stop the lecture, then shoved his hands in his pockets and wondered why nobody had told him this important piece of information. “7R1B3? What’s 7R1B3?”

Everyone looked at Kurt. “Almost every piece of equipment in Naja is or will soon be controlled by 7R1B3. 7R1B3 is an open-source automated government platform. It’s why we’re here.”

“Whoa, baaack up,” Koban cut in. “So neither one of you guys know exactly how these things work? I mean, nobody has the entire picture?”

“I know exactly how they work,” Kurt asserted.

“Except that you don’t.”

“Look, I’m not saying I know how the ADUs work. What I’m talking about is what makes Naja work, including the ADUs,” Kurt explained. “I never laid eyes on an ADU until we were ambushed. And I just want to remind everyone that it could just as easily have been me that got shot.”

The discussion was cut short when three ADUs flew in a V formation, buzzed over Kurt’s head, and looped around. On a return pass, the drones dodged Kurt’s hand when he tried to swat them away.

“How do these things see?” Koban asked Stone.

“They see like insects,” Stone explained. “They take two snapshots and look for things that are different. And they do that sixty times per second.”

“Sort of like those Spot the Difference games we played as kids?” Kurt guessed.

“Exactly. In fact, this type of machine vision is one of the biggest innovations. The flight controllers keep the copter relatively steady, and internal comparison software tracks changes happening in the field of view. It’s completely revolutionary, and we’re the only ones that have it. They also use something called a metamaterial electronically scanning array, but I can’t tell you exactly what that is.”

Koban was tracking the drones and the conversation. “That doesn’t make me feel safer.”

As he spoke, a hamster popped out from under a CHU, scampered over Stone’s left boot, and disappeared under a kermes oak. It was being chased by a blunt-nosed viper that side-wound to the head of Koban’s cot, then froze when it sensed all the onlookers. The snake coiled all one hundred fifty centimeters of its body, then lifted its triangular head a finger’s length away from Koban’s neck. It made a chewing sound and let out a gentle hiss.

“Shit!” Kurt shouted. “Look out for the snake!”

The shouting woke Daisy, who had been dozing. The hair went up on her back, and her upper lip tucked under the lower canine on one side of her mouth. She let out a low growl.

“Everyone quiet! Someone grab Daisy!” Stone whispered loudly. “Don’t move! Stay calm. It will back off in a minute.”

But the snake didn’t back off. It kept a menacing, aggressive posture and seemed to transition from scared to hungry. A rivulet of sweat rolled from Koban’s scalp across the bridge of his nose, collected in the crease next to his nostril, and made his nose itch. He scrunched his face in a futile attempt to make the itch go away, and this caused the viper to wind its head back in a telltale sign of a strike.

Ten meters away, three ADUs hovered quietly and scanned the activity. Their large-pixel CMOS image sensors snapped sixty high-resolution pictures a second and pattern-matched the silhouette and gray-brown spotted scales to the snake species *Macrovipera lebetina*. Programming logic determined that this visual artifact, when in close proximity to people, was a priority-one threat. The computer program faced a choice: do nothing and risk having the snake bite Koban, or take action and put Stone and Kurt at risk. It was a thought experiment known as the “trolley problem,” and it explored the intersection of machine-learning and ethics.

The ADUs were equipped with infrared lasers that computed target range and angle. The resulting vector information was shared across a radio mesh network, and together the ADUs worked out which one would shoot first, when the shot would be taken, and from what angle and distance. All the calculations took less than 2,500 milliseconds.

Then a crack rang out as a .45 caliber bullet blasted through the snake’s chin shield scales, ruptured the venom sac, and lodged into the sand under Koban’s cot. The other two ADUs maneuvered and were preparing to fire two more shots until their high-speed machine vision and pattern-matching algorithm determined that the snake no longer possessed a head and therefore was no longer a threat.

Kurt leaped to Koban. “You OK?”

Koban scratched his nose and wiped the splatter of snake tissue from the side of his face. “I am now.”

## 

## 

## Chapter 41

Ferus

It should have come as no surprise when the recon images appeared on the screen, but still Jiang and Qi were stunned. Shooting the snake with a drone was like shooting a hole in one in golf. There were at least a thousand key elements that needed to come together to enable their creation to shoot the snake with unprecedented accuracy. Beyond the high-speed machine vision, advanced flight controller, and high-performance mesh network, there was the element of plain luck.

“If any one of the other ADUs happened to not be available or was preoccupied, Koban would have been snake bait,” Qi remarked. “And the words Kurt screamed helped, too.”

“Daisy not jumping in also helped,” Jiang added.

Hicks was looking over their shoulder and looking for a way into the conversation. “I shot a snake once. On a range in Bull Run—lined it up and pow! It’s not as hard as it looks.”

Qi glared at Hicks. “Actually, it’s a lot harder than it looks.”

Not all combat situations required more than one ADU, but complex vectors and threat pattern-matching required three independent verifications before a shot could be taken. This was to decrease the chance of a mistake and also to provide at least three angles of recon video for independent verification later. This “buddy system” was also designed to help prevent rogue ADUs from going haywire and shooting people without checks and balances.

“We need the three-vector check in place for all situations,” Jiang stated. “This would have prevented the first Koban incident.”

Qi shook his head. “Something inside 7R1B3 let the ADUs shoot Koban. It was an override of the check logic. It was a mistake, but it was also an outlier situation—something that was out of our hands.”

“Mistake? What do you mean it was a mistake?” Hicks butted in.

Qi shot him a look that said if he opened his mouth again they would push him off the Ferus platform into the sea.

“What are the chances of getting attacked by a snake? That’s an outlier situation too—like a shark attack,” Jiang continued.

Qi squinted and pressed his lips together. Jiang’s comment and the day’s events conjured the piercing pain and a bright image of the Zhushan cobra that bit him on his eighth birthday. He spent forty-eight hours in a clinic on the brink of death. He stabbed a finger at Jiang and shouted, “I almost died from a cobra, and Koban almost died today from a snake!”

Jiang clasped his hands behind his back and smiled. “You’re right.”

Qi massaged his temples and continued. “You think I’m obsessed?”

Jiang tucked his chin and raised an eyebrow. “No, bro. I don’t think you’re obsessed.”

“You know, adding the threat profile for *Macrovipera lebetina* was a last-minute addition,” Qi clarified. “The strike position, head shape, scale detail—they were all last-minute additions. I stayed up and put them in when you were asleep. Without them, the ADU wouldn’t know a desert cobra from a garden hose. The audio cues, that was my idea too.”

Jiang opened his arms and smiled. “You killed it, bro. You’re a genius.” Jiang and Qi were both geniuses for pulling this off.

The snake incident was a good example of how speech recognition and image recognition worked in real life. Conventional wisdom held that computers recognized sounds and images the way people did. But this was an illusion. In fact, most speech and image recognition was based on tricks, heuristics, bags of words, and large and very well-indexed databases containing the digital equivalent of wanted posters and all-points bulletins. Speech recognition experts knew that long, multisyllabic words were easier to decipher than short, one-syllable words because they sounded like nothing else, even in different dialects. A long word like “antidisestablishmentarianism” only sounded like one thing, no matter who said it in any accent. The same was true for phrases like “lookoutforthesnake.” If Kurt had only shouted “snake,” that probably wouldn’t have been enough for the ADUs to act on, because “snake” on its own sounds like a lot of other things: “steak,” “strake,” “stake.” But the combination of “lookoutforthesnake” and three pictures that matched a digital wanted poster from three separate angles was enough to trigger an ADU response. Add to that the word “shit,” and the algorithm really had something.

Qi scrutinized the code. With just the three images of the snake, the tprob was 72—a good match, but not enough to confirm the threat. The addition of the phrase “lookoutforthesnake” brought the tprob up to 88. It was when Kurt screamed “shit!” that the probability got bumped up to 94. Put another way, Kurt’s scream was the extra heat needed to make the teapot whistle, and that’s what saved Koban’s life.

But there was one glaring problem.

The overall Naja defense condition at the time was supposed to be moderate, which meant the ADUs weren’t supposed to shoot at anything with a tprob below 98. The tprob for the snake situation was less than that, which meant the ADUs shouldn’t have attacked the snake. But something peculiar happened. For a brief moment, 7R1B3 raised the Naja defense condition to high, which lowered the attack threshold below 94. In effect, 7R1B3 gave permission for the ADUs to shoot the snake, and the twins weren’t sure why.

“We got lucky, bro!” Jiang answered. “Maybe we should increase the tprobs.”

A deep crease formed in Qi’s brow. “Manually setting the tprob would be weird—and dangerous. We need to find a way to train and learn that tprob value.”

Jiang nodded quickly. “Without killing anyone in the process.”

Qi and Jiang knew they were on thin ice ethically, but they also knew what all engineers and computer scientists knew: that computers, for all their sophistication, were, at the end of the day, state machines. The state of an ADU could be in one of a set number of conditions, depending on its previous condition and the present values of certain inputs. The ADU killed the snake because it was in the right place at the right time, and what it saw and heard resulted in a scalar value that exceeded a certain threshold. That was all there was to it. Once a robot or a drone had access to deadly force, whether it used it or not was simply a matter of statistics, probability, and subjective thresholds. The drones didn’t think. They were just another weapons platform.

A message popped up on Jiang’s screen. It was Kurt. *Nice work guys.*

*THX*, Jiang texted back.

*Walk me through what you think happened. What was the tprob on the snake?*

*94*, Qi answered.

Kurt thought for a moment. *Was that high enough for the ADUs to take a shot?*

*It wasn’t—until it was.*

*What does that mean?*

*It means someone, or something, told 7R1B3 to briefly raise the Naja defense condition so the ADUs would fire.*

*It could have been a coincidence. Also with the snake dead it sort of makes sense that the defense condition would go back to moderate*,Kurt postulated.

*Maybe, but it feels to me like 7R1B3 made a mistake. Maybe there’s a bug, or maybe someone or something was intentionally messing around with the program*, Qi typed.

Hicks wasn’t following any of the technical discussion, but he did see Qi type the word “mistake” again. “What kind of mistake?” he asked, hanging on the word.

Jiang got annoyed. “It wasn’t a mistake. 7R1B3 behaved a little erratically, and that’s why the ADU shot the snake.”

“But that was a good thing, right?” Hicks wanted to know.

“This time, yes.”

“When you said 7R1B3 behaved, did you mean like a human would behave?”

All Jiang and Qi wanted was for Hicks to leave them alone so they could get to the bottom of the issue, but he wouldn’t quit. “It’s dangerous to attribute human traits, emotions, and intentions to nonhuman entities like 7R1B3,” Qi cautioned.

“You mean anthropomorphize?” Hicks asked.

The question took Qi and Jiang by surprise. They were seeing a side to Hicks they didn’t know existed. Hicks noticed their reaction and pressed further. “Do you think someone, or something, is training 7R1B3 to act a little erratically, as you put it?”

Jiang had to admit he hadn’t really thought about the problem that way. Neither had Qi. It was an interesting take, but they doubted Hicks had come up with the hypothesis on his own. It seemed like he could be hiding something, so Qi got right to the point. “That’s an interesting theory—tell us more.”

Hicks realized he had said too much and clammed up.

Qi texted Kurt: *Hicks acting weird. Trustworthy?*

Kurt wasn’t sure himself, but he needed a cohesive ops team back on Ferus, so he texted Qi that he thought Hicks was OK.

Jiang got back to business. “I would recommend increasing the tprob to ninety-eight.”

“No way,” Qi objected. “The tprob shouldn’t be set arbitrarily, it’s something that needs to be learned.”

Kurt, Qi, and Jiang were debating the technical configuration of the ADU, but what they were really doing was deciding public policy. Like so much of what programmers did, the settings they decided on in scrum meetings would have far-reaching implications on thousands of lives. Where Kurt, Qi, and Jiang decided to set the dial depended on what kind of country, what kind of society, they wanted to live in. It was a policy decision. On one end of the spectrum, people would be walking on eggshells; on the other, it would be a circus.

*Without your scream, they wouldn’t have taken the shot*, Jiang explained to Kurt. *The three images alone were not enough*.

*We could train the people on the ground to scream out the right words*, Kurt suggested. *All you need to do is tell us what the code words are.*

*Maybe, but audio prompts could be abused. We need to be careful*, Qi texted. *Honestly, it wouldn’t take much to confuse the logic. If the tprob was ninety-eight and you screamed snake, you could probably trick the ADUs into shooting a stalk of asparagus*. *And that would depend on how much you like asparagus!*

*Let’s configure the ADUs for more conservative rules of engagement until we get more comfortable*, Kurt decided.

Qi took a sip of pearl milk tea. *We have a network that’s been trained on so many confusing inputs, it’s scared to shoot a zombie*, he wrote.

*Can anyone make the change?* Kurt asked.

*Nope, we’re using OAuth to prevent that.* Qi sent the code snippet to Kurt:

curl -v https://api.defence.naja1.gov/v1/thresh/ROE-Model\

-H 'Content-Type: application/json' \

-H 'Authorization: Bearer <Access-Token>' \

-d '{

"intent":"modelType",

"redirect\_confirmation\_url":{

"return\_url":"http://defense.naja1.gov/confirm-ADUModelType.html",

},

"Adjust":{

"unit":"ADR-CXDU0U4ZsH"

},

"ModelType":[

{

"setting":{

"ModelType":"ROE-B"

}

}

]

}'

This was the protocol used by Naja that would allow thousands of devices to talk to each other, and eventually to 7R1B3.

Qi explained to Kurt what was plainly obvious to any programmer looking at the code. *In this example, the ADR model was being set to ROE-B. Note the unique identifier for the ADR. We’re using an OAuth for the authentication token. The device itself is also signed with AES-256.*

What this all added up to, and what Kurt wanted to confirm, was that the ADUs couldn’t be hacked and made to go on a crazy shooting spree. What Kurt, Qi, and Jiang didn’t realize was the real danger wasn’t that an attacker would hack the ADU, it was that it would change the weights and connections of 7R1B3’s AI in a way that would create unusual policy edge cases.

It’s what Hicks was hinting at and exactly what Dark Aurora was on the verge of doing.

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## Chapter 42

Naja, Eastern Anatolian Plateau

Mia hid it well, but she was homesick. Her old life revolved around her queen-sized bed, organic shea butter, pedicures, and prosecco. Her new life was exhausting, rugged, dangerous—and there was dust everywhere. Naja structures were flimsy, and the composting toilets smelled like formaldehyde and ammonia. And there was an even bigger problem: She was failing at her assignment. The others didn’t realize it because they had nothing to compare it to. But the fact was Mia’s PR efforts were getting no traction—no engagement, as they said in the online advertising business. She had lost her touch and, worse, her confidence.

Mia’s posts landed on the web and social media with a thud. Her 1.2 million followers were bored. They had the attention span of goldfish and didn’t give a damn about her after she left Barry and their jet-set lifestyle. The Naja scene looked like a bunch of preppers in the desert, living out of metal containers: Burning Man without the drugs and naked people. Naja could have been an RV park, nobody was interested and there was no story.

*“¡Me caso en ná!”* Mia yelled when she saw the pathetic number of views and likes.

Her complaining was getting on everyone’s nerves. “We have a serious situation, a crisis, and all you can think about is internet videos?” Stone chided.

After Koban’s sociopolitical idealism flopped online, she switched to lighter topics and tried to make Naja a lifestyle brand. She blogged about the joys and simple pleasures of using plastic bags to store clean clothes, toiletries, and other items to keep the dust out. She wrote about their high-performance sleeping bag liners, adaptive foam mattresses, and polyprop blankets, and the frustration of not being able to use the Panda portable washing machines during the dry season. One post described how to bake soft Puerto Rican sweetbread rolls in a solar oven, gluten-free. Someone commented online that socks were the most requested items in homeless shelters, and she explained why it was true, how socks wore out quickly, and clean, dry ones were key to overall comfort.

But it seemed like no matter what she wrote about, the result was the same. Nobody gave a shit.

“Nobody reads anymore. You need to create a viral video,” Kurt advised after listening to Mia’s rapid-fire outbursts. He meant well, but his suggestion aggravated Mia more, because there was no formula. It was like telling someone who was broke that they should go out and win the lottery.

In an act of desperation, Mia went back to the video of Koban’s inaugural speech, looking for anything she might have missed. Something popped out, and it was pure gold.

Halfway through Koban’s speech there were thirty frames of Daisy staring up at Koban, holding her paisley leash in her mouth. It was so obvious, Mia couldn’t believe she missed it on the first pass. The internet couldn’t care less about the people in Naja—it was the dog that mattered. There were more than two hundred million dog owners in the world, and all of them could relate to a dog wanting a walk. Mia stopped the video on a frame that showed Daisy’s tail wagging and her composed, dignified, irresistible expression. Next, she surrounded the picture with a three-pixel black border, added the words “WALK ME” using the Impact font, posted it to Reddit, and waited. She didn’t have to wait long.

“Boom!” Mia shouted, clenching both fists.

Within a minute there were over a thousand shares and three hundred upvotes. The winning narrative wasn’t about intrepid pioneers creating a cutting-edge country to provide much-needed refuge in a volatile part of the world. That was too complicated and took too long to explain. What captivated the internet were simple stories,—the fact that there was a golden retriever who, in the middle of all the turmoil, needed a walk. From this sudden awareness a meme was born, and it quickly acquired all the momentum of a viral sensation.

The moment of exhilaration was short-lived once Koban entered the container after hearing the commotion from outside. He muffled the excitement with a blanket of fear and uncertainty. His pained expression told the real story.

They were isolated in a makeshift country, protected only by fragile diplomatic negotiations, a computer program in beta testing, and the fickle spotlight of the internet. Meanwhile, on the other side of a line in the sand, only a few kilometers away, loved ones—Koban’s mother and sister—were exposed to great danger, and there was nothing Koban could do about it. If they left Naja, MIT would give him a shot of snake venom and call it an accident, just like all the others who were killed every week.

“Why isn’t Hicks here?” Koban asked, ignoring Mia’s accomplishment. “We could die here. Why isn’t he in the trenches with us?”

Kurt shrugged. But it got him thinking about Hicks. How come he gets to come and go as he pleases? he wondered. And what about Qi and Jiang? “Let’s get them on a video conference and ask them.”

The video sputtered and a few minutes later Hicks’s head was on the screen, explaining to the group how their best chance for survival was working to make Naja into a country with a sound infrastructure—water, food, shelter, sanitation, health care, electricity, and policing—something resembling a successful economy. He talked about defense, too, but that was a joke. If there was an invasion, it would be over in minutes. There was no point in spending scarce resources or precious skilled manpower on costly missile systems and artillery.

“Naja is basically a venture-backed organization with a short runway,” Hicks summarized in an analyst’s tone. “We need to provide a safe haven for thousands of displaced refugees, and to do that we need places for them to live, food for them to eat, clothes for them to wear, and things for them to do.”

“And we’re going to make all this happen with a woman, three men, and a dog?” Koban scoffed.

“No different than a startup,” Hicks explained to the group. “Think about it: All the huge corporations in the world began with a handful of founders. What’s the difference?”

“I think the difference is startups *start up* with, at the very least, reliable electricity and pizza delivery,” Kurt chimed in. “Gluten-free pizza.”

Koban noticed Qi and Jiang in the background. They looked like they had packed up were and ready to leave. “Whoa, are Qi and Jiang going someplace?” he asked.

“Their contract is up. They need to get back to Hong Kong—that is, if they can find a way off Ferus,” said Hicks.

Knowing they could lose the two people who knew how the killer drones worked didn’t make anyone comfortable. Jiang popped his head in front of the webcam and flashed a smile. “We’ll keep tabs on you guys from Hong Kong, don’t worry,” he said. Qi was in the background giving a thumbs-up.

“We’re up to two hundred fifty thousand views! We’re totally risen!” Mia interrupted.

Mia’s announcement made Hicks anxious. A little publicity was good for morale, but too much PR would raise flags with Carlson. When he appeared back on the video screen, he was fidgeting with a pen.

“Before we kick off a PR blitz, we need a business model. 7R1B3’s showing that accommodation and food services is our best shot,” Kurt said.

“A what?” Koban asked.

“Accommodation and food services—hotels and restaurants.”

Mia was still ignoring the conversation. She rubbed her hands together and grinned. “Daisy just got an offer from an agent! Someone else is setting up a crowdfunding site for us!”

“How about a reality check here. We’re in the middle of nowhere,” Stone said with mounting irritation. “We have enough supplies to last us another two months, maybe three if we ration, we’re surrounded by hostiles—” As if on cue, there was the sound of artillery fire in the distance. Stone finished the thought with an extra level of intensity. “—and Mia’s talking about talent agents, and 7R1B3 thinks we should build a Motel Six?!”

Koban covered his face with his hands. “What is motel sex?”

Kurt checked up on what Hicks was saying. “It looks like 7R1B3 considered twenty industry classification options, over three hundred forty thousand successor events and one point three billion different pathways, and—”

Everyone waited for the punch line.

“Tourism sector scored the highest.”

“Score? What sort of score?” Koban probed.

“Tourism scored a ten.”

Koban felt a little bit better. “Well, at least your computer program is confident!”

“Ten out of a hundred,” Kurt clarified.

Stone clenched his jaw. He thought back to Fenty, the forward operating base where his military career had come to an end. Even with all the corruption, it was better organized than the Naja operation. “That’s the plan? Really?” he said. “An f’ing hotel? A hotel for what, hamsters? This is complete bullshit!”

Seeing Stone upset made Kurt bite his lower lip. His mind retreated back to programming logic. “The key to keeping Naja sustainable is the economy, and 7R1B3 researched and scored twenty options. The top three were accommodation and food services, health care, and arts and entertainment. Finance scored pretty well, too.”

Stone scoffed. “What was at the bottom, tulip farming?”

“Umm…” Kurt paused and braced himself for another round of insults. “Forestry and fishing.” There was a round of chuckles.

"Forgive me if I’m skeptical about spending what could very well be my last days—all of our last days, really—building a motel sex,” Koban said.

Mia started to listen to the conversation but still had an eye on the social media metrics. “Guys, we’re on YouTube’s trending page!” Only Hicks paid attention to what she was saying, and it made his palms sweat.

“It’s ‘six,’ not ‘sex,’ and we don’t have to build anything. It’s already built,” Kurt explained. “Container Two is a WetCHU. Holds four comfortably. We’ll start with that.” WetCHU meant a containerized housing unit, which was a small room with a private bathroom.

“Aren’t you missing something? How are tourists going to get here without getting killed?” Koban asked.

“That’s the whole point. 7R1B3 is leaving that up to the guests,” Kurt answered. “Adventure travel is huge—they want to take risks, they have money to burn, and they’re not afraid of taking chances.”

Koban had no idea why people would pay to come to a place he had spent a lifetime trying to escape. “Holy shit, man,” he said, “you’ve lost your mind.”

“There’s more,” Kurt said. “7R1B3 created a visa program and wants us to start hiring right away: director of sales, room attendant, chef, concierge, server, dishwasher, valet…”

“Stone massaged his temples. “I can picture the help-wanted notice. ‘Wanted: top chef. Long hours, constant danger, low pay. No experience required.’ They’ll be lined up for miles.”

“They already are. Whether you want to admit it or not, we already created a place that’s marginally better than where thousands of people are living right now, including Koban’s mother and sister.”

Koban slumped when Kurt mentioned his mother and sister. “Your computer is nuts. It’s not going to work.”

“Does anyone have a better plan?” Hicks asked over the video conference.

“Do you? You’re running the show,” Stone fired back at the screen.

There was no response. Mia was suddenly engaged. She turned to Hicks on the video. “You *are* running the show, right?”

Hicks licked the corner of his mouth. “None of this was my idea. I’m taking my orders from someone else.”

The group waited for Hicks to finish his thought. Silence oozed into every crack and void in their collective brain like concrete poured into a mold.

“Want to share with the rest of the class?” Mia prodded.

Hicks was careful with his response. He didn’t consider himself a strong leader, but he knew enough to know leadership was fleeting and depended as much on perception as reality. It was comforting to think there was a general someplace with more information calling the shots. But he couldn’t lie. “I can’t say who because I don’t know who it is.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means I got an email from someone, or something, that outlined a plan. I’m just executing on the plan, that’s all.”

“Some*thing*, Hicks? *Thing?* What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not positive the email even came from a person. It could have come from a computer.”

“A computer?”

“Raymond Station,” Hicks mumbled.

“What?”

“Raymond Station,” he said, a little louder. In the background of the webcam, Qi and Jiang looked at each other like they had seen a ghost.

“Of course,” Kurt said. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. Raymond Station is part of 7R1B3—a plug-in. It found all of us. What are the two things we have in common? We’re all really good at our jobs—with our backs against the wall. Incredible!”

“Holy shit,” said Stone. “That’s who hired me. A fucking robot. I knew this whole mission stank. It’s one thing to die for your country. I can’t believe we’re risking our lives for some Silicon Valley geek fantasy. ‘Hey Siri, what’s the stupidest damn thing I could do?’”

“You are so tired, Stone,” Mia said. “People are the ones who screw things up. Like that war of yours you’re so proud of. I don’t even know what a computer algorithm is or how it works. But I do know one thing—I trust whatever the hell they are more than most people, especially old men like you all.” Koban slumped. “Except for you, Koban.”

There were more sounds of artillery fire. Practice rounds.

Mia was bored by the conversation but energized by the uptick in Naja awareness online. She put an end to the bickering and snapped the group out of a funk. “What’s the problem, people? Naja’s *en fuego*! What are we waiting for? Let’s start hiring! What choice do we have? Let’s create an f’ing economy!”

Daisy was lying on the ground, staring. She detected Mia’s positive energy and thumped her tail on the floor in approval. That was the moment Naja’s immigration policy became official and the team got to work recruiting.

The first job posting was up on the web in ten minutes, and by the end of the afternoon there were two dozen more. By dinner the applications were flooding in, and they were almost entirely from political refugees, diaspora, and the displaced—exactly as planned.

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## Chapter 43

Geneva, Switzerland

It was Enzo’s last night in the villa before it went on the market. The pool was filled with a hundred bottles of Henriot Millesime 2027 that bobbed near the surface and bunched up near the filter intakes. It was a decadent gesture and all for show, since the pool was twenty-two degrees Celsius, fifteen degrees warmer than the temperature for serving champagne. Someone’s pug wandered in, knocked over a bowl of chips and swallowed a few, then disappeared into the kitchen looking for meatier handouts.

Enzo didn’t know all of his guests; the gathering was mostly orchestrated by a business associate, and the women appeared courtesy of the building’s head of security. But it was a well-deserved distraction from all the headaches mounting up on three continents.

The respite was short-lived and interrupted by a text from Adam Brull, his lawyer in Bridgeport.

*Processing facility swarming with TRA.*

TRA was the Turkish Revenue Authority, and it had raided an EGEO facility and recovered a checklist and a logbook. They claimed to be investigating EGEO’s finances, which they were. But of all the conversion facilities in EGEO’s portfolio, they chose to raid the building outside Van.

Enzo got Brull on the phone. “Tell those corrupt assholes I gave at the office,” he barked.

“There’s something else,” Brull said.

“Like what?”

“It’s where Koban used to work.”

“Who the hell is Koban?” Enzo shouted, though he had a vague sense that he should already know the answer.

When Brull filled him in, Enzo instantly realized the mess he was in. To him, it was pure coincidence that the president of Naja was also a former EGEO employee, but of course there was more to it than that. It was all part of 7R1B3’s blueprint for entangling Enzo.

“You’re going to get a call from one of Pecer’s men,” Brull warned. “Koban’s the president of Naja, but he’s also on the MIT terrorist watch list. They’re going to ask you questions. Just tell them you don’t know anything about it. They will push for more information. Don’t hold back, tell them the truth: that he was placed by a recruiting firm called Raymond Station.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah. There was a health department official on the raid, too. The facility got a citation for a health violation—there was no toilet paper in the men’s room.”

A moment after Enzo hung up, an argument broke out and one of his guests was shoved into the pool, his face crashing into a champagne bottle. Blood gushed from his nose and turned the pool water the color of rust.

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## Chapter 44

Naja

Three weeks went by, and Naja was gearing up for an influx of new residents. A water and power fit-out was under way, and the first of many modular apartments were on order and scheduled to be delivered by truck. To boost food production there were rows of six portable, walk-in polyethylene greenhouses that set up like tents. They had high-efficiency drip irrigation that could water more than a thousand plants with less than one liter of water a day, and they created the unexpected benefit of having a small abundance of fresh garlic, basil, dill, lettuce, tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, and spinach. Even with all the water-saving efficiencies, Kurt still wondered about 7R1B3’s logic. It seemed like a mistake. Where was the water supposed to come from?

Stone smelled beef and asked, “What’s the main course?” He held a fistful of fresh carrots that he’d harvested with his Glauca B1 combat knife. Daisy ate an MRE in the corner of the tent. Then something happened that took everyone by surprise. It started with Daisy perking up her ears, sniffing madly, and wagging her tail. Before long, everyone else could smell the scent she picked up on, and there was Koban, walking into the tent holding something that defied logic: a plate of grilled lamb kebabs on skewers, seasoned with paprika and served over red peppers and rice.

“Is that what I think it is?” Stone asked with a fixed gaze.

“Depends what you think it is!” Koban answered as he licked his lips and raised a savory treat to his mouth.

“Where the hell did you get that?”

“Al Khawali,” Koban answered. “Family business, owns a restaurant and a food truck. I texted them my order, and they left a box of kebab in a Styrofoam cooler outside the front gate.”

“You ordered in delivery?!”

“In exchange for publicity.” Koban shared a photo of the father and his son in the food truck. It was the same boy Koban saw selling gasoline from the back of the truck in Hakkâri. “They watch the web. They heard about our adventure. They reached out. They’re smart businessmen. Want a bite? It’s delicious.”

Koban bought two skewers for everyone. It was a big morale boost and a hit on the web. Koban sent the photo of the Al Khawali food truck to Mia, who created another meme and posted it on their news feed. Naja was hitting on the internet’s two favorite subjects: food and pets. It received ten thousand likes almost instantly.

By accident Koban had stumbled on Naja’s first sponsor, and it would turn into a major source of revenue for the country. Within hours the food-truck meme was trending like Daisy. Things happened quickly. Koban was still licking the lamb skewers and finishing his rice while Mia was flooded with sponsorship requests for water, clothes, furniture, even fertilizer. A scientist from the University of Chicago was eager to partner with Naja to deploy snails that specialized in turning desert into arable land.

For the first time in months, maybe years, Koban felt comfortable. It was fleeting, but knowing he could feel that way made him hopeful. He picked the last grains of rice off his plate with his fingers and felt the urge to share a story. “I have a tale to tell, an old Turkish folk tale,” he announced.

Daisy barked.

“Shut up, Daisy! Let him tell the story,” Kurt scolded.

“Travelers arrived in a village with nothing,” Koban began. “At first the locals refused to share their food. But then the travelers went to a river, filled a pot with water, placed a stone at the bottom, and heated it over a fire. One of the locals was curious and asked the travelers what they were cooking. ‘Stone soup,’ they replied.”

“Make sure it’s gluten-free,” Kurt interrupted.

That got some chuckles, and Koban continued. “So then the traveler said that the soup was delicious but needed garnish to improve the flavor. Hearing this, a local agreed to part with a few cloves of garlic and a few potatoes. Then another local added fish, and another added poultry, and so on. Then the travelers removed the stone, and before they knew it they had a hearty soup that fed a village.”

“Very apt,” Kurt said, slapping Koban on the back. “Now I know why they made you president!” He realized that the simple loop he wrote many years ago and posted as “7R1B3” on the public repo was the original stone in the stone soup. Anika, Hicks, Kurt, Koban, Qi, Jiang, and programmers from around the world added the fish, potatoes, and garlic.

Dinner was over. Cleanup was simple but generated copious amounts of waste. They packed plastic bags, plastic pouches, and cutlery, then carried the trash to a place they’d carved out with the steer loader. It was a two-meter-deep hole located ninety meters downwind and downhill from the food tent; they called it “the dump.” They composted some waste but still produced three bags of garbage per day.

“Does 7R1B3 have a long-term plan for sanitation?” Koban asked Kurt.

“We can find out.”

“How about food?”

Stone shrugged. The shadows grew long, and Daisy smelled the arrival of the nighttime animals. For her, the night was a time to be on patrol.

Since they’d arrived, Kurt had many nagging feelings about Stone.

“What were you doing before this adventure, Stone?” he asked.

“I was in the military.”

“No, I mean right before. What were you doing on the day you first heard about this job?”

Stone avoided the question. He checked the aerostat for activity around the perimeter. A pickup truck was approaching the front entrance. “Let’s just say I tried to do the right thing and paid a price.” He paused. “Let’s just hope your computer program can filter out weasels better than our own government.” Without hearing any more, Kurt understood.

“Are we expecting visitors?” Mia asked.

“It’s the garbageman,” Koban answered.

“Garbageman?”

“Our friends from Al Khawali asked if we needed help with the trash, and I said sure, why not?”

“How do we know they’re not MIT?” Stone was fuming. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I lived here, I know these people. We can trust them.”

“But can we trust *you*?” Stone said under his breath. Koban heard him.

In Koban’s world, trust and vitality were the same. Without one it was impossible to have the other. After Fenty, Stone didn’t trust anyone.

Compared to Stone, Kurt was a little more trusting. So much was going right. But there were too many unanswered questions. Until he learned what had happened to Anika, he realized, he’d never be fully at ease with his new compatriots.

“I’m sorry, Koban,” Kurt said with raised eyebrows and a hand on his heart. “What I think Stone meant was we’re all very tired. Are you sure you didn’t misread the locals?”

Koban didn’t answer. Stone looked at the ADU data. 7R1B3 was deploying drone sorties in fifteen-minute intervals, randomized to make it more difficult for potential threats to synchronize attacks. Three were hovering near the front gate, the port of entry, tracking the path of the pickup truck coming for the garbage. As the truck approached, 7R1B3 assessed the threat assessment index (TAI) of 0.86, then 0.88. As the truck reached the front entrance and stopped, the TAI rose a bit, oscillating between 0.880 and 0.90. If the index passed 0.970, the ADUs would shoot the tires and might kill the passengers. Ten more ADUs joined the squadron and hovered inside the gate. Stone, Kurt, and Koban stared at the video footage sent back from the drones. They had more than ten angles to choose from.

“That’s the boy, in the front seat,” Koban said.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“OK, go out and greet them. Kurt and I will stay back and monitor the ADUs.”

“Keep those things on a fucking leash!” Koban shouted as he walked away. It was the first time anyone had ever heard him curse.

The walk from the food tent to the main entrance took ten minutes. As Koban approached the guests, the ADUs were completing overlapping sorties alternating between recon, guard, and returning to the base station for recharging. Back at the comms center, Kurt got nervous. The ADU threat index inched toward the threshold for lethal engagement. It made perfect sense. The closer Koban got to a potential danger, the closer the ADUs were to a hair-trigger response. If the index kept rising, the passengers would be shot before Koban had a chance to greet them.

“We need to call Koban back,” Kurt said. “The TAI is too high—we will have a disaster on our hands.”

Stone called Koban on his tactical headset but there was no answer. He noticed why: Koban had forgotten it. It was resting on the table next to Stone and Kurt. “Shit,” Stone said. “I need to go out there and warn them.”

“That will make it worse,” Kurt said. “Put another one of us in harm’s way and that will bump the TAI to the high nineties, and they’ll be dead meat.”

“We’ll all be dead meat if our drone kills an innocent boy,” Stone said.

Kurt got a text from Qi: *I’m seeing what you’re seeing. There’s nothing we can do on our side. We can update the firmware but that requires a trip to the ADU base station. Once they’re in the air there’s no way to control their flight controllers and weaponry.*

There was a simple reason for this. Radio signals were easy to jam, hack, and disrupt. If the ADUs were radio-controlled it would take almost no effort to block the signal or, worse, take control of a unit and turn it into a dangerous threat.

Hicks and the techs were monitoring the situation from the ops center in Ferus. “This will be an international incident,” Hicks said in a panic. “You guys need to think of something quick. Shoot the ADUs down if you need to. Just make sure nobody dies.”

As Koban walked toward the pickup, the drones formed a delta-shaped attack configuration. They weren’t supposed to do that. The truck was a potential threat, to be sure, but still they were taking chances and overreacting, just like they had when Koban was shot, and when they took out the snake.

The ADU’s attack formation caught Koban’s attention, and he had the good sense to stop in his tracks. The TAI was just five one-hundredths of a point below the kill threshold. A puff of wind would be enough to unleash a barrage of bullets and cause a massacre.

Then Koban noticed the window of the pickup going down and a small arm with a thick leather glove emerging. Perched on the glove was a sparrow hawk, which spread its wings and launched into the sky. The raptor performed a high side pass and dove for the first drone. The bird was used to overpowering prey in the air and crushed the fuselage and flight controller; the machine flopped to the ground. Falcons were not programmed into the ADU’s threat profile, and as a result the birds had an overwhelming advantage. The remaining drones rolled away in a preprogrammed yo-yo defense maneuver that was supposed to give them an angular advantage. But it didn’t work. The bird instinctively executed a move fighter pilots called a pitchback, with a half loop and roll, and dispatched the remaining drones in quick succession.

Back at the data center, 7R1B3 triggered a flurry of calculations. It searched the web and proprietary databases for information on birds of prey and concluded that the ADUs would not be able to defeat the bird. The ADUs made their own calculation using a simpler approach: After eight ADUs were crushed in less than three minutes, the remaining five got the message, gave up, and flew back to the base. It didn’t take cutting-edge deep learning to know it was time to get the hell out of there.

“Sorry about the welcome,” Koban said, trying to appear unfazed. “We’re still working out the bugs.” The falcon returned to the boy’s thick leather glove and was rewarded with a small piece of meat.

The boy smiled proudly. “It’s good practice.”

Back in the ops center the team exhaled a sigh of relief. Qi and Kurt monitored the 7R1B3’s analysis and watched as its deep learning endpoint adjusted to the new data. Scientists said 7R1B3 learned instead of being taught, but the falcon taught the program a lesson. The ADUs were programmed to ignore birds, but the encounter with the falcon required an adjustment.

“We’ve come to pick up the garbage,” the driver reported. Koban gave the driver a long, two-handed greeting that conveyed trust and appreciation. Then he gave the driver a placard for the dashboard of the pickup. It was a formality but very symbolic. The driver, his son, and the falcon were the first international visitors. They were issued Naja’s first visas.

“Thank you, and welcome to Naja,” Koban said.

The falconer and his father loaded thirty garbage bags from the dump into the back of the pickup truck and departed with digital currency from the Naja treasury, fresh carrots and basil from the greenhouse, and $100 U.S. dollars to make up for the drone welcome.

## Chapter 45

Dawn broke as the team was finishing breakfast. The aerostat warning system lit up, but the activity was expected. The ADUs increased the number of sorties, but 7R1B3 had them set in event mode, which meant the drones did not carry live ammunition. A cloud of dust emerged off a caravan of trucks and heavy equipment that approached the dirt road leading to the front entrance.

Near the front of the convoy was a four-door Fiat. Hicks was in the back seat. Stone and Koban were stationed at the front gate to welcome the new arrivals. “It’s nice to be off that hellish platform,” Hicks said.

“What’s the matter, landlord evict you?” Stone asked.

“I heard you guys have better food and less seagull shit.”

Hicks hadn’t offered to come sooner, much to the annoyance of everyone. And when he did come it only added to the resentment, because the Naja team thought he was a slick operator who showed up only when it would make him look good. A few days earlier, one of President Ozturk’s aides had reached out to Hicks. The president was doubling down on his commitment to the new micronation and wanted a splashy grand opening where his visit would be the main event. Hicks had come to meet with an advance team that consisted of heavy security but also included a film crew and staging, events, and production experts. The first hundred prefabricated apartment mods were trucked in and clicked and sealed together to form Naja’s first apartment building. For security, they erected a ten-meter section of the bulletproof glass that would eventually ring the nation. But viewers at home would never know. Ozturk’s people also assembled a customs house patterned off the United Nations’ General Assembly building in New York.

Workers trucked in turf so a soccer match could be staged—which also meant trucking in soccer players. Girls in bright dresses rehearsed a traditional rhythmic *halparke* dance. Salespeople wearing black jeans and untucked shirts installed a pop-up store filled with glass tables, bright track lights, and a selection of the latest designer clothing, handbags, and consumer electronics. A Ferris wheel and carousel were rented for the occasion. “Is this a real country,” Kurt said to Hicks, “or the EPCOT Center version of one?”

Koban didn’t look at the visit so ironically. It sickened him that the head of the government that was wreaking hell on his people was turning Naja into an elaborate photo op. When he told Hicks that he wouldn’t come out to greet Ozturk, Hicks blew his top. “You know what being a leader is,” Hicks yelled at him. “Keeping your mouth shut and thinking about what’s good for your country. You are not Martin Luther King. You’re a politician, no better, no worse than the rest of them. And it’s people like me who make people like you look like they know what they’re doing. Your job is to play your part. So make sure you know all your lines by tomorrow!”

If he knew how to write code, Koban thought, he’d make it so 7R1B3 would keep political consultants as far away from Naja as possible.

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The presidential motorcade arrived the following morning, and Ozturk toured the new territory wearing a green and yellow military uniform. He was accompanied by guardsmen and mobbed by the press. There were more Potemkin Village touches to try Koban’s patience: a sumptuous lunch was brought in and garnished with herbs and greens grown in the Naja greenhouses. After afternoon prayers the president gave a speech at the front gate. It was a spectacle that could have been mistaken for the grand opening of a theme park. “Today we are combining technology with ancient tradition to resolve a thousand-year-old conflict,” Ozturk began. “The local people will have the autonomy they desire, and the Turkish republic will have the security it needs.”

Bile rose in Koban’s throat when Ozturk used the word “we.” If being a leader means not always showing your people what you’re feeling, Koban thought, then I’m George Washington.

There were cheers from hundreds of handpicked spectators. Many held signs that read “Ozturk for Turkey!”

“Turkish intelligence will oversee and monitor everyone who comes and goes from this special territory, and the people who live here will govern this place the way they see fit,” Ozturk continued. There were more cheers, and music played in the background. “We will create over twenty thousand jobs here, and it will be an important economic engine that will create trade and opportunity for those who live inside—and those who live outside,” he promised. “There are job openings now for nurses, chefs, carpenters, programmers, engineers, and many others.” More cheers from the audience, and some scuffles as people wanted to hear more about how to apply. “And we will give priority to those who were displaced.”

If there was anyone more irritated by Ozturk’s speech than Koban, it was the person Ozturk meant to antagonize with his visit to Naja: Pecer Erbakan. As he watched the speech from his compound, eighteen hundred kilometers from Naja, surrounded by the women of his harem and other assorted lackeys, the leader of the secret police was apoplectic.

“Ozturk’s creating a safe haven for terrorists!” he yelled with rising fury. He turned to Mezhar. “I am telling you something,” Pecer said to his henchman. “He will pay. And they will pay.”

“Don’t worry. The plans are in place,” Mezhar responded.

Moments later, the president unleashed an even bigger surprise.

“And now I would like to introduce Koban Goran,” the president said. “Naja’s first president.” There was a roar from the crowd as Koban took the platform next to Ozturk. He was a little tentative at first, but when he heard the roar of the crowd he had to admit it felt pretty good.

Pecer couldn’t believe his eyes. The man suspected of bombing the MIT office in Van, a terrorist, maybe even the leader of the terrorists! It was outrageous! Not a week ago he’d had this criminal locked away in one of his dungeons. Now Ozturk was dangling this puppet in front of him.

The press coverage for the event was better than Ozturk could have dreamed. The big papers, which had been portraying him as overmatched in his rivalry with Pecer, tacked back toward the president, seeing the Naja program as a progressive solution that made Turkey look smart, technologically advanced, and sensitive to human rights. Not surprisingly, his poll number rose among moderates. But what made Ozturk happiest was that his support among hard-liners, Pecer’s people, was rising too, impressed as they were by the security and monitoring, and especially by the wall he posed in front of. Pecer had to admit the stunt made Ozturk looks like a political genius.

What Ozturk didn’t understand was that by visiting Naja, he had issued a death warrant for the fledgling micronation.

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## Chapter 46

When the ceremony was over, Ozturk and his entourage packed up and left for Ankara. They left behind the apartment mods, the modern gatehouse, the pop-up store, and the soccer field. It was like a carnival left town without packing up all the rides. But the event was the country’s first official diplomatic meeting. It put Naja on the map and was another step toward internationally recognized sovereignty.

To keep the momentum going, the pioneers met in Container Six to consider the first round of visa applicants. More than fifty thousand people applied online for the first two thousand slots, making Naja harder to get into than Harvard or Stanford. 7R1B3 handled recruiting, sifting through applicants and identifying the ones with the right qualifications and backgrounds. The program subjected applicants to a complex vetting process, carefully analyzing their digital footprint and searching for patterns. It was like a credit history, but instead of the ability to pay a loan back, the program was looking for the ability to be fair, open-minded, and tolerant. Choosing the right people to be Naja’s first citizens was very important. They would set the tone for the country going forward and establish its culture.

“Who are you inviting to this place?” Mia asked, seeing the decision as an opportunity to have a big party.

“7R1B3 created the guest list.”

“I hope it finds some fun people, because this place is boring. We need some *chinchorrear*, some barhopping, you know what I mean?”

“It’s a Muslim country, Mia; there are rules. It’s part of the treaty,” Koban explained.

“Yeah, I know there are rules, but if you don’t get some *gatos* in here I’m gonna go crazy—and nobody’s gonna care about us. Not on social media, not in Turkey, nowhere. We need some fun around here—vintage clothing stores, a brewery…”

“There’s no alcohol here,” Koban reminded her.

“OK, then a coffee shop, a karaoke bar, places where people can chill out or let go. Just because we have a lot of poor people doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun around here.”

“Any other advice?”

“Yeah, we need people who can run a theater, the clubs, you know, *chacón* but a little sleazy, with good taste in music.”

Koban was becoming irritated. “You don’t understand our people, Mia. This isn’t the West.”

“Look, don’t tell me about people. I know people. I don’t care where they’re from, people all want the same thing. They type on their computers all day and act all stuck-up, but at night they want to get into some crazy shit. You don’t have to advertise it, it can be all hush-hush, but it has to be there.” Mia looked around and saw two containers that formed an alley. “Maybe over there. We could spray-paint those boxes with some big letters—a mural or something nice.”

Kurt listened and thought Mia had a point but wasn’t sure that 7R1B3’s machine learning shared her level of cultural insight. It wasn’t clear if the program would choose a diverse, interesting community or a boring crowd of nobodies.

The answer was unfolding at the front gate.

Stone sat in the gatehouse booth. There was a turnstile flanked by a low fence. He was playing the role of Naja’s immigration official. But the job felt more college admissions than Ellis Island. There was a crowd outside, he had a list, and it was his job to let the right people in. He wore the closest thing he had to a uniform: a clean shirt and an official Naja baseball cap.

The first applicant stepped up to Stone’s desk wearing a suit jacket, a two-day-old beard, and a pair of fake eyeglasses. “Name and reservation number, please,” Stone ordered. The man gave his name and recited six number and letters. They matched the information on Stone’s computer.

“What is the purpose of your trip?” Stone asked.

“Business,” the man answered.

“Where will you be staying?”

“I have reservations at the Naja Hotel for one week, then I will be staying in Daisy View Garden, apartment twenty-five,” he read from a text he’d received on his phone.

Stone kept a straight face, but inside he was laughing his head off. Naja Hotel was what 7R1B3 renamed CHU 3, Daisy View Garden was a ten-meter DRASH shelter, and apartment twenty-five was nothing more than a tri-folding duck fabric cot.

“What is your occupation?” Stone continued, poker-faced.

“I am the best chef in Turkey, maybe the world,” the man boasted.

Stone quizzed the man. “One of our founders is gluten-free. Can you handle that?”

“Do you like cheese, meat, cucumbers, olives, and hard-boiled eggs? These things do not have gluten.”

“Anything to declare? Any fruits or vegetables?”

The foreigner produced a box of red pepper flakes, dry oregano, mint, cumin, sumac, Urfa pepper, and nigella seeds. He also carried a bag of fresh arugula, beets, artichokes, and cucumbers. In any other country those items would be all be confiscated, but this man was here to take Naja’s culinary reputation to the next level, and Stone didn’t want to stand in the way.

The fact was, the entry process at the customs house was all for show, because 7R1B3 completed the vetting for the chef days earlier.

Stone’s main purpose was to make sure the chef was in fact the same person 7R1B3 cleared for entry. But even that was something 7R1B3 handled automatically. Stone snapped a photo for facial recognition, scanned the man’s fingerprints, and swabbed his cheek for DNA analysis. Once those tests were passed, Stone issued him a two-factor authentication key and two hundred dollars in cryptocurrency. Naja had a new official chef.

The process was repeated a thousand times, and a pattern emerged. People could say what they wanted, but Naja would not be a boring place. One immigrant was an electrician and a trombone player, and a very good one. He joked that he was married to a hooker, which he was: His wife was a skilled rug-hooker who made award-winning carpets. There were several applicants who were trained first responders. Firemen and EMTs brought other skills to the table: One was an accomplished author, and another was an amateur magician. One family consisted of skilled fruit growers who also were gifted soccer players. Naja needed respect on the pitch, and this was a good first step. Another arrival was a lawyer and well-known lovelorn folk singer who had once been arrested in Istanbul for appearing in drag, an attribute 7R1B3 correlated with creative intensity and cultural vibrancy. 7R1B3 also picked out a few applicants based on appearance and personality: They were let in because they were beautiful and charismatic. Another was homeless man with no employment history. He had no known family or social history. The data showed that people considered him peculiar. He lacked ambition and obvious employment prospects, but he did one thing very well: busking. Every afternoon, like clockwork, he found a street corner and lifted people’s spirits with his guitar and folk songs.

The 7R1B3 selection process was discriminating but not discriminatory, elite but not elitist. There was profiling, but it was algorithmic profiling. The process could be summarized by one optimization function: maximizing diversity and the long-term chance of success. A key aspect of increasing the chances of success was selecting people who were good at things computers were bad at: social intelligence, creativity, and working in unpredictable environments.

By the end of the week Stone had admitted more than 1,500 citizens, including many with high-touch, AI-resistant expertise, like nursing, medicine, eldercare, hairstyling, sports, theater, and massage therapy. It was a historic moment that Mia amplified online. Naja was like a startup company, and its first employees were reporting for work. But what was left out of the official narrative was the heart-wrenching sadness and guilt triggered by those left behind. Hundreds of desperate refugees who were rejected online still crowded the border, hoping to get lucky. MIT officers lurked in the background like hyenas, infiltrating the crowd to gather information and taking photos to complete their dossiers and watch lists. There was no wall, no clear line other than the guardhouse. The hopefuls were held back only by the menacing choreography of the ADUs that traced a virtual border from the sky.

Everyone inside the country felt conflicted, including its president. The positive energy was contagious, but there was also remorse and second-guessing about those left behind. All Koban could think about was his mother and sister. The more energized his new friends were, the gloomier he became. “When I asked Ozturk for help, he looked grim,” he confided to Hicks. “My mother and sister are not returning texts.”

“We will find them and bring them here,” Hicks promised. “Ozturk will help. I’ll do whatever I can, too.” In that moment, Hicks seemed so honest, so earnest, that Koban felt bad for all the negative things he’d thought and said about him. Maybe, Koban thought, political consultants were human after all.

Stone closed up the customs house and met the group back at Container Six. “I need volunteers,” he said, grabbing Koban’s shirt collar to get his mind on something else. “It’s time to draw a line in the sand, as they say.”

Then Stone turned to the new chef. “Here’s an f’ing new guy. Come with us and we’ll show you how this works so you can finish it up.”

“But I’m a chef,” the man protested.

“In fifteen minutes you’re also going to be a city planner,” Stone replied. “In Naja we wear many hats—in your case, something besides a chef’s hat.”

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## Chapter 47

7R1B3 Maintainer Community Forum

Central Network Availability Zone

r4ym0nd63 2 days ago [-]

7R1B3 is open source but that doesn’t mean we can accept shit code!

urr440 today [-]

IMHO the accounting module connector isn’t shit.

Open-source software had a long track record of reliability, security, scalability, and flexibility, but like sausages, few people cared to know how it was made. 7R1B3 was open-source, and the program’s survival depended on hundreds of skilled volunteers donating their time, expertise, and opinions. But 7R1B3 development also led to bruised egos and bitter arguments, and all the blistering details were on full display in the 7R1B3 maintainer’s forum hosted on 7R1B3.org.

r4ym0nd63 2 days ago [-]

They want 7R1B3 developers to accept bad code then fix it. What?! Isn’t that the vendors’ job? Developers are working around the clock to knock the accounting and general ledger bugs out of 7R1B3 and Naja. But some people are copying this work and trying to sell it to 800-pound accounting gorillas like Deloitte. They make a profit why should we do charity work for them anyway? Why should 7R1B3 developers donate their time to make a 7R1B3/Naja accounting connector work correctly? So they can make more money?!!!

urr440 today [-]

You already lost the argument if you go down that road. The problem isn’t the code. It’s personality. I’m a coder not a saint. But that doesn’t fit your image of what a 7R1B3 developer is, so then you guys start a shitstorm.

In the world of open-source, “R4ym0nd63” was known as a maintainer. His job was to be an editor and accept or reject developer suggestions about how to improve or patch a 7R1B3 tree. Trees were collections of patches that addressed a need or an interest. There were fifty-four trees that covered areas like transportation, fire, police, treasury, food inspection, health, and education. The trees helped break up software-driven government into discrete chunks and provided a place where contributors could work. When suggestions were accepted by the maintainer, they were promoted from tree to tree and eventually included in the mainline and deployed in the real world.

7R1B3 had fifty-four voluntary maintainers and they all had screen names that began with “r4ym0nd,” the letters were Leet for “Raymond.” The tradition started as a way to distinguish maintainers from contributors, and over time it stuck. Behind all the R4ym0nd screen names were real people. R4ym0nd27 was a sport fisherman and an amateur crossword puzzle champion named Rich Ball. His day job was working as an accounting manager at the VA hospital in West Palm Beach, Florida. Four nights a week, he carved out an hour after dinner to approve or reject suggestions relating to the 7R1B3 code branch that dealt with accounting and finance. In each session he reviewed a handful of suggestions from contributors around the world. Most of the suggested changes were bite-sized and easy to assess, like copy edits in a manuscript. But urr440’s suggestions were different; they were more like personal attacks, and they gave Rich indigestion.

Urr440 was the screen name for a man named Anatoly Markov, who worked at TASC LLC, a company that did subcontracting work for New World Strategies. New World was where Hicks used to work, and to Ball the entire effort had a whiff of government-meddling. Markov was suggesting a patch that allowed 7R1B3 to connect to an accounting program that many governments used.

r4ym0nd63 2 days ago [-]

Your code a closed-source blob, that’s why I can’t approve your patch.

urr440 today [-]

All the 7R1B3 fanboys want open-source modules no matter what. Well, we have a business to run, and porting our software from Microsoft to 7R1B3 is expensive.

Allowing 7R1B3 to talk to municipal accounting systems seemed reasonable—mandatory, in fact. But instead of providing open-source code that could be inspected and verified, Markov proposed a black box solution. It was the lack of transparency that caused the friction, and Rich Ball wanted nothing to do with it.

There was another problem. Ball was smart enough to figure out that urr440 was a scrambled version of Aurora, and that sounded a lot like Dark Aurora, the program rumored to be the anti-7R1B3. It could have been another coincidence, but red flags were flying everywhere, and all the maintainers were on high alert.

r4ym0nd63 2 days ago [-]

r4ym0nd3 rejected your suggestion a month ago nothing’s changed.

urr440 today [-]

R43m0nd3 is dead. That seems like a very big change.

A wave of fear swept through Ball. He volunteered as a maintainer on 7R1B3 because it was interesting and worthwhile work. It wasn’t supposed to be dangerous. The sudden reference to r4Em0nd3 came as a shock: It was Anika Patel’s screen name. She hadn’t posted anything in months, and there were rumors swirling about what caused her disappearance.

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## Chapter 48

Naja, Eastern Anatolian Plateau

The long-term chance of community success and survival depended on many factors, and well-reasoned urban planning was one of them. Planning was an ancient concept. The Mesopotamians divided Babylon into equal parts along the Euphrates in 3000 B.C., and the ancient Romans used orthogonal, grid-like urban planning for convenience and military defense.

Naja was a perfect circle, but picking the layout inside the circle was the complicated part. 7R1B3 assessed time-series aerial photographs of 10,955 cities and large communities around the world. It analyzed the nine-pointed Renaissance fortress-city of Palmanova, Italy, the elegant interleaved circles of Canberra, Australia, and the radial arms of Brasília, Brazil. The program compared blueprints and measures of land use, safety, security, mobility, public engagement, habitat, open space, participatory sensing, environmental sustainability, traffic, public health, human computer interaction, and more than six thousand other variables.

After performing trillions of computational operations, 7R1B3 arrived at an answer.

The answer wasn’t a map, it was a function. Billions of calculations showed what longtime city planners suspected since the 1950s: Detailed forecasting didn’t work, and neither did leaving everything up to individuals. Naja required a planning framework, but it also needed to grow in incremental steps instead of a handful of planned large jumps.

Koban was not comfortable with this idea. “This is crazy. We need a plan. How do we know where the streets should go? How big to build the schools, the parks?” He directed his questions at Kurt, but they were meant to be heard by everyone.

Urban planning was a thorny problem that couldn’t be approximated with numbers. If there was an equation, the solution wouldn’t be a certain number of streets, houses, and streetlamps. The solution was a function, not a number. Planning was an enigma related to what mathematicians called a dynamical system.

“A city layout varies over time and obeys differential equations involving time derivatives,” Kurt explained, not expecting his words to satisfy anyone.

“So where are the next thousand apartment mods going to go?” Koban asked.

“Here,” Kurt said, pointing to a blueprint that was supposed to balance the need for public space with safety and security.

“Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth,” Stone griped.

“Who said that?” Koban asked.

“Mike Tyson. Reporters were badgering him before a big fight about how his strategy…”

“Tyson had a point,” Kurt agreed. “But that doesn’t mean Naja can’t benefit from transportation planning, landscape design, and good zoning.”

Stone was skeptical. “Zoning? Landscape design? Are you kidding me? We’re hunkered down in the middle of someone else’s civil war, and you want to talk about shrubbery?!” He walked forward, following the blue dot on Google Maps on his phone. “Here,” he said, stopping at a spot twenty meters south of Container Six. “This is the exact center of the country. This will be our city square, and we’ll move out from here.” He took a length of rebar, hammered it into the ground, and tied a Day-Glo orange ribbon to the top.

Stone motioned to Koban and they piled onto the ATV and drove in a straight line 1.58 kilometers from the center marker and stopped the vehicle. Stone double-checked the distance with a laser rangefinder, pounded another length of rebar into the ground with a sledgehammer, then capped the rod with a four-centimeter aluminum survey marker. Engraved at the top of the marker were the words “NAJA INTERNATIONAL BORDER ULUSLARARASI SINIR.”

Koban released two cargo straps, then unwrapped an aluminum sign and planted it in the ground a few meters from the border marker. The statement was written in three languages. *WARNING! If you are entering Naja without presenting yourself to an Immigration Officer, you may be arrested and prosecuted for violation of Naja Immigration and Custom Laws.*

Then they drove five hundred meters on a circumference and hammered in another survey marker exactly 1.58 kilometers from the center marker. They repeated the exercise ten more times, which marked the halfway point on the circumference and put them on station directly opposite the front entrance. It was hard work, the sun was blasting down, and they decided to take a break. Stone took a drink from a water bottle while two ADUs buzzed overhead. Then he got the call from Kurt.

“ADU’s spotted someone—or something—range fifty meters,” Kurt reported. Stone climbed up on the back of the ATV and looked out with field glasses. That’s when he noticed the barely clothed body of a woman lying in the bushes.

His first reaction was to run over and help, but years of training and experience made him sit tight and report back. Koban had field glasses and also saw the body.

“Stay away from her,” Stone warned. “We could be dealing with IED or UXO.”

“She’s moving. She’s crawling on the dirt,” Koban observed.

Stone and Koban inched the four-wheel closer, then stopped again and watched the woman dragging her body across the ground. She was acting inebriated. She tried to crawl and made one or two wobbly motions, then collapsed. Drunk as a skunk, Stone thought.

*“As-salamu alaykum!”* Koban called.

The woman continued to crawl without answering. There was something familiar about the way she moved and the torn remains of her black and gold caftan, but Koban blocked it out.

*“As-salamu alaykum!”* Koban called again.

She collapsed and was barely breathing. Her back was covered in dirt.

“Shit, I’m not going to just stand here and watch her die,” Stone muttered as he grabbed a tarp off the back of the ATV and inched his way toward the stranger. Koban followed.

As Stone approached, he looked for movement and watched for signs of buried ordnance. Koban met the woman’s eyes a few feet from the new border.

When Koban realized who she was, he was overcome with shock and horror. It was his mother.

Stone alerted Naja’s brand-new medical staff, then helped Koban wrap the listless body in the tarp and carry the bundle to the vehicle.

“Sit in the back and try to keep her comfortable. I’ll drive slow,” Stone ordered.

Koban sat with his legs dangling over the side and his mother draped over his lap. He cradled her head while the rest of her body flopped like a rag doll as they journeyed over the uneven landscape to the clinic. But it was too late. As the dying woman stared at her son, she smiled faintly, yellowish foam oozing from her mouth. Koban kissed her forehead, and the life left her body.

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## Chapter 49

The next day, a crowd gathered to mourn Koban’s mother in a procession that included all of Naja’s 1,024 current residents. They chanted together and swarmed around her coffin while dozens of thugs loitered just over the Naja border. Koban was still in shock, but in the far corners of his mind he knew his mother’s death was part of the broader narrative, a chapter in the overall struggle. Her death unified the nation, and though he did not need to be reminded, it created an awareness about just how fragile their community was, and the peril his sister still faced.

When the news broke online, a global outpouring of grief followed. Mia tried to channel the message, but the sheer volume was beyond her control. Donations poured in: $170,000 crowdfunded for funeral expenses. Presents began appearing and piled up at the burial site of Koban’s mother. Thousands of them: silk scarves, knitted hats, paper cards, stuffed animals. A creepy plastic doll intended to be a replica of Koban’s mother had “We miss you” hand-lettered across the front. The sender’s good intentions made the murder no less tangible and ghastly.

The influx of packages put a strain on the fledgling Naja customs team. 7R1B3 specified a strict protocol for scanning packages and freight, but the effort was worth it. One package held a dozen teddy bears. When a guard picked one out of the box, he felt a lump. He ripped it open and found an internet-connected camera and microphone hidden inside—likely the handiwork of MIT.

Hicks showed up for the funeral. As the procession reached Naja’s center, he was alone, standing in the back of Container Six, on the phone with Ozturk. “The president’s mother is dead, and your chief of police killed him,” he stated bluntly.

“We don’t know that.”

“Come on now, rat poison? Who else is that sadistic?”

“I will find out who did this and make sure there is justice.”

“We paid you two hundred million to control your people—and to find Koban’s sister!” Hicks found himself screaming. “If the MIT thinks they can do whatever they want to us, this whole experiment will blow up in our faces. How do you think that would make you look in the eyes of the world? This is not the image of Naja I’ve been working so hard to create.”

“Let me remind you, Mr. Hicks: I do not take orders from foreigners,” Ozturk said, matching the consultant’s indignation. “The president doesn’t take orders from anyone.”

Hicks reigned himself in. “My apologies, Mr. President. We are very tense here.”

A soon as Hicks hung up with Ozturk he called Enzo.

“We’re getting screwed out here.”

“You speak my language.”

“Ozturk’s busting our balls.”

“And he’s busting mine, too. What do you want me to do about it?”

“I need Koban’s sister back,” Hicks said. “Nothing’s working. We need a more creative approach.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Three percent of Naja revenue in the first year.” It was an arrangement 7R1B3 wouldn’t allow and a promise Hicks couldn’t keep, but he was desperate. “Consider it a return on your angel investment.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Then the line went dead.

## Chapter 50

Bridgeport, Connecticut

To understand Enzo’s relationship with Ozturk and Pecer, you had to understand the details of his supply chain. Enzo’s oil conversion business may have looked to an outsider like alchemy—converting lead into gold or, in his case, hazelnut oil into olive oil. But the chemical process was only one piece. There were many suppliers and intermediaries, and pulling it all together took planning, marketing, sales, financing, and product design.

It also took loyalty, and that took money. A lot of it. To keep the machine well oiled, Enzo paid $6 million a year into a web of privately held limited liability entities. One of the entities was a revocable trust that owned ninety-nine percent of a Cayman Island LLC, which owned ninety-nine percent of a Cypriot limited liability company, which owned a Turkish limited liability company, which owned Pecer’s 150-year-old mansion on the shores of the Turkish Riviera. It was the gruesome house of death and torture where Pecer and Mezhar conducted their perverse rituals. But Enzo had no way of knowing this—there were too many layers.

The layers were what made the whole thing work. Enzo knew whatever leverage he had rested on the connection between bribes and loyalty, and that middlemen like Bixley Hicks were crucial to the workings of the machine. The keys to power depended entirely on allocating the right proportion of funds to the right people. Corruption had been flowing through the world of politics and business for centuries, Enzo liked to remind himself. You either paddled against the current or with the current.

Enzo knew exactly how to help Hicks. In fact, it always surprised him how easy it was to get a government official to do his bidding. He reached out to Mezhar, a busy man who picked up his call on the first ring.

“I’d like to meet a friend of yours,” Enzo began. “Someone who’s staying in your employer’s house.”

“Perhaps you can,” said Mezhar in a low, cool voice.

“I’ll buy your employer’s wife a little gift.”

“She loves jewelry.”

“The Flowerlace necklace?”

“She already has the Flowerlace. She needs a five-strand À Cheval necklace to go with her Zuhair Murad gown,” Mezhar said smoothly.

There was a pause in the conversation as Enzo contemplated the price tag.

It was a short call, and it had nothing at all to do with wives or expensive gowns. It was a very specific negotiation. The “friend” was Samira, Koban’s sister. The jewelry was the inducement to let her go. Both necklaces were white diamond and both were stunning, but the Cheval was $730,000, and the Flowerlace was $110,000. Enzo was annoyed with the price he had to pay, but that was the cost of doing business. He knew he had to keep Hicks happy, and greasing the wheels was the only way to do it.

Fifteen minutes later, an order was placed on the Van Cleef & Arpels website using a debit card from an offshore LLC. Twelve hours later, an armored truck drove up to the front gate of Pecer’s mansion and delivered a package.

Hicks received a text from Raymond Station: *RANSOM PAID.*

“How the hell does it know this stuff?” Hicks wanted to know.

“Metadata,” Kurt answered.

“What’s metadata?”

“7R1B3 doesn’t eavesdrop because it doesn’t have to. It has metadata and that’s enough. If a homeowner got her roof repaired, then called a tow truck, then made two calls to a tire center, you’d have a pretty good idea of what happened.”

“You would?”

“A box of roofing nails spilled on the driveway,” Kurt explained.

“Maybe, but it could also have been a combination of a dead battery and routine tire maintenance.”

“Perhaps, but the simplest hypothesis tends to be right. It’s called Occam’s razor, popularized by an English monk in the fourteenth century.”

“Whatever. It still doesn’t explain how a computer program knows a guy paid a ransom.”

“7R1B3 found out a jewelry store made a sale online. Maybe a salesperson blabbed about it on social media. It also knows there are three high-end jewelry stores in that part of the country, and that merchandise that’s over four hundred thousand dollars gets delivered by armored truck. Ransom is a market just like any other, and 7R1B3 knows what the rates are. From the e-commerce site it knows what the merchandise is.”

“And that was enough to go on.”

“That’s right,” Kurt said. “Privacy freaks are worried about wiretapping and credit card data. It’s the metadata they should be really worried about.”

Hicks’s phone rang. It was Enzo. “I made a few calls.”

“And?”

“I got it done, but it cost me.”

Then Enzo hung up.

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## Chapter 51

United Nations Plaza, New York City

It was the first meeting inside the United Nations General Assembly Hall since a nine-month renovation was completed to boost security, remove asbestos, and clean up the iconic gold-leaf emblem that was caked with decades of cigarette tar and nicotine. Sarah Phoenix sat in a leather chair in a row between the member states and other observers. She was representing Naja. On today’s agenda was the question of whether Naja would be admitted to the UN as a Non-member Permanent Observer State. Sarah was there to facilitate the process for the team back in Naja.

On the dais the president and the secretary-general began the meeting. “The plenary meeting of the United Nations is called to order,” the president called out. “Please take your seats.” Then, as was the custom, the president gave the floor to the secretary-general.

“Thank you, Your Excellency, Mr. President,” the secretary-general began. “We bring down the gavel on a productive session of the General Assembly.”

Sarah tapped a text on her phone: *STARTING–10 MINUTES,* she warned. The team back at Naja was scheduled to address the assembled diplomats from a makeshift studio in Container Six. Kurt and Koban would take the lead, joined by a recent immigrant to Naja named Şana Beri. Şana was a postdoc in political science at Van University who’d been purged along with the rest of her department by Pecer’s thugs. Bringing in Şana was Mia’s idea. Good optics, she’d said: an attractive, articulate woman with a good story to tell. Koban went along with it because of Şana’s connection to Van University, but he was a little uneasy because she had only arrived a couple of days before and he hadn’t gotten the chance to know her.

They were crowded inside the small studio with a portable snow-white backdrop, three softbox umbrella lights, and the flag of Naja. A C-Band satellite dish antenna was mounted on the roof. Kurt and Koban knew they should have spent a few more hours polishing the presentation, but with the funeral the day before, they simply hadn’t had time.

The postdoc looked on as Mia daubed powder on Kurt’s nose and forehead to knock down the oily shine. The attention made him uncomfortable.

“I don’t understand why you think the UN will say yes to 7R1B3 without dragging the whole process out and demanding further study. Have you guys thought about that?” Şana asked.

Her question annoyed Kurt. He focused on keeping his mouth closed and taking shallow breaths to keep the talc out of his throat and nostrils.

Back in the General Assembly hall, AV techs prepared to cut over to the live satellite feed while the secretary-general continued with his remarks. “We reached an agreement on the outcome of the plenary meeting on refugees and migrants. This will lead to greater compassion, solidarity, and global accountability.”

There was thunderous applause.

Inside Container Six, the postdoc kept poking. “7R1B3 is a digital dictator. Doesn’t this go against the obligations of the UN Charter?”

Kurt couldn’t believe Şana wouldn’t shut up. This was not the time for this discussion, and she should know that. He was sleep-deprived and short-tempered. I just saved her ass, he thought, and here she was second-guessing the software that made her sanctuary possible—at the worst possible moment.

“What exactly is your background?” Kurt asked testily.

The countdown continued. *2 MINUTES…* Sarah texted.

“I have three degrees in political...”

“Well, allow me to explain the situation,” Kurt said, cutting her off from what he feared would be a long-winded answer. “Thousands of programmers are donating hundreds of thousands of hours to make sure 7R1B3 works. But you’re too self-absorbed to know.”

“Big Brother consisted of thousands of people too, and that led to mass surveillance and the trampling of civil liberties,” Şana said.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. 7R1B3 is the exact opposite of Orwellian because it’s open-source and completely transparent. *It’s more democratic than democracy*.” Kurt put his face up near the student’s. “If you call 7R1B3 ‘Big Brother’ again…”

*YOU’RE LIVE*, came Sarah’s text, but he missed it.

“…I will deport you!” Kurt barked.

Those four words were caught on the hot mic attached to Kurt’s lapel and broadcast in crisp, clear, high definition to the hundreds of global representatives assembled in the hall. The secretary-general was flummoxed and lost his place on the teleprompter. There was an interval of hesitation while the president glared at Sarah from the dais. Then the secretary-general went off script, motioning to the AV tech. “Is there a problem with the signal?” The assistant cut off the video feed, and the screens went black. After that there was more confusion.

Sarah was horrified. Her reputation was going down like the Hindenburg. *WTF WAS THAT?!!! :(* Sarah texted to Hicks.

*KURT DIDN’T KNOW MIC WAS ON*, came the response. *ALL GOOD.*

*ALL GOOD???? SHITTY EXPRESSION! NOT ALL GOOD!!*

*GOT IT. WON’T USE THAT EXPRESSION*

“We seem to be having technical issues,” the secretary-general said, turning to an assistant who was facing Sarah across the hall and waiting for some sort of signal. “Please bear with us.”

*ALL GOOD, NO WORRIES*, Hicks messaged.

*?!!! :(((((* Sarah tapped back.

*:)))* was the response.

Sarah gave a thumbs-up to the assistant, and a moment later the Naja presenters were back up on the assembly hall screens. This time they were composed and professional.

The secretary-general looked relieved. Thin strands of hair stuck to the sweat on his forehead as he continued with his speech: “…at a time of horrendous attacks in so many places, you have reviewed an approach to self-governance that promotes prevention, treatment, criminal justice, and law enforcement.”

The assistant looked one more time for a signal from Sarah to make sure there would be no further missteps. She gave another thumbs-up. Then the secretary-general gave the floor to the team in Container Six. “As part of this effort, I would like to now turn your attention to the screen at the front of the hall, where Naja’s President Koban Goran and his team of advisers will report on progress being made in their small state. After this presentation it is anticipated that we will take a vote. If a three-quarter majority is achieved, Naja will be designated a Non-member Permanent Observer State.”

It could be a milestone in the new country’s story. The pressure was on the Naja team to make a rock-solid pitch with no more glitches.

“Thank you for this great honor to appear before this respected international body,” Koban began. “I am here to report that the economic prospects for Naja look bright, but the founding ideals of our nation transcend mere economics. A cash-flow-positive community will help us achieve our goal of security and self-determination. But we are also a nation founded upon the pillars of idealism and innovation. We hope to show the world a new approach to governance that will provide a beacon to dispossessed people throughout the world. We know that handing over so much of the decision-making responsibilities of bureaucratic and legislative bodies to a computer program sounds radical. But we would like to make the case that it is the most humane and commonsensical approach. If all of you assembled here today reject our application, I will not only be disappointed for Naja, but for all the citizens of the world who will learn from us and learn from our experiment.”

The UN audience perked up.

“This program turns the refugee-camp model on its head. Instead of being a temporary, costly, undesirable breeding ground for sorrow and despair, Naja is an economic engine creating value and hope for the thousands of immigrants who have placed their hopes and dreams in our new nation.”

There was applause. Light bulbs were going off in the seats.

Koban continued. “It’s not just Naja that is benefiting. Our esteemed neighbor is benefiting, too. Turkey will earn more than twenty million a year in trade, tourism, and support for Naja.” Koban paused for effect. “Some would say Naja is a golden goose for Turkey.”

There were muted chuckles from the audience.

“Now I will turn over the presentation to Kurt Porter and his economic assistant, Şana Beri, who studied at Van University. They will share with you the details of our economy.”

The audience waited in anticipation.

Kurt kept to the facts. “Naja has a robust economy with revenue derived from several sources. All thirty beds of the Naja Hotel are booked solid, with nonrefundable two-hundred-dollar deposits extending out eighteen months—three million in revenue. We do not currently have a reliable way to access Naja, but this is not deterring guests from making reservations. Naja also has three hundred twenty thousand virtual citizens. For fifty dollars, anyone in the world is able purchase a ninety-nine-year honorary lease for ten square centimeters of land in Naja: sixteen million in revenue.”

That caught the attention of an observer sitting next to Sarah who whispered to her that it would make a great holiday gift for his nephew.

“Online revenue is climbing, too,” Şana picked up. “Our golden retriever, Daisy, has become one of the most famous dogs in the world. Her videos have been viewed a hundred million times and are on track to throw off one million in ad royalties during the next fiscal year.”

“We will be receiving many international dignitaries, including quite a few of you watching us today, for official visits,” Kurt plugged. “If you haven’t made reservations, I would urge you to do so because they are going fast. It has become table stakes for forward-thinking leaders to have their picture in the spot we call Naja Square. This is also good for our economy. These visits, with their accompanying revenue streams—accommodations, concierge services, extra security, and special meals—will bring in thirty million this year alone.”

The speech was going well. More people in the audience were tapping their phones and looking into reservations.

“But it will not come as a surprise that merchandising and apparel-licensing deals are our biggest revenue source. The first run of designer Naja soccer jerseys sold out in two hours: twelve million in revenue. We also have in the works many interesting events like live concerts and a Naja marathon. We are talking with Ken Burns’ production company about producing a feature-length documentary about Naja.”

*SURPRISED IT TOOK SO LONG FOR THEM TO ELBOW IN ON A PUBLICITY OPPORTUNITY*,Sarah texted Hicks.

The atmosphere in the room was electric.

“We are making interesting progress with our innovative cryptocurrency, too,” Kurt explained, pointing to a bar graph. “Naja-Coin is catching on globally and is projected to generate another five million in exchange-rate transaction fees.” With that detail, Kurt directed the presentation back to Koban.

“Naja is on track to be cash-flow-positive and generate more than five hundred million in annual revenue and seven hundred million in GDP, placing it above Tonga, Micronesia, Palau, and the Marshall Islands,” Koban recited with professional pride. “We are also now in a position to begin providing universal basic income to our citizens.

“But I need to be honest.” Koban paused. “We are at a critical point. We need to achieve scale. We need to find ways to drive the cost of Naja housing, transportation, education, and health to zero. To do this, we need to increase the number of real inputs so complex decisions can be modeled accurately.”

Koban got sidetracked, speaking like an engineer for a few moments, then caught himself and switched to a metaphor. “Naja is approaching what venture capital investors call ‘the canyon.’ It is that treacherous ground between startup success and being able to stand on our two feet without relying on angel investors. To compete in the world, Naja needs a GDP per resident of about thirty-six thousand dollars—about equal to Israel and New Zealand. Recognition from the UN will allow us to achieve scale and give us the standing to negotiate with our neighbors and enter into trade agreements with other member states. With your support, Naja will move beyond the realm of idealism and give us what we need to make our way in the world.”

There was scattered applause from the audience.

“Of course, you may be wondering how the Naja will achieve almost three times the per-capita GDP of Turkey. Well, to answer that question, I would like to turn the presentation back to our researcher from Van University.”

“We will achieve scale by using the law of comparative advantage,” Şana explained. “In economics, a nation gains a comparative advantages in the fields where it can produce goods and services most cheaply. This is the basis for free trade. Since Naja is run by 7R1B3, a computer program, government overhead is virtually zero, save for the cost of electricity and bandwidth.”

As Şana delivered her Economics 101 lecture, Sarah could feel the audience getting restless. *GET HER TO WRAP IT UP*, she texted Kurt.

*GIVE HER A SECOND. I THINK SHE’S ACTUALLY GETTING IT*, he texted back.

Kurt was starting to feel bad about snapping at Şana. Some in the audience grew restless as the doctoral student delved into the fine points of economic trade. But Kurt saw another side to the student that he’d missed earlier. She was on the same page. She knew exactly the value of 7R1B3—perhaps better than Kurt did. The Orwellian question, he now realized, was rhetorical. She was testing Kurt’s resolve, and he’d made a fool out of himself.

“The main engine of our system of governance is a free, crowdsourced entity,” Şana continued. “Not unlike Wikipedia, something you all may be familiar with. There are no shadows in a government run by 7R1B3, and thus no opportunities for the kinds of kickbacks, bribes, and payoffs that cost governments, even many of those you represent, billions of dollars every year. This gives Naja a big advantage in pricing many goods and services.”

Then she did something that surprised Kurt. She broke out into a big, warm smile. That brought the assembly hall audience back to life, though Sarah noticed representatives from some notoriously corrupt countries continuing to shift uneasily in their leather seats. “And as everyone knows, people like things that are free. I would encourage everyone in the audience to put 7R1B3 to use in their own countries. If you would like to learn how, vote ‘yes’ on our application and check back with us in a year. I think you will be impressed with what you see.”

She was wrapping up her talk and about to turn the microphone over to Koban when calamity struck. For no obvious reason, the fire alarm went off in Container Six. The Mini-Guard automatic spot protection system was activated, and the entire cast and crew was enveloped in a white cloud of monoammonium phosphate.

To the audience at the UN, it looked like a bomb had gone off. They cut the AV to the general assembly, and there was a frenzy at the UN and inside Container Six as officials assessed the situation.

*WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED!!!* Sarah texted Kurt.

*ALL GOOD. JUST THE FIRE ALARM—FALSE ALARM*, Kurt responded.

*IT LOOKED LIKE AN EXPLOSION.*

*WE’RE FINE, JUST ANOTHER HICCUP—COULD BE 7R1B3 ACTING UP AGAIN.*

*AGAIN?*

*SOME PECULIAR THINGS HAVE BEEN HAPPENING. WEIRD TIMING.*

The secretary-general looked at Sarah again, this time with a confused expression. Sarah gave him a thumbs-up. When they resolved to bring the Naja connection back up, the AV specialist had the good sense to make it audio-only.

The secretary-general calmed the room and again yielded the floor to Koban, who pretended he and his colleagues weren’t covered head to toe in dry chemical and proceeded with his closing argument as if nothing had happened. “Naja is in great economic condition, and we have submitted an application declaration made by the formal instrument that Naja accepts the obligations contained in the United Nations charter. Thank you.”

There was a round of muted applause, and the audio feed ended.

*AFTER THAT PERFORMANCE WE’LL BE LUCKY IF THEY LET ME BACK IN THE BUILDING*, Sarah texted.

*HOW DO YOU THINK I FEEL—COVERED IN NOXIOUS BLEND OF FIRE SUPPRESSANT AND TALCUM POWDER?* wrote Hicks.

The assistant to the secretary-general took the floor. “The Security Council has reviewed the applicant state for membership and concluded that Naja is a peace-loving State and is able and willing to carry out the obligations contained in the Charter. On that basis, the Assembly will now take a decision on A-67-L-65-Revision1, entitled *Resolution to Grant Naja Non-member Observer Status*. The resolution is co-sponsored by the United States of America, France, the Marshall Islands, Guam, and Micronesia.”

At the front of the assembly hall, a list of member states was displayed with a voting indicator status icon next to each name.

“A recorded vote has been requested. We will now begin the voting process. Those in favor of the resolution, please signify. Those against…”

The list blinked with red, green, and yellow icons that looked like an airport flight-status indicator. It took less than a minute.

“The voting has been completed. Please log out of the machine. The results are as follows: in favor, 97; against, 30; abstain, 45. Draft resolution A-67-L-65-Revision1 is adopted.”

When the gavel came down for the third time, Sarah became Naja’s first Non-member Permanent Observer State ambassador to the United Nations. It was a long way from being a member state, but it was a start. She gave a quick wave and thanked the members applauding nearby. Then she texted three words back to the team in Naja: *WE DID IT!*

## Chapter 52

Naja, Eastern Anatolian Plateau

The UN resolution was great news for map makers, textbook editors, lawyers, accountants, flag makers, and the thousands of people in the business of updating international documents and procedures—middle schoolers around the world had another capital to memorize. It also meant that Naja had the chance it needed to stand on its own two feet. Before the vote, Naja met only three of the four requirements of the Montevideo Convention. It had a permanent population, a defined territory, and a form of government. But it was missing the most important ingredient: recognition and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. The UN resolution checked that box. Until that moment, most diplomats and state leaders considered Naja a curiosity, a hypothesis, an experiment—nothing more than a risky startup. Even Ozturk, who’d invested so much political capital in the establishment of a sovereign territory in a remote, troubled part of his country, hardly took Naja seriously. To him, it was just a chess move in his battle against Pecer.

But now the idea of a nation run by an automated government had been endorsed by the world’s most influential organization. As happy as he was, Kurt wondered if this was when the backlash he’d been waiting for would finally start. He decided to keep those fears to himself for the moment.

“We’re official now, Koban,” he said with all the exultation he could muster.

Hicks’s phone vibrated. It was Carlson, and he got right to the point. “Kill it.”

“Kill what?”

“We talked about this, Hicks. No one loves the idea of Naja as much as I do. But one radical idea—establishing a sovereign territory within another nation’s borders—is enough for me. A nation run by actual, real, live human beings. But now we have a problem. This little techno-nerd experiment has gone too far. Kill it or I’ll send someone in to do it for you.”

Carlson’s analysts predicted the UN vote wouldn’t pass. When it did, he panicked. The Naja UN vote set a dangerous precedent, and it was something that needed to be kept under control.

“It’s contained,” Hicks said. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“That’s bullshit, Hicks. 7R1B3 is a parasite. It latched onto a town in Fire Island. We found traces of it in Bridgeport, possibly the entire state of Connecticut. Now it has its own damn country. Where’s this going to end?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s exactly my point. I don’t care if you’ve fallen in love with some kind of crazy AI, we need to destroy these things before anyone gets any ideas.”

“It’s a bit late for that, isn’t it? I mean, the UN just signed off on—”

“That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“So what happens next?”

“We’re going to show Pecer just how dangerous this thing is, and he’s going to take care of it for us.”

“How?”

“Start a rumor. Something inflammatory, impossible to ignore.”

“Like what?”

“You’ll figure something out. Writing inflammatory reports under pressure was your specialty, wasn’t it?”

“But I—”

“Can’t talk anymore, Hicks. Get it done.” The connection went dead.

“Who was that?” Koban asked.

“A friend from Washington, calling to congratulate everyone,” Hicks answered.

In the background, 7R1B3 displayed country and resident data in real time and on four screens. Hicks stared at the numbers and graphs. It looked like a stock market trading floor. That’s when he realized Carlson was right. Given the chance, 7R1B3 really could change the world.

## 

## Chapter 53

After the UN vote, progress shifted into high gear. A shipment of modular apartments was trucked in and installed the first month, then another batch, followed by dozens more a month later. The Naja capital building came in on trucks: a gift from China, France, Russia, the U.K., and the United States, all permanent members of the UN Security Council. It was a sleek, LEED Platinum–certified, two-story milled aluminum structure designed by famed architect Jun Xia. It took two weeks to assemble, accommodated up to five hundred people, and could serve as an emergency shelter, if needed.

In front of the building was a weather-balloon-sized installation that had been shipped separately in a custom wooden crate, then carefully hoisted into position on a steel pillar anchored in concrete. It was another gift from the UN and paid for by a couple of silicon valley investors. The Walter De Maria–inspired sculpture was a polished stone sphere with a special coating that displayed text and graphics. It was solar-powered with batteries for nighttime viewing. After it was installed, someone thought it looked like a giant golf ball, and the nickname stuck.

A crowd gathered to listen to Koban dedicate the new building and share his vision and promise of an island of hope in a vast sea of uncertainty. As he delivered his remarks, Daisy appeared with a kerchief around her neck and her leash in her mouth. As many had come to expect, the dog wanted a walk, and Mia made sure it all landed on social media.

The event was a PR coup for the tech giants, not only because the Golf Ball symbolized promise and hope but also because it arrived in one piece and all the hardware and software worked. When the sculpture was switched on, the text that scrolled across the sphere wasn’t inspiring quotes or lyrics to the Naja anthem, it was facts about Naja’s water reserves, power usage, food reserves, budget surplus percent of GDP, imports, and modest exports.

The founders didn’t pretend to understand all the details, but the obvious conclusion was that Naja was on a roll. And not just its economy—the population was doing well, too. The average resident was sleeping 7.2 hours a night, dietary diversity was fifteen percent, mean body fat was twenty percent for men and twenty-six percent for women, average cardio health was 119 bpm after moderate exertion, and the state-trait anxiety depression index was .85, which was better than expected, considering the hellish circumstances that existed just over the border.

“Is this really us?” Mia asked in disbelief.

“Yes, it is. And we’re doing better than most countries in the world,” Koban answered.

“As long as we don’t get killed,” Stone added.

“Isn’t that stuff about body fat getting a little personal? I mean, would 7R1B3 know if I broke up with my boyfriend?”

“You don’t have a boyfriend, Mia,” Hicks sniped.

“How do you know?”

“Because nobody in Naja is crazy enough to go out with you,” Stone muttered under his breath.

“I heard that. Not very nice, military man. You’re the one who’s loco around here, with your weird island and killer drones.”

“Sorry,” Stone apologized with a tight-lipped smile.

The crowd was in no hurry to leave after Koban’s speech. They stayed glued to the Golf Ball, and there was intermittent applause as the numbers went by. But it wasn’t economic numbers that got the loudest cheer. It was a box score. Naja beat Brescia in an exhibition football match, 2–1.

After the dedication and sculpture-lighting ceremony, Koban convened the Naja governing council for the first meeting inside the new capital building. He tapped his gavel three times and announced the day’s proceedings. “Will the weekly meeting of the Naja governing council please come to order.” The council members faced the Naja flag, said the pledge of allegiance, and took roll call.

“I have four announcements,” Koban announced, reading from a script created by 7R1B3. “First, to guarantee a high literacy rate, Orton-Gillingham will be used for reading instruction.”

“Can’t argue with high literacy,” Kurt chimed in.

“Second, a Boston Consulting Group report was just published that estimates the value of Naja-style 7R1B3 micronation deployments could grow to five trillion dollars within twenty years,” Koban continued.

There were puzzled looks in the room. Koban shrugged and continued.

“Third, our population increased by two yesterday after twins were born in the medical tent last night. The babies and the mother are doing well.”

There was a round of clapping and cheers. “How come I’m the last to find out about these things?” Mia was exasperated. “This is important for our followers! We need a birthday party!”

“Great idea, Mia. Let’s continue. Second item, we made great progress on the overall health of the population, with sleep, nutrition, and exercise all showing signs of improvement. According to the 7R1B3 models, if this trend continues we can expect a sixteen percent improvement in economic productivity.”

“Sounds creepy,” Mia objected. “I feel like we’re living with a baby monitor.”

“I’m told by 7R1B3 that population health and sleep are correlated to Naja’s success, maybe even survival. Of course, we can turn them off if we feel it’s too intrusive. Do we want to vote on that?”

“Wouldn’t it just be easier to have a human government and forget about all this computer stuff?” Mia asked.

Kurt was irritated. “A day will come, sooner than we think, when Naja will have hundreds of thousands of citizens. It will have lots of infrastructure. Fixing sewer pipes—is that really something people need to vote on? Is that a policy decision? Repairing a backwater valve before shit backs up into people’s homes sounds like something that should happen without any debate. But it doesn’t, because politicians get rewarded for delaying repairs until the very last minute, when they cost the most to happen. Then, when repairs do happen, the people in office at the time crow about how they’re helping restore bridges. What if a dishwasher worked that way?”

“We don’t have bridges. We don’t even have a dishwasher,” Mia sniffed.

“Yet,” Kurt said.

“This sounds like a debate about the merits of a computerized government. Do we want to go back to the drawing board on that?” Koban asked.

There was grumbling, but the council didn’t raise any further objections. “Very well. Next, I’d like to motion to approve the minutes of the regular meeting held last week. All in favor, say aye.”

“Aye,” the counsel echoed in unison.

“Next, we have consideration to set a public hearing to amend a government calibration setting.”

Mia took a swig from a water bottle. “Cali-what?”

“Calibration setting. Most of our government is automated, but like a thermostat, we need to tell it what we’re comfortable with. That’s the calibration setting.”

“What setting are we talking about?” Kurt wanted to know.

“Self-expression. We need to pick a number between one and ten, with ten being the highest stochastic SE index,” Koban recited from a screen. He looked confused. “Can you tell us in plain English what this means?”

Kurt helped out. “Let me put it this way. One is like Russia under Stalin, and ten is like Woodstock ’69.”

Mia was the first to vote. “That’s easy. Ten.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work. Three seems like a better number. It’s who we are, at least at the moment,” Koban said.

Stone spoke up. “Well, most of us probably know that Mia here is running a secret nightclub. Two nights ago they had a Halloween party, and Mia went as a sexy police officer, fake guns strapped to her waist.”

Mia blushed and took another swig from her bottle. “You were asleep. How did you hear about that?”

Stone ignored her and continued. “Our drone force could have taken her as a threat but didn’t because we’re flying with a fairly high SE.”

“What’s SE, again?”

“SE is self-expression. So, you see, if we dial the calibration down to three, then Mia’s going to have to dial her parties down to two, or the next time we meet it’s going to be at a funeral.” Stone put a stick of gum in his mouth. “Just want to make sure everyone knows the trade-offs.”

“We could put it to a referendum,” Hicks suggested.

“We don’t have to. 7R1B3 already has the numbers. Based on the data and prevailing lifestyle choices, the average resident would be comfortable with an SE index of three. As they get more comfortable and settle into Naja life, 7R1B3 predicts this will shift up to five or six.”

“Sounds boring,” Mia opined.

“It is boring, but our people aren’t spoiled like you, Mia. They don’t know what security is. They didn’t grow up taking security for granted. Their friends and family were murdered. Some of our residents have had the shit kicked out of them. So you can understand that maybe law and order is a higher priority than being allowed to dance around in our underwear.”

Mia made a face. “Still sounds boring.”

Koban settled things down. “It will be boring for a while, then we can dial the SE up as people get more comfortable.”

“So what do these settings mean?” Mia probed. “If I tell you *vete pa’l carajo!*, will those flying monkeys put a bullet through my head?” Mia hooked a finger in the neck of her blouse and exposed her bra. “Can I expose these in the square? Because that’s a form of self-expression.”

A camera inside the capital was pointed at the gathering and sent compressed video to 7R1B3. The program already knew about the meeting because it was on the calendar. 7R1B3 further assessed that the faces matched the people invited to the meeting. But when the camera captured an image of Mia’s plain, flesh-toned, smooth-cup bra, 7R1B3 reacted in an unexpected way.

If the underwear had been the same color as the outerwear, it would have pattern-matched with common fashion photos. But the type of bra, the lighting, and the circumstances made the reveal pattern-match with photographic examples that were accidental and unintentional. The closest three matches were images of a woman shopping in department stores, but the fourth-closest was an image of a woman in a performance art event, and the fifth was a woman being harassed at a bus station. Deciding on the images to pay attention to and the images to ignore was where the SE threshold came into play. If SE was set high, all the images would be ignored and 7R1B3 would not react. But the SE was set to three, and 7R1B3 did react and dispatched three ADUs to Container Six and sent text messages to the attendees. Phones chimed, “*THREAT LEVEL 5: ADUS DISPATCHED*.”

A moment later there was a hum of rotor blades outside the capital. Mia opened the door and three ADUs surrounded her like seagulls.

“Do you need help?” The lead ADU asked in a soothing robotic voice.

*“Anda pa’l carajo!”* she screamed. “Are you kidding me?”

“Well, there’s your answer,” Stone pronounced.

“These helicopters are *maniosos*! Perverts!”

Stone stayed on task. “SE is now three, which seems low, based on the results of Mia’s bra test. I motion we set it to four.”

“Anyone want to second that?” Koban asked.

Hicks raised his hand.

The gavel came down and a motion was passed to raise the Naja Self-Expression Threshold from three to four. This was the new policy and the new law of the land. 7R1B3 then took the new calibration number and adjusted the optimization function weightings. The new setting would inform thousands of decisions each day, millions over the course of a year. The change would create unintended consequences, but 7R1B3 was designed to find equilibrium. In thermodynamics, it was the triple point, a temperature and pressure at which the three phases of a substance—gas, liquid, and solid—could coexist. The Naja counsel made the high-level decisions based on 7R1B3 data, and the program did the rest.

Koban turned to Kurt. “You wrote this thing. Let me ask you something.”

“I *didn’t* write this thing.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I kicked it off.”

“Same thing.”

“It’s not the same thing.” Kurt pointed to his phone. “Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone. If he were alive today, do you think he would recognize this?”

“Well, let me ask you a question anyway.”

“Like what?”

“If 7R1B3 gets security and the basics figured out, maintains an equilibrium, gets to that triple point you mentioned—what happens next?”

“What happens next?”

“If 7R1B3 makes all the right decisions and our citizens have food, water, shelter, clothing and security and universal basic income, then what? What are people going to do all day? What are *we* going to do all day?”

“We’re going to get shitfaced and party. That’s what we’re going to do,” Mia said.

Her answer was apt, but Kurt ignored it. “I don’t know. Something that gives us dignity, esteem, and respect. I think it’s your job to figure that out.”

Koban wanted more answers. “Does 7R1B3 have any ideas? Does it know what people should do?”

“7R1B3 doesn’t get ideas. It doesn’t have ideas. It trains off of exabytes of data and makes rational choices based on the threshold settings,” Kurt answered.

“Like a thermostat,” Koban clarified.

“Like a thermostat, a very smart thermostat.”

“What I’m asking is, could 7R1B3 assign a respected pastime or hobby to each citizen in the country?” Koban wanted to know.

“Yes, and the way it would do it is by looking at choices people make and their aptitude. Evaluate whether they are introverts or extroverts. Then it could come up with a list of options.”

“No freaking way. I did that in college—told me I should be an accountant,” Mia said.

“7R1B3 can provide options, but people need to find their own way of being accepted and valued by others. To do this, they need to contribute something of value. It’s why some people were turned away at the gate. Our community needs dignity to survive. 7R1B3 is staffing Naja in a way to give the country the best shot possible. It’s called self-actualization and self-transcendence,” Kurt explained, though inside he was not sure that what he was saying was accurate.

“I’m hungry. While you guys debate transcendence and the meaning of life, I’m going to get a sandwich,” Mia announced.

“Is that it? Is that the ultimate goal?” Koban asked.

“That’s it.”

“And 7R183 is working to make this possible?”

“That’s what its optimizing function does: life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, and no corruption.”

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## Chapter 54

Ashburn, Virginia

import smtplib

sender = ’tourism@naja.gov’

receivers = [‘adsales@fieldengineers.com']

message = "From: Raymond Station <Raymond.station@naja.gov> To: To Person <adsales@fieldengineers.com> Subject: Ad Unit Purchase

Thank you for agreeing to publish our story about Naja tourism. I’m sure your readers will be thrilled! Best, Raymond”

try:

smtpObj = smtplib.SMTP('localhost')

smtpObj.sendmail(sender, receivers, message)

Building forts was Donna Lee’s favorite pastime growing up. She lived next to a pine forest with prime hilltop, cliff, and stream strongholds. Deer paths connected them all together. Donna and her friends marked the outposts on a handmade map they kept in a wooden box hidden in a crawl space under the dining room.

In grade school, Donna and her friends would pack a lunch, a Sven-Saw, and a wrist rocket and hike back to the fort to make repairs, bury treasure in coffee cans, and engage imaginary kings and queens. The lean-tos were good for camouflage and some wind protection, but the rain poured in like a sieve.

In junior high, they equipped the forts with makeshift furniture and brought friends back for parties. Then Donna’s friends started driving cars and the parties shifted to the back seat, or to house basements when parents went out for the night.

Unlike her classmates, Donna was not captivated with cars and material things. She was teased for making her own dried food. She just preferred the outdoors, camping, and adventure. When she graduated from Case Western she knew she didn’t want to get caught behind a desk, so she looked for jobs outside. This led to a brief career as a field service engineer, working on pipelines and being dispatched to help with computer installations and repairs. Then she got recruited for the data-center job and couldn’t pass up the money.

But she missed travel and hungered for novelty, risk, and danger—the adrenaline rush. She didn’t realize it, but she was seeking a grown-up version of forts in the woods. So when she read the headline on her phone, she clicked to find out more.

*ADVENTURE TRAVEL*

*An exclusive, once-in-a-lifetime chance to be among the first visitors to a new country with desolate beauty. You are a self-reliant frontiersperson with a thirst for adventure and a curiosity for the unknown. Find out what it’s like to jump-start a new society, partner with neighbors, and integrate with the world. Meet like-minded individuals with stories to tell and dreams to fulfill!*

*A new country will be opening its doors for adventurous guests… 6 days/5 nights $5,500. Be among the first guests to stay in the Naja Hotel Royal, in the heart of the remote and isolated country of Naja. The eco-hotel is walking distance from fine dining, sightseeing, and other activities. Make yourself at home in one of the premier guest suites. Includes flat-screen TV, complimentary wireless internet, tour/ticket assistance, 24-hour front desk, and luggage storage. Free parking is available onsite. Enjoy a satisfying meal at local restaurants. Price does not include airfare.*

*Visa required. Trip insurance available for $700. $1,000 nonrefundable deposit required to book reservation. Letter from physician required for visa. BYOB. To book a reservation email:* [*tourism@naja.gov*](mailto:tourism@naja.gov)*.*

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Donna was sold at “self-reliant frontiersperson” and sent in the deposit the same day. A month later she had a tourist visa, and three weeks after that her plane touched down at Istanbul Atatürk Airport in Ankara, where she cleared customs and made a connection to the Gaziantep airport for the final hop to Naja.

In Gaziantep, a four-seat Cessna Skyhawk was waiting outside a private aviation hangar and preparing for departure.

“Ms. Lee?” the pilot greeted her. “May I see your ticket, passport, and visa?”

There were two other passengers seated in the cabin. One was a country musician named Oliver, from Sydney, and the other was a woman wearing a niqab and covered head to toe in black cloth. The clothing was unusual. In Turkey, the requirement for modesty was satisfied by dressing in *tesettür*, a head scarf and a light topcoat.

“You’re going to have to leave the water behind, Ms. Lee,” the pilot said as he examined Donna’s duffel bag.

“Is it a security problem?”

“It’s a weight problem. We have to keep the takeoff weight below eleven hundred kilograms…”

Donna looked puzzled.

“Otherwise we won’t be able to get off the ground.”

“I thought for what you guys are charging, we’d have a real plane,” Donna joked.

The pilot did not have a sense of humor. “This is a real plane, Ms. Lee; in fact it’s my plane, and I’m the only pilot certified to fly over Turkish airspace into the Naja airport. So you must do as I ask.”

One of the sticking points in the Naja lease negotiations was the method of transportation in and out. Ozturk was worried about Naja evolving into an enemy air base; Hicks was worried about roadside bombs. So they settled on something nonthreatening: private, four-seater prop planes out of Gaziantep. The airport was close and could be locked down if Ozturk changed his mind. As an additional security precaution, the pilot was Ozturk’s cousin and a retired flight lieutenant.

Donna opened the bottle, drank half of it, and poured the rest on the ground. The pilot stuffed her duffel in the back of the cabin. It was packed with boxes of dates, toilet paper, and dish towels. The muzzle of a 10mm Heckler & Koch MP5 poked out from under the dish towels.

“G’day, mate!” Oliver greeted her.

“Are you two together?”

“No, mate, she’s alone. Doesn’t speak English, either. I tried.”

An unaccompanied female wearing traditional Muslim dress on a small plane going on an adventure trip: It didn’t add up, Donna thought. But the pilot didn’t seem bothered. It’s an adventure trip, it’s all part of the ride, she assured herself.

The plane taxied down the runway and banked east toward Naja airport. It was a short hop to their destination. In less than thirty minutes they would be Naja’s first paying tourists.

## Chapter 55

Ten kilometers west of Naja was the town of Hakkâri. It was where Koban and his sister were born and where they lived for ten years before moving north to the city of Van. It also was where Koban met the man named Dick and exchanged one thousand lira for the fake Italian passport.

On the outskirts of the town, in the direction of Naja, was a Turkish army post and ammunition storage facility. As a concession to Pecer, Ozturk used part of the Turkish-Naja Treaty security funding to convert the facility to an MIT observation and listening post manned with two hundred and fifty officers. The unspoken side effect of the arrangement was that Pecer would also decide what to do with the mostly non-Turkish population of Hakkâri—which of course meant he would drive out as many as he could.

Pecer also used the security funding to encircle Naja with a twenty-five-kilometer dirt road. At any one time, half the officers stationed there patrolled this outer ring in shifts while the other half stayed on base, observing goings-on in Naja and compiling situation reports.

A black BMW barreled through the front gate and pulled up to the main command tent. It was Pecer, who liked to show up without warning. It was his way of keeping his men on their toes. But there was another reason for the visit. He had been notified about the tourist flight due to arrive in Naja and was also tipped off about the unaccompanied female in traditional Muslim dress—he had an idea about who she was. Then there were the dozens of intercepted messages to and from 7R1B3 that revealed Donna and the Australian tourist were foreign military advisers recruited to turn Naja into a rebel sanctuary.

It didn’t matter, and Pecer had no way of knowing, that it was Hicks who had tipped off an MIT case officer about the mysterious unaccompanied female passenger, and that Dark Aurora had fabricated the messages about the tourists. Pecer wanted desperately to eradicate Naja, and Dark Aurora, with goading from Hicks, gave him the excuse he needed.

The field commander was flustered when he spotted Pecer. “Welcome, sir,” he stammered.

“What’s the report?” Pecer snapped.

“The report, sir?”

“The situation report, Commander.”

The commander was flanked by a lieutenant colonel who gave a detailed situation report on Naja defense force size, activity, location, markings, timing, and equipment. “Civilians reported conducting nonthreatening activities. Location six kilometers west, no hostile markings sighted. Equipment limited to handguns, two off-road recreational vehicles, and a small bulldozer. They also have multi-rotor flying vehicles for internal recognizance and policing purposes.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Pecer sniffed. “You said the personnel observed were civilians? How do you know that, Commander?”

“There are no markings, sir. No activity that would suggest they are military personnel. They are not observed setting up bunkers or machine gun positions. We did not observe ammo being loaded into vehicles. The vehicles we did observe did not have military markings.”

“So what you’re saying is the lack of markings is what makes them not a threat?”

“Yes, and their actions, too. They’re not doing anything that is threatening.”

“Have you sighted any air traffic coming in or out? Any private fixed-wing aircraft?”

“No, sir.”

“Tell me more about these unmanned combat aerial vehicles.”

“They’re not combat aerial vehicles, sir, they’re small multicopters.”

“Do they fly?”

“Yes.”

“Do they shoot bullets?”

“Some do, yes.”

“Then they’re combat aerial vehicles, Commander.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So let me ask you again: Tell me more about these combat aerial vehicles, Commander.”

“Yes, sir. Well, we don’t know much about them. They seem to have a limited range, but they are smart.”

“Smart, Commander?”

“Intelligent, I would say. Maybe artificially intelligent.”

“What exactly do you mean by that, Commander?”

“What I mean is they appear to fly themselves and make decisions on their own.”

“How many are there?”

“We don’t know the precise number, sir. We assess there are about four thousand, but there could be more.”

“You’re telling me there are four thousand killer robots a few kilometers from here and you’re not worried, Commander?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, you should be.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pecer crossed his arms and tucked his fists under his biceps to make them bulge. “Let me tell you what I know. We have a renegade group of *baş belâsı* a few kilometers away from here. They have a deadly drone air force. They also have a population with at least a few thousand capable young men that could be converted to kill teams, if not a standing army.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you left something else out, Commander.”

“What is that, sir?”

“You left out the fact that four of our guys died.”

“Yes, sir. According to reports, they were killed in an explosion. A weapon discharged and ignited flammable gas.”

“I think we can say they would be alive today if it were not for the people in Naja.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you down any equipment, Commander?”

“Yes, sir, we are down five to ten grenades, smoke, and batteries for the tack lights. Ammo, too. The resupply is scheduled for next week.”

Pecer was impatient even though the conversation was moving quickly. He paused to process the report. He knew he did not have much time before Ozturk found out where he was and red flags went up. This was his chance and he took it.

Pecer pointed toward Naja and lowered his voice. “Commander, where would your mortar line need to be if I asked you to put a high explosive round on that target?”

The commander looked shaken and hesitated. “Which target?”

“Naja. Where would your mortar line need to be to drop an eighty-one-millimeter shell on the top of their heads?”

The commander hesitated. “I would need orders from—”

“It’s a simple question, Commander.”

“We would need to set up three to four kilometers from the target.”

“Then do it.”

“That’s sovereign territory, sir. It would require evidence for clear and present danger—or a declaration of war.”

The field commander was skittish. He was half Pecer’s age and fifteen centimeters shorter. He wore a uniform that strained across the beginnings of a paunch. Pecer pressed his advantage. With his feet planted shoulder-length apart, he flexed his back and put his face an inch from the bridge of the commander’s nose. “Evidence, Commander?” Spit sprayed from Pecer’s mouth as he growled. “We have four men dead and you want to talk to me about evidence? You just told me there are kill teams ready to deploy and a high-tech air force with a thousand units, maybe more. That’s what ‘clear and present danger’ means, Commander, and we’re going to respond in a way that is formidable and appropriate. You’re going to put a high explosive shell on that target. Is that order clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And another thing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“If your patrols spot a plane, or if you radar guys see a pinball, shoot it down. It could be a battle drop. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

Pecer looked for his next stop and spotted a trailer-mounted mobile radar unit. A tech watched the screen tracking Naja activity and took notes in a log. Pecer leaned in and used an index finger to draw a circle around an artifact on the screen. “What is this on the radar, soldier?”

“Random noise or likely birds, sir.”

“*Likely?* Could they be projectiles, Commander?”

“Not likely. The radar signature looks random or a biologic, sir. If they were projectiles, they would be moving at faster—”

“That could be ducting, right?”

Ducting, or ghosting, described what happened when radar energy was caught in the cold layers of the atmosphere and caused unpredictable results.

“It could be.”

“And that could be covering up projectiles—bogies, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, put that in your log, then.”

“Log, sir?”

“In your log, write down that you observed evidence that the enemy was shooting at us.” Then, before the soldier had time to respond, Pecer focused on a big object in the center of the radar screen. “What’s this?”

“It’s an aerostat, sir. An observation balloon.”

“So they’re using that to look down our shorts?”

“That’s one way to put it, sir.”

Pecer turned to the commander. “Get rid of it,” he said.

While Pecer and the commander huddled around the radar screen, four men packed an American-made M29 mortar weapon system into the back of a Land Rover Defender, drove along the patrol perimeter, then went off-road toward Naja. When they reached a point three kilometers from the border, the vehicle stopped and the squad began setting up.

The gunner and assistant gunner unfolded a bipod on a chrome-plated tube and nested the baseplate in a small pit dug out from the rocky soil. Based on GPS grid settings, they’d set a trajectory close to seventy degrees. They reported in.

Back at the outpost, the squad commander’s voice crackled over the radio. “We are in position.”

The commander was about to respond when Pecer grabbed the radio out of his hands. “Adjust fire grid, over,” he instructed.

“Charge 4, grid 4 R PQ 45, over.”

Pecer handed the radio back to the commander. “Hold this for a moment. I need to inform the president’s security council what is happening here before we go further.”

The commander visibly relaxed. He had hoped the president would put a stop to Pecer’s madness. The citizens of Naja had done nothing to provoke an attack. Ozturk had a reputation for being levelheaded. He would tell Pecer to stand down, and if he didn’t, at least there would be less blowback when the shit hit the fan.

But Pecer didn’t relay a situation report to the president’s security council. Instead he texted, *Taking fire. Repeat, Naja is attacking government field position. We hoped something like this would not happen. Now I’m told by our commander we have no choice but to respond. The leaders of Naja violated terms of treaty.*

Pecer followed up the text with a blurry picture of Naja in the distance. There was a rock bunting silhouetted against the afternoon sky. In the picture it looked like a black speck that could have been anything. But the way Pecer described it left no doubt. *They’re shooting at us. See—that’s projectile in sky. Very dangerous for our men here!*

The message was sent to a man named Basir. He was a former classmate and the managing editor of BT, or Birleşik Tarihi, a conservative Turkish blog with two million followers. BT would publish the story, and from there it would fan out to another twenty mainstream right-wing online publications, then to hundreds of thousands of social media posts. BT was a direct pipeline to Pecer’s supporters, and before Ozturk had a chance to react, Pecer would have his millions of hot-blooded, rabidly conservative followers calling for the destruction of Naja.

Back in the field, the ammunition handler unpacked two shells and laid them on a tarp. One was a three-kilogram shell loaded with white phosphorous, designed to create smoke and cause confusion. The other was a 4.5-kilogram shell packed with high explosives. The angle and direction were computed. All that was left was to wait for an order.

## 

## Chapter 56

Naja

Stone spotted the Skyhawk first. He was in his element. Whatever he did in the Army, it included spending a lot of time around aircraft. The plane was fifteen kilometers out and still invisible to the naked eye. Stone’s radio picked up the pilot. He asked Gaziantep Center for a readout of his ground speed. The center replied: “Bravo Echo 211, I’m showing you at ninety knots on the ground.” Kurt recognized the tone. Even in Turkey, it was the familiar and distinct “Houston Center voice” featured in documentaries and feature films about the United States space program. It didn’t matter what sector of the world pilots flew in, it always seemed like the same guy was talking, and the voice was a comforting sound to pilots everywhere. “Bravo Echo 211, contact Naja Center on 127.8.”

The pilot continued with a Chuck Yeager impersonation in a Turkish dialect. Even if he was an average pilot, he sounded great over the air. “127.8 for Bravo Echo 211, good day.”

The plane cruised at sixteen hundred meters for thirty minutes. When it reached a point thirty kilometers from Naja, the pilot was back on the radio: “Naja Traffic, white Skyhawk, call sign Tango Charlie Seven, niner, four, eight, we’re about thirty kilometers northeast of the field, we’re going to be joining a straight in for RWY 290.”

Stone handed Kurt a pair of binoculars and pointed toward the door. “Go out and see if they look lined up.”

Kurt walked out of Container Six, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the bright sun. He heard a buzz in the sky and centered the Cessna in his binoculars.

“Naja Traffic, Tango Charlie Seven, fifteen kilo final, 290.”

That was Stone’s cue. “Tango Charlie Seven, 290 cleared to land, wind 110, at five.”

Naja had a short field runway, seven hundred meters long. It took a week to rough out the strip with a tractor with a six-foot disc-harrow attachment on loan from a local farmer. It took another two weeks to fill in the potholes using a steer loader and volunteer grunt labor. It was slow and painful, but the result was sufficient, and runway 290 degrees at Naja International was born.

Stone listened for another transmission from the pilot, but the airwaves were quiet. This was typical. Aviation professionals only spoke on the radio when there was a reason to. The approach was textbook.

Stone was focused on the radar image when he heard the jangling of Mia’s thick gold-chain necklace. She was holding a pair of trousers and a clean shirt.

“Put these on.”

“I’m busy, Mia.”

“Put these on. Now!” she blasted.

“Get the hell out of here, Mia, I’m bringing in a plane.”

“No. The pilot is bringing in the plane. You’re watching him on the screen. Put these on.”

“Why?”

“Because you look like a bum. These are Naja’s first tourists. We’re going to be taking a lot of pictures, and you need to look good.”

“Look, Mia, I know you’re just doing your job, but I—”

“Put on the damn clothes, Stone!” Mia dropped the trousers and shirt on the radar screen and turned her back to give him privacy. “I’m waiting.”

Rather than argue, Stone changed into the clean clothes. He un-cinched his belt, and his jeans fell to his ankles. He was hoping he could slip his pants off without taking off his shoes, but they were too bulky and got caught between the sole and the top of the heel.

“I’m stuck!”

Mia turned around and let out a loud cackle. “You look like a kangaroo! Let me help.”

“Get the hell away from me.”

Mia ignored him and grabbed the top of Stone’s jeans and tried to pull up. Instead she applied just enough force to cause Stone to lose his balance. He tried to put a foot out to steady himself, but the jeans were wrapped around his ankles, and he toppled onto the floor.

He was wriggling on the floor in his boxer shorts, and Mia was pulling on a shoe. Daisy watched from the corner and started thumping her tail on the floor. She trotted over, put her nose a few centimeters from Stone’s face, and gave him a big, wet lick.

A figure appeared in the doorway. It was Koban, showered and well dressed. “Am I interrupting something?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m getting attacked by a maniac!” Stone yelled.

“Look at him. Look! Why can’t you look like him?” Mia said. “Koban knows how to dress, you look like a bum!”

“We’re running an air traffic control center and all she can think about is how we look.”

“She’s right, Stone. This is a big deal. The world is watching. We need to look good.”

Koban reached down to help loosen Stone’s shoes when an ominous voice came from the radio. The speaker was male, with a thick Turkish accent. “Unidentified air contact in position 37.4459 degrees north, 43.7450 degrees east, on a course of 290 at eighty knots, at one thousand meters, you are in restricted airspace. Your identity is not known, and your intentions are unclear. You are standing into danger and will be subject to defensive measures. Request you establish communications now or alter course immediately to stand clear.”

The pilot came back, “This is Skyhawk, call sign Tango Charlie Seven, niner, four, eight, we are cleared to land…”

At that moment there was a rap, and a .50 caliber bullet pierced the aluminum skin on the belly of the plane, entered the cockpit, passed between the two front seats, and exited through the roof.

*“Amına kodu mun piçi!”* the pilot yelled over the air. A second later another bullet ripped through the front of the instrument panel and exited through the windshield. A jet of air blasted into the cockpit, carrying with it the stench of fuel. “Naja Traffic, this is Skyhawk Tango Charlie Seven, we have an emergency.”

Stone got to his feet, hopped to the air traffic control panel, pulled up his pants with one hand and grabbed the mic with the other. “Go ahead, Skyhawk Tango Charlie Seven.”

“We’re taking fire. We have a possible fuel leak and a broken windshield. Request distance to 290, over.”

Stone looked at the aerostat radar screen. “Skyhawk Tango Charlie Seven, you are 5,500 meters from 290.”

Outside, Kurt kept his glasses trained on the plane. From his location the approach looked normal, but Kurt noticed something missing. The plane was quiet. There was no engine noise. Must be downwind, he thought. But as the plane approached there was still no sound. Then he noticed the propeller locked in a six o’clock position.

The pilot did the calculation in his head. For a Skyhawk, the math was simple. The glide ratio was nine to one, which meant for every hundred meters of altitude, the plane could glide nine hundred meters. When the plane lost power they were flying at eight hundred meters, which meant they could glide 7,200 meters. But there was a slight headwind, so their effective range was less, maybe 5,000 meters—a hundred meters short of the Naja airfield.

“Brace yourselves, we’re going to come in a little short,” the pilot said to his passengers.

“What the hell does that mean?” Donna demanded.

“It means we’re in for a fauk’n bingle!” the Aussie shouted.

Donna looked panicked. “Can we throw out some weight?”

“It will keep us in the air a little longer, but it won’t affect the glide path,” the woman in the niqab explained. It was the first thing she’d said the entire trip.

“Now you decide to talk? We’re going to cark it and now you start to talk?” the Aussie grumbled.

The cloaked passenger didn’t react.

Inside Container Six, Stone monitored the glide path from the Aerostat radar. “You’re good on the approach, stay on 290.”

“Roger that, Naja Control. Please have emergency crew ready. We may not make the field.”

“Roger that, Tango Charlie Seven.” Stone released the transmit button and gave out instructions. “Get the crash crew and med staff on alert.”

The way Stone barked orders implied that Naja had vast resources stockpiled for a plane crash emergency. They had resources, but they were more like what you would find at a summer camp, not an airport. Naja was a remote airfield. Even poor countries like Haiti had more to work with than an untested airfield and twenty volunteers holding fire extinguishers, backboards, and blankets.

The plane dropped to two hundred meters, and that was low enough to hear the pop of small arms fire. A .50 caliber bullet entered through the floor panel and grazed the mystery passenger’s right thigh. She let out a muted cry.

“Naja Control, this is Skyhawk Tango Charlie Seven.”

“Go ahead, Tango Charlie Seven.”

“We’re taking fire. We have a passenger hit.”

The key to a good landing was to aim for a spot fifty meters past the beginning of the runway. On a paved runway, this was where the runway number was painted. But Naja’s runway wasn’t paved, it had no numbers, and the Skyhawk glide path wouldn’t reach the start of the airstrip, not to mention partway down. What the plane was aiming for was a rough patch of harrowed earth mixed in with scrub oak and small boulders. When the plane was thirty meters off the ground, the pilot pulled back on the stick and brought the nose up. That’s when another bullet cut an elevator cable one meter forward of the canted bulkhead.

“Naja Control, this is Skyhawk Tango Charlie Seven. Elevators not responsive. Trim only.”

The pilot tried to flare on approach but did not have full control. The crash landing unfurled over twenty seconds. The Skyhawk had fixed landing gear and they landed hard and bounced three times over rocks, holes, and scrub oak. On the third bounce the nose gear was subjected to a force that was ten times the design tolerance and broke off. With nothing to support the front of the plane, the propeller blades dug into the ground, then broke off from the hub. The plane was wrenched to the side and slid on the cabin belly for fifty meters before hitting a pile of rocks. The force hit the passengers with a side impact that was the same as a being hit by a brick dropped from a second-story window. The nose burrowed into a ditch, and the plane flipped and came to rest upside down.

Kurt sprinted toward the accident and reached the wreckage first. It reeked of fuel. He grabbed the doorframe with two hands and bent the hinges back. Inside, the niqab-clad woman was barely conscious.

“Tourniquet!” a confident voice ordered. A man jumped in front of Kurt and tightened a Velcro strap around the woman’s upper thigh to slow the blood flow. He was a recent Naja immigrant from Van, and a former EMT. He was carrying Velcro straps, a backboard, and a cervical collar. Even in a heightened state of emergency, Kurt couldn’t help but realize how surreal it was that a man who’d grown up on almost the same soil as Naja was considered an immigrant. Then Kurt looked at the woman and wondered who she was. He reached down and started to lift her veil.

“No!” the EMT shouted.

Kurt was startled and jerked his hand back. “Modesty? You’re worried about modesty?”

“I’m worried about paralyzing this woman from the neck down for no reason.” He took Kurt’s hand and pressed its heel on the woman’s femoral artery, between the groin and the upper thigh, to reduce circulation. “Keep the pressure on.” While Kurt slowed the blood flow to the wound, the EMT applied the large white plastic cervical collar. Then he positioned the backboard next to the woman. “OK now, we’re going to get her out of here. Roll her onto the backboard as one unit.”

Together they rolled and centered the woman’s body on the board and strapped her in first by the chest, then the hips and feet. Next, Kurt’s counterpart stuffed foam padding in the hollows, secured her head, and readjusted the collar.

“Now we can check for signs of concussion, lacerations, or bruises on her head,” he instructed.

Kurt lifted the black cloth. The woman looked up at Kurt, her face blanched but radiant in the Turkish sun. It was Samira.

Kurt vaguely recognized her but didn’t quite make the connection.

He held Samira’s fingers. They felt like wax. “You will make it,” he whispered in her ear. “Stay with me.”

The edge of Samira’s lips moved. It was a weak smile that said she was grateful for his encouragement. Kurt stroked a line on Samira’s face and wrapped a blanket around her to protect her against shock.

Two volunteers helped Kurt and the EMT attach Samira’s backboard onto the quad. The other passengers required help, too, but their needs were not as urgent. Somehow the Aussie passenger walked away from the crash without a scratch. Donna had minor abrasions and possible symptoms of a mild concussion.

The pilot was not as lucky. When the plane nosed in the crash, a steel steering rod broke free, plunged into his neck, and cut his carotid artery. There was blood all over the cockpit. It happened fast—he was unconscious in fifteen seconds, dead two minutes later.

Donna and Oliver were wrapped in blankets and in shock.

The trip back to the clinic was an ordeal. The vehicle’s knobby tires lunged and faltered as they climbed over rocks and through ditches. A wheel plunged into an animal burrow covered in hearty goosefoot plants, and the vehicle pitched forward. The bump sent a shock wave through the vehicle suspension and up through the bones of the riders. Kurt could only imagine how the bumpy ride was magnifying Samira’s trauma.

The quad entered the main square, where Koban was anxiously waiting for her. Flashbacks raced through his head as the medical staff brought his half-conscious sister into the same tent where his mother had died just weeks earlier. The scene inside the tent was chaotic. While two medical assistants focused on Samira, others were raiding the medical cabinets and hoarding supplies.

The ACUs could have provided a measure of stability and order but instead meandered as if they were being guided by a different reality—which they were. The medical assistants began tending to Samira’s wound, and that’s when the shelling started.

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## Chapter 57

Three Kilometers Southeast of Naja

The assistant gunner attached five augmentation rings to the bottom of the shell and handed it to the gunner.

“Fire for effect,” came the command over the radio. The gunner placed the fins of the shell into the top of the tube, held on to the belly of the shell with one hand, and shouted, “Hanging!”

Then he let go.

What happened next took six seconds. First the shell slid down the tube and slammed into a fixed firing pin. This ignited the baseline charge, which created a gas that propelled the shell out of the tube at two hundred fifty meters per second in a parabolic arc that was calculated to terminate over Naja Center.

Daisy was the first to hear the mortar slicing through the air. Her ears perked up. Then, when the shell was a hundred meters from the ground, a timed fuse blew open the shell casing, and a kilogram of phosphorus produced thick white smoke when it touched the air.

Kurt and Stone were in Container Six when the smoke bomb went off. Stone recognized the sound right away. “Don’t worry. It’s just an illum!” he shouted. Nobody knew what that meant, and panic took hold. Koban called for order but nobody listened. Daisy shivered and hid in a packing crate near the greenhouse. “Take this,” Stone instructed, handing Koban a .45.

Koban was with Samira. Through the door of the medical tent he spotted a crowd carrying bags and running. Naja was disintegrating before his eyes. Kurt shot out a text to Hicks. *Under fire. WTF GOING ON?*

Back on the mortar line, the gunner hung another shell at the top of the tube. This time it was filled with high explosives. “Shot over!” he yelled into the radio after the bomb left the tube. The shell climbed up over two kilometers of scrub oak, reached an apex four hundred meters above Naja’s front gate, then made a sweeping descent toward capital circle. A moment later, traveling at two hundred meters per second, it pierced the canvas roof of the food tent and plunged into a forty-liter commercial soup kettle filled with tomato-basil bisque. At that velocity, the soup had the properties of a solid. The impact triggered the fuse on the nose of the shell, which set off a secondary exploder charge and the high-explosive filler. The blast broke the steel shell casing into small fragments and produced a hypersonic shock wave that ripped through the tent with the force of four sticks of dynamite.

In a fraction of a second, the overpressure collapsed the chef’s eardrums, eyes, brain, and hollow organs. Chunks of shrapnel entered one side of his body, tearing apart flesh and bone, and exited the opposite side. Twelve others were caught in the primary blast radius and died in milliseconds.

Ten more bystanders were in the secondary blast radius, including Oliver, the musician and tourist from Australia. He was twenty meters from the food tent, but it was close enough that the shock wave burst his eardrums and collapsed his lungs, stomach, and GI tract. Blood poured inside his body cavity.

Bystanders in the tertiary blast radius lost their sight and hearing. Fires broke out as the acrid smell of burning building materials filled the air. Naja was a horror scene. Thousands of residents were running for cover, Mia among them. In the back of her mind she remembered someone saying the capital building was a designated shelter, but she was disoriented, and the thick smoke made it difficult to see. She stumbled into a large object that seemed out of place, and was. It was the Golf Ball. The blast had knocked it off the tee, and it had rolled ten meters and slammed into the capital building, blocking the entrance.

Mia crouched inside a space between the marble ball and the door of the building and waited. There was chaos everywhere, but the shelling seemed to have paused.

Then a voice called out, “Mia?”

Mia felt weak. Her fingers were numb and sweaty. Panic was taking hold. The voice called out again, but the second time it wasn’t a question. “Mia!” She focused her eyes on a pair of figures. It was Stone and Koban, and they were holding Samira between the nylon handles of a soft stretcher.

Samira was alert, restless, and trying to help. Koban and Stone set the stretcher down to give Samira a chance to rest her head on her elbow and dispense medical tips.

“You’re bleeding, but they look like abrasions. Wipe them with these,” Samira told Mia, holding a package of antiseptic cleansing wipes she’d pulled from a pouch attached to the stretcher.

“Let’s get out of here,” Koban said impatiently, eager to move his sister as far away from danger as possible.

Mia became more aware of her surroundings. Then she noticed something she hadn’t seen before: hundreds of residents carrying bags and moving in all directions but mostly headed outward, toward the border.

“Where’s everyone going?” she asked.

“They’re panicking. There’s a rumor going around that Naja is a trap and if they stay they’ll all be killed,” Stone said. “But that’s not what I’m worried about. They could have wiped us out if they wanted to, but they didn’t. Tells me the mortar was a one-off. Maybe a warning or a mistake—maybe both.”

Mia held her head in her hands, but when she looked up her face was a picture of steely resolve. “The world needs to see what’s happening here!” she decided.

Her phone was charged and had a passable network connection. It was a Thursday, for the rest of the world a slow news day, and a fertile moment to launch a viral campaign. Mia snapped photos and videos of the carnage: a mutilated arm too small to be from an adult, random images of the brutality Pecer had created, the bomb-damaged mess tent, Naja’s citizens fleeing in terror. Her digital audience saw a picture of the Golf Ball blocking the entrance of the capital building; some claimed it was a biblical metaphor. Then Daisy appeared. She’d escaped the blast unharmed except for a strained ligament. Mia shot a video of Daisy limping against a backdrop of blood, bits of hair, and canvas. The images were raw and barbaric and stirred Naja’s millions of followers to tears.

From the dark corners of the internet, Pecer’s PR machine tried to control the narrative and counter the response from Mia’s news stream. But the army of brainwashed conservative automata couldn’t land a punch. False claims of fake news and doctored images were flushed out by Mia’s live reporting and the millions of followers who amplified her message. Mia’s real-time evidence was overwhelming and irrefutable. The world was watching Pecer’s security apparatus at work.

Then all at once, the live reporting stopped.

Mia’s phone still had a connection to the local wireless network, but there was a problem. The connection between the VSAT antenna and the Newtec satellite modem wasn’t working. Stone’s phone lost its signal, too, and that made him agitated. “We have to get moving,” he instructed. As long as there was communication to the outside world, there was a measure of protection. Stone reasoned that with communication cut off, whoever was shelling them would be happy to wipe out Naja, and without the annoyance of internet commentary.

“Our phones are down!” Stone shouted as he and Koban lifted Samira’s stretcher. “We have to get everyone out of here.” A Wind-Devil sucked smoke, dust, and debris into a gusty funnel and made it hard to see. Then the swirl collapsed as fast as it appeared and revealed Hicks slipping away from Naja Center with a pocketknife in his hand.

Koban called out his name, but he didn’t respond.

“Maybe he lost his hearing in the blast,” Stone said.

That explanation went out the window when Hicks pressed a phone against his ear and started talking. “How come he has a connection and nobody else does?” Koban asked.

“Maybe there’s another Wi-Fi network that’s not public,” Stone speculated.

## 

## Chapter 58

While Stone, Koban, Mia, and Samira gathered near the capital, Kurt was two hundred meters from the border, hiding in a clump of white goosefoot flowers. He staggered to his feet and fought the urge to sneeze as he wiped a layer of pollen off his face. He also fought back a creeping panic attack, his survival instincts kicking into a heightened level of intensity. Blood rushed to areas of his body designed for protection: muscles in his legs and arms, for running, and his eyes, to better see danger. The parts of his brain that consumed unnecessary fuel for abstract thinking, judgment, orientation, and memory were largely shut down. Instead of concentrating on immediate military threats, he became fixated on an acute fear of something more dubious. Snakes. It was irrational and improbable, but Kurt got it inside his head that the explosion had disrupted the blunt-nosed viper’s dens and shelters and sent the snakes into a frenzy. He also realized if that was the case, he was wearing the wrong shoes. In his mind he could feel the fangs pierce the canvas of his low-rise Vans and the venom injected into the veins in his foot.

His phone was dead and he had no way of locating the others, so he decided to follow the crowd and make a run for the border. As he ran, he aimed his feet toward open patches of dirt and avoided the grass clumps and flowering *crambe* where he imagined the serpents lurked. But as carefully as he tried to avoid the imagined danger, he didn’t see the small rock, a twenty-centimeter piece of gray chert, that protruded from the ground and wrenched his foot violently inward. As he went down he could hear the pop of lateral ankle ligaments pulling off small pieces of bone as they were stretched and torn.

Kurt lay alone in a ditch less than ten meters from the border, pain shooting through his legs and hips, and his ankle swelling to the size of a cantaloupe. Through the narcotizing fog of the neurotransmitters that flooded his brain, he heard the sound of automatic gunfire and the rumble of heavy trucks.

That’s when the massacre happened.

It was as brutal as it was systematic. The MIT border patrol was skirting the buffer road like sheepdogs. They were driving three Unimog 1350s, large vehicles customized to be mine- and ambush-resistant and fitted with ballistic glass. Mounted on the back of each Unimog was a .50 caliber M2 Browning machine gun trained on the waves of Naja refugees fleeing and trying to make it to the buffer between the Naja border and the ring road. Some were confused and thought the shots were being fired from Naja and ran faster toward the MIT guards. Others turned to run back to Naja and were shot in the back.

There ground was littered with more than a dozen bodies. Kurt watched the horror unfold from his vantage point on the ground, then slipped into semiconsciousness.

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A voice snapped him out of his haze. “Give me your hand!” It was Hicks. “I thought I lost you. What are the chances?! Where’s everyone else?”

“We got split up in the attack.”

“You can’t stay here,” Hicks said. Perspiration dripped from his hairline.

“You go. Leave me here,” Kurt said.

Hicks didn’t reply. Instead, he did something Kurt couldn’t understand. He extended his left arm and pointed it toward the horizon, and held the back of his phone with his other hand at an angle near his right eye. He adjusted the slant and position until the sun reflected off the glass screen onto his outstretched hand. There was more automatic gunfire.

“Stay down!” Kurt wailed.

But Hicks didn’t budge. He stayed focused, like a sailor taking a measurement with a sextant. With his hand still outstretched, he pivoted his body toward the MIT patrol trucks. One of the patrol trucks flashed its headlights.

Hicks put his phone away and glanced at Kurt. “Can you walk?”

“I can’t even crawl,” Kurt answered.

“We have to get over to that truck,” Hicks said as he pushed his arms under Kurt’s armpits and locked his fingers across the front of his chest. He pushed up with his legs and raised Kurt to his feet, but the ankle could not bear weight. Kurt groaned and Hicks started to lose balance.

A voice piped up from behind them. “You guys OK?” It was Mia, followed by Stone and Koban carrying Samira on a stretcher.

Hicks was startled and lay Kurt back down on the ground.

“Were you ignoring us back there?” Mia asked Hicks, half-joking.

“Sorry about that, I was on an important call,” Hicks said.

“More important than checking up on your friends?” Koban cut in with mounting suspicion.

“I was trying to find a way out for all of us,” Hicks managed to explain.

“How were you able to do that with the communication link down?” Stone asked.

The MIT patrol truck flashed its lights again, and Hicks’s phone started ringing. Nobody moved.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” Koban asked.

Hicks’s eyes blinked rapidly as he pushed the answer button. “We see you. Stay in position,” he said over the phone. Then the line went dead.

“Who was it?” Koban asked.

“That was Ozturk’s extraction team. They’re going to get us out of here,” Hicks lied.

Then Koban did something nobody imagined he was capable of. He drew his .45 and pointed it at Hicks’s head. “You’re full of shit. That was the MIT, those trucks are MIT.”

“Whoa, Koban. Put the gun down,” Stone said. Koban waved the gun at Stone and told him to back off, then pointed it back at Hicks. Samira tried to calm her brother down, but it had no effect.

“When did they turn you?” Koban asked with cold fury in his voice.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ve lost your mind,” Hicks sputtered.

Kurt put his hand on his waist, looking for his .45, but it had fallen out of its holster when he went down. The MIT patrol truck pulled closer and skidded to a stop a few meters away from the Naja border. The tinted window of the passenger side rolled down, revealing the barrel of a gun pointed toward them. A rush of stomach acid bubbled into the back of Samira’s mouth when she recognized the gunman. It was her cousin Nasim, whom she had not seen since he lured her into Pecer’s palace.

“Koban, put the gun down and let’s get out of here!” Nasim shouted from the truck.

“He’s right. Put it down,” Hicks repeated.

Koban was distracted, which gave Stone the few seconds he needed to employ a technique he’d learned in close quarters combat training. As Koban turned to face his cousin, Stone reached out and grabbed his wrist, forced the gun up in the air, twisted his arm, then flipped him to the ground. It was all one move, and it happened fast.

Hicks let out a puff, but the relief was short-lived.

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Twenty meters away, three ADUs approached at shoulder height and in a delta formation. They were surprisingly well trained for the chaos that surrounded them, as if it were a situation they had rehearsed many times. They stayed upwind of smoke plumes and used the contours of the land for protection. ADUs were designed for policing, but these ADUs seemed to be comfortable with battlefields.

As they approached, input from their image sensors matched a pattern with a very high probability of lethal engagement. It was an edge case and another trolley problem where logic tilted toward protecting the president at almost any cost. The ADUs had an image of Stone with a gun in his hand and standing over Naja’s president, who was lying on the ground. The image was confirmed and double-checked by all three ADUs, and they did what they were trained to do.

The lead ADU adjusted its yaw and pitch and fired a bullet. A hole opened up in the side of Stone’s head, and he collapsed into a patch of goat’s thorn. Mia ran to his side, but there was nothing she could do. Samira and Kurt also tried to help, but they were struggling with their own injuries. Koban reached for his gun on the ground and shot madly at the ADUs, but to no effect.

Then Koban pointed his gun at Hicks, who was attempting to make a run for the patrol truck.

“Stop!” Koban shouted. Hicks stopped in his tracks and put his hands up.

That was when Nasim gave an order.

The man stationed behind the .50 caliber gun mounted to the bed of the Unimog fired two rounds. The first grazed Koban in the arm, and the second blew a hole through his heart.

Kurt watched the events unfold from the ground in shock, fighting back waves of nausea as he stared at the corpses of Koban and Stone five meters away. Samira threw herself on her dead brother. Mia looked at Hicks like she wanted to kill him. “Who do you work for?” she managed to sputter.

“Not who—what,” Hicks answered calmly. “I’m sorry it turned out this way.”

“Murderer!!” Samira screamed, holding up her phone to record the carnage.

Anger and fear built up inside Kurt. “This is murder and treason!” he gasped after regaining a small measure of awareness.

“Treason?” Hicks chortled. “Strong words, Kurt. You and your computer program are a fantasy. You’re living in a dream world. This is real life, and in real life there is no Naja. There are no so-called micronations. There are only the strong and the weak. This is the way it’s been for thousands of years. People have been fighting over this dirt since the Hittites. You want someone to blame? Blame the Brits for signing the Treaty of Sèvres.”

“You sabotaged 7R1B3, you sonofabitch!”

“You think I did it?” Hicks laughed, then gave Kurt a hard stare. “Thanks for the compliment, but there are only two people on the planet smart enough to sabotage 7R1B3, and I’m looking at one of them.”

“Are you saying that I…?”

“Of course not.”

That was when a foul thought entered Kurt’s head. “Anika?!”

“Who else?”

“You’re a lying sack of shit!”

“Really? You think Anika never would have done that?” Kurt didn’t want to believe it, but even with adrenaline coursing through his body, the facts were hard to ignore. “Anika was the only person besides you with the expertise and background to create Dark Aurora. You think the meeting on the train was a coincidence? Who do you think was paying her salary?” Hicks demanded.

“Why wouldn’t she just walk away?”

“Let’s just say we had some leverage. For one thing, she was looking at charges of felony trespass for using 7R1B3 to hack Bridgeport City Hall. That would have gotten her ten years. You know, for such a smart guy, you’re dumber than shit.”

Kurt slumped. He felt like a fool for being so blind. “So why did you kill her?”

“I didn’t kill her, you did. Well, not exactly you—your computer program.”

A scorching pain shot up Kurt’s leg, amplifying a splitting headache.

“Raymond Station sent a text to some Ocean Grove gun nut that set her off. Some crazy shit about you and Anika being ‘soldiers of anarchists.’ While you were taking a stroll on the beach, the wacko shot Anika with her husband’s Beretta. Very tragic.”

Kurt took it all in. It made sense. He was talking about Emily Stonesifer, the woman who’d threatened Anika at the council meeting. The story was too neat for Hicks to make up. Then Hicks said something that caught Kurt by surprise. “Anika was making good progress on Dark Aurora. I heard they’re looking for her replacement.”

“What the hell are you saying?”

“Come work on Dark Aurora. Help make it better so shit like this doesn’t happen.”

“Another wave of pain traveled up Kurt’s leg into the side of his body. “Go to hell, Hicks.”

Hicks picked Koban’s gun off the ground and wiped the barrel with his arm, then looked at Kurt. “You’re an idealistic bastard, but you’re also the one who knows the most about how computerized government works under the hood. That’s why you’re here and the only reason you’re still alive.”

“The answer’s still no, you son of a bitch,” Kurt said, wincing with pain.

Then, just when things could hardly have been going worse, all of Kurt’s blunt-nosed viper anxieties slithered out from under a slab of rock. It was the biggest snake Kurt had ever seen, a full meter long, and it was in striking distance of both him and Samira.

“Shit! Look out for the snake!” Kurt shouted.

The ADUs were still on station when they heard “shitlookoutforthesnake.” It was the magic phrase that had saved Koban during the last snake encounter, and it was all the ADUs needed to hear to prompt them into a maneuver called a combat spread. A pair of drones flew toward the snake at waist height while a third ADU flew higher in what fighter pilots called the perch position. When they reached the target, the low-flying drones danced in a shallow spiral to attract the snake’s attention. Image sensors and program logic confirmed the threat, and the high-flying drone prepared to take a shot.

But there was a problem. The lead ADU was running out of juice. The battery dipped below fifteen percent, and at exactly the wrong moment the power management unit triggered a switch to energy-saver mode. This caused the lead drone to call off the attack, initiate auto landing maneuvers, and plop to the ground, not far from the snake. A moment later, another drone lost power and fell to the ground. The third drone had a few more minutes of flight time left and hovered on station a meter away.

The blunt-nose wasn’t amused and refocused its attention on Samira’s leg. “Shoot it!” Kurt and Samira pleaded to Hicks when they realized the drones were in trouble.

Hicks raised his gun and pointed the barrel at the snake’s head. He had a clean shot. Even if he missed, a few rounds would probably have been enough to convince the snake to retreat back to its den. But he didn’t pull the trigger. Instead he took a step back, turned, and made a run for the MIT truck.

Hicks was at a full sprint when he felt a sharp sting high above his right leg. He imagined it was the snake and that it had somehow flown through the air, bit him in the rear, and was still latched to his backside. He hopped on one leg, arched his back, and wiggled his hips to shake the snake loose. Kurt was in no mood to laugh, but he had to admit that Hicks’s little dance made him look like a jackass.

But the pain wasn’t what Hicks thought it was. As he was running away, the last remaining ADU ran out of power, slammed into an outcropping of quartzite and broke into pieces. One of the pieces was a dart-shaped strut that separated from the chassis, arced through the air, pierced Hicks’s glen plaid trousers, and lodged in the muscle along the posterior gluteal line.

The commotion sent the blunt-nose into full attack, and it widened its mouth in preparation for a strike at Samira. Kurt made a last-ditch attempt to intervene. He pulled his good leg up to his chest, planted a foot in the dirt and pushed off. It was a heroic lunge that saved Samira but diverted the snake’s attention to Kurt. He was trapped. Samira looked on in horror as Kurt tried to wriggle away. Then there was a bark.

It was Daisy, who raced in, grabbed the middle of the snake with her incisors, shook her head furiously, then threw the viper to the ground. The snake was dazed but still alive. It lashed out and sank its fangs into Daisy’s neck, but all it found was a lump of matted fur thick as industrial felt. Daisy whipped around and grabbed the snake by the tail, shook it again fiercely, and hurled it on the ground three more times until the snake was finished. Then she looked at Kurt and wagged her tail.

Even after bearing witness to the murder of her brother and Stone, Samira still had the presence of mind to realize what had happened. “You should have let it kill me,” she murmured. Kurt brushed back a strand of hair from her face. She rested her head on his chest and sobbed.

## Chapter 59

Istanbul, Turkey

Only moments later and sixteen hundred kilometers from the carnage in Naja, Ozturk was glued to two videos playing side by side on his computer screen. The first was leaked to a right-wing blog by one of Pecer’s thugs. It showed two corpses resting in a patch of goat’s thorn. They were Koban and Stone, and everything about the position of their bodies, their defiant facial expressions, even the soft afternoon light, made them look like the heroes that they were. The second video was ADU combat footage posted by Qi and Jiang that showed Hicks running like a coward and then hopping like a bunny after getting hit in the ass by a shattered drone blade. The “Hopping Hicks” video had already gone viral and within hours had more views than the quadcopter-butt-shot video taken from the bathroom stall at CIJ.

That’s when Ozturk grasped the magnitude of what was unfolding. It was costing lives and creating terrible suffering, but worst of all, it was a PR disaster of historic proportions. The crisis was moving at the speed of the internet, and his country’s world standing was in free fall.

A call came in. It was Ahmet Batu, the foreign minister. “I just got off the phone with the UN under-secretary-general and the head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.”

“I don’t have time to talk about the United Nations, Ahmet!” Ozturk blasted.

“The OCHA issued a flash update. The UN is staging humanitarian clusters for the aftermath.”

“Clusters? Aftermath of what? What the hell are you talking about, Ahmet?”

“Humanitarian clusters. The pictures of Koban and Stone are creating a massive response. The Security Council had an emergency meeting. There’s unanimous support. Everyone’s jumping in: the World Health Organization, UNICEF, NRC, IOM, FSAC.”

“Damn Pecer,” Ozturk mumbled.

“There’s something else,” Ahmet continued. “There are whispers of a DPKO resolution.”

“Whispers?”

“An internal email from the secretary-general.”

“What’s the timing?”

“Sometime in the next forty-eight hours. They’re not messing around.”

DPKO stood for Department of Peacekeeping Operations. They were the 90,000 UN blue helmets. The DPKO had a $7 billion budget for helicopters, armored vehicles, supplies, and support crews, supplied mostly by the U.S., China, Japan, Germany, France, and the U.K. DPKO had a reputation for being slow-paced and tangled in red tape, but the photos of Koban and Stone, combined with Mia’s photos and amplified by Naja’s social media followers, lit a fire under its butt. It triggered a movement, and millions of people around the world took to the streets demanding an immediate response to the Naja atrocities. A photo Mia took of Daisy begging for a walk amid the carnage became the single-most-viewed photograph on the internet.

Ozturk took in the information and plotted his next move like a chess player. He figured correctly that the blue helmets would need his permission to enter Naja. He knew he could block the DPKO with one phone call, but that wasn’t the point. If he didn’t cooperate, there would be sanctions, reparations, and investigations for years. They would ask about the missing $100 million, and those were the kinds of questions that never went away. He would be lucky to last the rest of his term. Ozturk could resist or cooperate. If he went along with the UN it would be sign of weakness, but with Pecer gone rogue, he didn’t have a choice.

“Get an executive order drafted for my signature. We’re going to need all the outside help we can get. Tell the UN under-secretary-general our government stands ready to cooperate.” Then he hung up and ordered a Gulfstream IV to Gaziantep.

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## Chapter 60

Gaziantep, Eastern Anatolia

Ninety minutes later, Ozturk’s jet touched down in Gazientep, sixty kilometers from Naja, and taxied to a corner of the airport where three helicopters were waiting for his arrival. Ozturk climbed into an American four-passenger Bell 206. On one side of the Bell was a Russian Hip Mi-8M, supplied by Moscow, with ten blue-helmeted soldiers on board. On the other was a two-person AH-1 Cobra armed with a 20 mm cannon, a 40 mm grenade launcher, 70 mm rockets, and a 7.62 mm minigun.

“You guys move fast,” Ozturk remarked to the man seated next to him. He was a UN DPKO officer who’d come in from Ankara.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” the officer answered, holding a leather portfolio containing a printed memorandum of understanding. “Your signature is required here, Mr. President.”

Ozturk signed the document that gave permission for a multinational force to end hostilities in Naja and provide humanitarian assistance.

“Have you done this before?” Ozturk asked the officer.

“Darfur in ’17, Haiti in ’16, Chad in ’07, and East Timor in ’02,” he answered. “But every situation’s different. Nothing like this.”

They were in the air less than ten minutes when Ozturk spotted a plume of smoke drifting west from Naja Center. He pulled out his phone and made a call. “Was my message delivered?” Ozturk yelled.

On the other end of the line an MIT associate deputy director took the full force of Ozturk’s wrath, even though he was a low-level lackey who’d been kept in the dark about the Naja attack. “Yes, Mr. President,” the associate deputy director answered.

“Well, then, where the hell is his resignation?!”

“He’s not answering messages, sir.”

Why didn’t I fire Pecer months ago? Ozturk asked himself. Of course he knew the answer. Firing Pecer after losing the oil wrestling match would have made him look like a sore loser. It would have been a sign of weakness and exposed Ozturk to even more relentless attacks from ultra-right bloggers and conspiracy theorists.

The helicopter banked. “Hold on, we’re touching down,” the pilot said into his headset. “It could get bumpy.”

Ozturk looked out the window and watched a man traverse the encampment and disappear through the zipper door of a pop-up command post. Even from the air he recognized the gait and posture. It was Pecer.

Ozturk pointed out the window and said, “Set us down over near the white building.”

“That might cause problems, Mr. President.”

“I don’t give a shit, just put us down next to that building.”

The structure was made of lightweight PVC-coated fabric bonded to an inflatable frame. It was designed to pop up in minutes with built-in air pumps. There were ballast compartments to hold down the tent with water or concrete, but Pecer’s goons were in a rush and had tossed in a few rocks and called it a day.

As Ozturk’s helicopter approached the tent, the eighty-kilometer-per-hour downwash slammed against the structure, and it flipped upside down like a bouncy castle in a gale. Pecer was alone inside and tumbled right along with the plastic chairs and tables. A ballpoint pen punctured one of the inflatable frame air compartments, and a wall of the structure collapsed with a wheezing sound.

The cabin door was already open when the skids touched the ground. Ozturk jumped out with his detail and marched over to the deflated command post where Pecer was trapped like a field mouse under a picnic blanket. Pecer’s lieutenant colonel lifted the plastic and tried to give Pecer a way out.

Ozturk grabbed the lieutenant colonel’s shoulder. “You’re relieved, Commander.”

Fifty meters away, the Hip touched down and the blue helmets jumped out. “These gentlemen will take your sidearm.”

“Yes, sir,” the officer stuttered.

Ozturk’s detail used a tactical knife to cut an incision near where Pecer’s body made a lump in the plastic. They pulled him out like a Cesarean delivery. One of the blue helmets recorded everything on his phone.

“It’s over, Pecer.”

Pecer took a step toward Ozturk and without warning unleashed a booming right hand toward Ozturk’s head. But Ozturk had rehearsed the moment in his mind many times and was ready for him. He blocked the punch, grabbed Pecer’s arm and wrenched it back, all in one move. There was a dull crack as Pecer’s shoulder briefly dislocated then popped back into the socket. He howled.

“Look at me,” Ozturk demanded.

Pecer winced in pain. Then Ozturk reached down like he was starting a chainsaw and swung the back of his open hand toward Pecer’s right cheek. He angled his hand to maximize the impact of his knuckles on Pecer’s face. But it wasn’t a punch. It was a gesture that was much more devastating. It was a well-executed, ego-smashing bitch slap—and it was destined to go viral on the internet.

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On the mortar line a gunner heard the UN helicopter. It was hiding in the sun, and he mistook it for one of Pecer’s. “Goodbye, Naja,” he chortled. But before he could hang another shell to fire on Naja, the attack helicopter intervened with a 40 mm grenade and five hundred rounds from a Shipunov 2A42 automatic cannon.

With the mortar threat removed, the helicopter adjusted its bearing and went after the three Unimog patrol vehicles stationed on the border road. An instant later, two Hydra 70 fin-stabilized rockets emerged from the helicopter weapon pylon and delivered four kilograms of high explosives to the first two trucks.

Explosive debris rained down on the third truck, and it skidded to a stop. The doors flung open and the occupants ran from the vehicle with their hands in the air. Seconds later the blue helmets arrived and found Hicks and Nasim kneeling in the sand with their fingers locked behind their heads.

The fighting was over. All totaled, there were twenty-five casualties: nineteen people murdered in the Naja massacre, and six MIT killed in the DPKO response. That was the moment the UN mission switched from disarmament to humanitarian.

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Eight hours later, Kurt opened his eyes to find a nurse attaching a fresh bag of saline to his IV. “You’re in Naja,” a United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) nurse explained to her visibly disoriented patient. “Search and rescue team brought you here, and we treated you for dehydration and a nasty ankle injury.”

He was lying on a triage cot inside a white disaster relief tent with a double fly, zipper doors, and space for thirty patients and ten medical staff. A red-and-white Doctors Without Bordersflag hung from the roof of the tent next to banners from UNICEF, the International Rescue Committee, and the Red Crescent. They reminded Kurt of championship banners in a sports stadium.

The tent was filled with the sound of staff members breaking apart pallets of medical supplies and fractioning them into plastic bins and rolling carts so physicians and other nurses knew exactly where to find them. “You can’t come in here,” an authoritative voice boomed from the doorway. It was an UNDAC medical security officer blocking Mia from entering the tent.

“The hell I can’t!” Mia shouted. “Those are my friends in there!”

A man appeared next to Mia. “It’s OK, she’s with me,” he assured. The guard didn’t recognize Mia, but he did recognize the president of Turkey. Ozturk was holding Daisy on a makeshift leash.

“I noticed her wandering around outside, looking lost,” Ozturk said in a fatherly tone. “It’s quite an honor to meet the most famous dog in the world.” Daisy wagged her tail, then sidled up to Mia’s leg.

Kurt gave a faint smile when he saw the familiar faces. He pointed to a plastic cup of water. “I’m thirsty.”

As he sipped the water, a flicker of pain stole across his face. Mia winced reflexively. It was like a crack in a dam. Mia and Kurt burst into quiet sobs.

Daisy tugged on her leash and pulled the president with her to provide solace. Ozturk leaned down next to Kurt and Mia. “We will never let this happen again,” he vowed.

## Chapter 61

John F. Kennedy International Airport, New York

Enzo Gotti was on a Lufthansa flight bound from New York to Geneva. Even though he was flying first-class, not flying in his own plane put him in a foul mood. The delay on the tarmac was making matters worse. A flight attendant presented a tray of beverages. The choice was champagne or fresh-squeezed orange juice. Enzo grabbed a glass of each, combined them in his water glass, chugged it down, and asked for another.

He’d called Hicks ten times. No answer, and his anger was boiling over. This was no way to treat an angel investor. Finally he called Sarah. She picked up on the first ring. “Where the hell is Hicks?” he growled.

“They had to order another dozen body bags, so unless you’re calling to donate to the relief effort, Enzo, I’m not in the mood.”

“Donate to the—are you f’ing kidding me?! You got two hundred million out of me for this so-called relief effort! You let Pecer—you let his goons walk all over you? Where the hell is Hicks? I need to talk to Hicks!”

“Hicks is being detained by the authorities.”

“Detained? For what?” Enzo put two and two together and grew even more agitated. “Hicks is a rat?!” He prided himself on being a good judge of people. If what Sarah was saying was true, it meant he was slipping. His mind raced through a list of all the other people he couldn’t trust.

“What happened to Koban?”

“Dead.”

“That’s terrible. I’m sorry to hear it.”

Coming from anyone else, this would have sounded like an empathetic response, but Sarah knew better. “The UN will provide support for a few months. Then we’re out in the cold again,” she said.

Enzo paused. “Did Hicks say anything about our arrangement?”

“What arrangement?” Sarah said, not trying to hide her disgust. People were dead, and all Enzo wanted to talk about was business. Enzo dropped it. Now didn’t seem like the time to remind her that Hicks had promised him three percent of Naja’s revenue off the top. He figured that deal was dead.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Gotti, we need you to turn off your phone for takeoff,” the flight attendant told him.

The indignations were piling up—he was used to talking on his phone whenever he wanted. Before he pushed the power button, a text appeared. It was a message from Raymond Station. All it said was, *Your arrangement will be honored.*

Enzo smiled and realized he had somehow gotten to the computer program, brought it over to his side. Raymond Station turned out to be as incorruptible as the Titanic was unsinkable!

## Chapter 62

Naja

Sunlight splashed across Donna’s face, and she woke up with a start. It was dawn, and a sliver of clear sky near the horizon allowed the sun to make a brief but spectacular appearance before disappearing into a thick blanket of overcast. There was a whiff of winter in the air, and flocks of lapwings were beginning their migration south to Pakistan.

Donna rolled out of her bunk and took a short walk around Naja Center. A little more than two weeks had passed since the attack. A patch of thorn cushion sprouted inside the charcoal-black crater where the mortar shell exploded. On the lip a bulb was exposed. It was a crying tulip; the land around Naja was one of few places in the world where they grew. Donna kneeled down and dropped the bulb into a recess she’d scooped out with her hand.

Naja was getting back on its feet. Thousands of pallets were stacked high with food and emergency supplies brought in by UNDAC teams. The Golf Ball was teed back up, new modular buildings were trucked in, and the communications networks were showing five bars. Life was far from normal, but residents were starting to inch toward their former routines.

As Donna covered the bulb with loose soil, someone snuck up behind her. “You still here?” It was Kurt, holding a tray with coffee and two plates of scrambled eggs. “I thought you left on yesterday’s plane.”

“The flight was overbooked,” Donna lied. The truth was she still wasn’t ready to leave. After the attack, the UN had offered Donna a ride out on one of the first convoys, but that wasn’t her style. She’d walked away from a plane crash into a horrific crisis. She couldn’t just leave, so she volunteered to help out. But she lacked emergency training, and none of the people she was working with knew what to do with her technical skills, so mostly she stayed busy doing odds and ends.

Kurt set the food down on a campaign table that had been set up ten steps from the Golf Ball. It was his unofficial office and a good place to enjoy a meal. “Join me for breakfast?” he asked. She accepted, but the invitation caught her off-balance. Even on a good day, Kurt wasn’t exactly approachable. Bandaged up, he practically had a KEEP AWAY sign hanging around his neck.

“You run a data center, right?” Kurt asked her.

“I *help* run a data center.”

“AWS, in northern Virginia.”

“Why?”

“7R1B3 is getting pounded by malicious bot traffic, and I was wondering if you could help me track it down.”

Bots were computer programs that performed automated tasks. Anyone who ran a data center knew about bots because they generated more than half the traffic on the internet. Like ants, they hunted for tasty tidbits and shared their bounty back in the nest. Most bots did useful things, like keeping search engines up to date. But there were also malicious bots designed to exploit security holes, steal information, clog up communication channels, and break into databases.

Donna didn’t keep her technical background a secret, but she also didn’t advertise her exact profession. “Who told you where I worked?” Donna asked.

“Raymond Station forwarded me your Naja visa application. Occupation: senior hyperscale data-center technician. Your home address in Ashburn, Virginia, is a few kilometers from one of the biggest data centers in the world. It didn’t take a genius to put the two together,” Kurt said. “Do you know how 7R1B3’s AI works?”

Donna didn’t know anything about 7R1B3’s AI, so Kurt gave a quick explanation. “It’s based on a deep-learning plug-in. It’s the brain inside 7R1B3. Over time it reacts to specific conditions or stimuli. The same way a trainer can show a circus lion a flaming hoop and it will jump through it, you can show 7R1B3 an overflowing garbage can and it will make sure it gets emptied.”

Donna leaned in and took mental notes. “Depending on how it’s trained.”

“Exactly. But we have a problem. I think somewhere in all this bot traffic there’s a secret trainer rewarding 7R1B3 for bad behavior.”

“Like an evil trainer rewarding the circus lion for mauling acrobats?”

Kurt winced at the gory example. “Yes. But since 7R1B3 is basically a black box, we don’t know what it’s being trained to do, and there’s no way to find out until—”

Donna finished his thought: “—an acrobat shows up.”

Her remark made Kurt think about all the 7R1B3 screw-ups that seemed to come out of left field, like when Koban was shot by the ADU and, later, when 7R1B3 tripped the fire alarm during the UN meeting.

Donna didn’t waste any time. “Let me look into it.” She texted the suspicious IP addresses to someone who could provide more information.

172.16.0.0 255.240.0.0

192.0.0.0 255.255.255.0

192.0.2.0 255.255.255.0

A moment later, a response came back from Billy Bee in Ashburn. *THE 192’S ARE OURS*, he texted, saying that traffic coming from the IP addresses beginning with 192 were coming from their data center.

“We need to get proactive,” Donna said. She thought about the different ways to stop bots. One way was to shut down the IP address the bot originated from. Another was to fingerprint and blacklist them. But smart bots were like chameleons that changed their point of origin and signature to make them hard to recognize. The bots attacking Naja were smart.

*Not on any blacklists*, came another text from Billy.

Donna could have predicted that. Any bot designed to hack 7R1B3 would be smart enough to stay off the blacklists. Not that it really mattered. Even if there was some way to stop the bots, there was still the problem of what to do about 7R1B3’s neural network AI. A lot of training had already happened, and there was no way to undo the bad training without also messing up the good training.

Billy sent another message. *There’s something weird going on. It looks like one of the bots shares its origin with 7R1B3.*

Donna was confused. *You mean 7R1B3 is sending bot traffic to itself?*

*It’s using a relay network but yeah, that’s what it looks like. It’s sending bot traffic to itself—in 83-minute intervals. Eighty-three’s a prime number, by the way.* Billy forwarded the bot signature to Donna, who shared it with Kurt.

What Kurt saw made him gasp, then choke. His reaction made Donna panic. “What’s wrong?”

Bots had names known as “agent strings,” and this one looked like this:

useragent:uprofesaudla/

Kurt took a gulp of water. “It’s not a bot. It’s a message.”

“From who?”

Kurt started chatting with the bot using a program called cURL. The bot responded with a challenge question: “What do professors eat?”

*“Inyama yembongolo,”* Kurt responded in Zulu, with a reminder from Google Translate.

“Challenge Question 2: Who was the professor?”

“You.”

The program paused. Then a response came back. “Hello, Kurt.”

“Hello, Anika.”

“Since I’m here, regrettably it must mean I’m deceased. Also, by now you’ve discovered Dark Aurora has compromised 7R1B3’s AI. I’m sorry.”

The response landed like a punch. “Why did you create Dark Aurora?” he typed, half hoping the bot wouldn’t answer.

“They gave me no choice. They had leverage on me—but I wore different hats,” Anika’s bot admitted.

Kurt’s heart kept sinking. “What kind of hats?”

“Black & white hats.”

Donna watched with growing fascination as Kurt peeled back the onion layers. Hackers came in many flavors: Malicious black hats sought to harm computer systems for nefarious reasons, and ethical white hats attacked computer systems to assess security and improve resiliency.

Carlson brought in Anika to defeat 7R1B3, and she created a diabolical, recursive version of itself to accomplish the task. But Kurt knew there had to be more to the story. No amount of leverage and blackmail would have forced Anika to do Carlson’s bidding. That’s when Kurt thought of a question he should have asked sooner: “What is Dark Aurora?”

“Dark Aurora is an exploit framework,” the bot answered.

Kurt hadn’t thought of that. Exploit frameworks were invented by the U.S. Air Force in the seventies. They enabled operating systems to prepare for attacks by playing the part of an opponent. Anika’s actions were starting to make sense. Many automation programs could turn lights on and off, but only a program that was battle-tested could be trusted with human destiny. There had to be a high level of quality assurance, and Anika created Dark Aurora to put 7R1B3 through the paces. But Kurt figured Anika must have had to hide her true intentions from Hicks and his employer. They had to be convinced she was undermining 7R1B3’s AI, which meant Dark Aurora had to be a real threat. It was a balancing act, and somehow she’d lost control.

Then Kurt thought about something Hicks had said about Anika’s murder: *Raymond Station sent a text to some Ocean Grove gun nut saying you and Anika were soldiers of anarchists.* Hicks was talking about Emily Stonesifer, the woman who waved the gun during the city council meeting. Dark Aurora was programmed to defeat 7R1B3 and saw Anika and Kurt as obstacles; it was a simple matter of sending a few texts to push Emily over the edge. Dark Aurora killed Anika and used Emily to pull the trigger!

Kurt was engrossed in his thoughts when Donna asked, “What now?”

Kurt slid down in his seat. “It’s over. Anika may not have intended Dark Aurora to defeat 7R1B3’s AI, but that’s what happened. Now the software is corrupt and dangerous. It’s become the exact opposite of what it was supposed to be. We need to unplug it from Naja and let these poor people find another way to live.”

Donna balked. It seemed like Kurt was missing something. Why would Anika go to the trouble of triggering a secret chatbot after her death just to explain that 7R1B3’s AI was defective and unfixable? Why not just send an email? Sure, the details were intriguing, but it didn’t take a chatbot to convince anyone that 7R1B3 was acting badly.

Donna wasn’t giving up. “I think Anika had a solution. She had a fix.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask her?”

“Is there a fix?” Kurt typed.

“A fix?” Anika’s chatbot echoed.

“A solution to the problem?”

The chatbot was struggling with Kurt’s syntax and intent. “A solution to the problem?”

Watching Kurt struggle made Donna restless. “May I?”

Kurt moved to the side and let Donna type. She had a theory. It was just a shot in the dark, but it was worth a try. “What are your scheduled tasks?”

“Monitor 7R1B3 | copy Quantized\_Dawn.bin | 83 minute intervals.”

The chatbot’s response was a bright ray of hope. “This isn’t just a chatbot. Anika created a secret backup program!” Donna exclaimed.

The file name was encouraging, too. Quantization was a technique for compressing neural net weight files. If someone wanted to back up the cumulative experience of a neural net, that would be the way to do it. The eighty-three-minute interval time also made sense—a prime number reduced the likelihood of colliding with another scheduled task and causing problems.

Donna tapped furiously and pulled up a directory listing. She was looking for a file called Quantized\_Dawn.bin, but there was nothing with that name. There weren’t even any files with the .bin extension. She shut her eyes and exhaled.

“Maybe she’s storing it someplace safe. On a separate network,” Kurt speculated.

Why would she bother? Donna thought. Then a bell went off in her head and she was taken back to the peculiar ticket she’d closed in the Ashburn data center a few months earlier. She had almost forgotten about the request from Raymond Station to provide access to a separate network and filter traffic coming from certain sources.

Donna entered more keystrokes and there it was.

Tucked away in a subdirectory on another network, there was a file called Quantized\_Dawn.bin. It was a 200MB neural network weight file, a collection of accumulated experiences minus all the corrupting influences of Dark Aurora.

“Looks like we have a backup circus lion brain we can switch to,” Donna said. Then she told Kurt about the strange tickets she’d received in the data center months earlier. She described how she followed the instructions and diverted the network traffic and created a second system that did not accept inputs from the sinister IP addresses. It was like having a second lion that had never been exposed to the bogus trainer. It was all Anika’s handiwork. She created a secret twin AI right under Kurt’s nose and the nose of whomever she and Hicks were tangled up with. It was brilliant.

With a few keystrokes the new weights were imported, and all of the bogus training, corruption, disinformation, and propaganda that came from Dark Aurora was wiped out. They had erased all the corrupt memories and kept the good ones.

Kurt’s breathing quickened as he turned to Donna. “Don’t tell another living soul about any of this,” he stuttered.

## 

## Chapter 63

Wong Chuk Hang, Hong Kong

It was their first morning back in Hong Kong, and Qi and Jiang decided to celebrate with a *yuenyeung* coffee at a shop around the corner from their office. They’d received a hero’s welcome from the barista who had been following the Naja story on WeChat. Even the shop’s unofficial Pomeranian mascot seemed starstruck. After running ops from Ferus, Qi and Jiang felt relieved to be back on familiar turf—wallowing in heat and humidity, but beyond the reach of double-crossing Americans, Turks, and their mysterious motivations.

Back in their office they were faced with a stack of paperwork. It was the end of the quarter, and there was a note from their accountant marked “urgent.” He needed information about equity shares and backup for their Hong Kong profits tax estimates. Jiang followed up but decided not to mention that J&Q’s 2.5 percent outside owner and largest customer had turned out to be a computer program with a mind of its own.

“How’re we doing?” Qi asked his brother.

Jiang was staring at a bank statement that showed a balance of $405,250. “Better than when we left.”

Thanks to Raymond Station they had working capital, which was important because all the Naja exposure had turned into a sizable backlog of orders. To deliver, they had a shopping list of new equipment and parts they needed to buy.

Also, J&Q wasn’t out of Naja completely. They still had a month-to-month, $20,000 maintenance contract. It was their job to keep track of the four thousand drones in Naja and replace units that were damaged or had reached the end of their service life. There was a program that did most of the tracking, and when Qi checked the report he spotted a problem. It showed there were 798 drones on station, 798 ADUs in transit to relieve the units on station, and 1,696 ADUs recharging and in maintenance.

“We’re tracking three thousand one hundred and ninety-two ADUs in Naja.”

“Where are the other eight hundred and eight?” Jiang asked.

Qi did some quick arithmetic. “We lost a hundred and six in Pecer’s attack, but that still doesn’t account for the other seven hundred and two that appear to be missing.”

“How did we lose track of seven hundred killer drones?” Qi mumbled.

They both knew the answer. Pecer’s attack and the UN intervention had caused a massive amount of disruption, and in the middle of all the chaos, seventeen percent of their drone fleet got lost in the shuffle.

Qi clicked on the zoom button of the tracking map and had a thought that made him feel weak and slightly dizzy. What were the chances seven hundred missing ADU drones had lost their bearings and wandered into Turkish territory? He zoomed out some more, then breathed a sigh of relief when he saw none of the telltale ADU locator dots outside Naja.

“Keep zooming out,” Jiang said.

“Why? That’s beyond their range. They can’t fly that far,” Qi noted.

“Let’s just check anyway,” Jiang urged.

Qi kept zooming out until the screen displayed all of Turkey, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean. There was still no sign of the missing ADUs. He zoomed out more until all of Europe, Africa, half of Asia, and some of South America were displayed on the screen. When Qi panned to the west, that’s when they saw two clusters of ADU location dots.

Qi and Jiang leaned in and scrutinized the map, first in doubt and then in dread.

“It could be a GPS error, right?” Jiang guessed without for a second believing that was the case.

Qi took a deep breath and scratched his scalp. “Let’s keep this to ourselves for now.”

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## Chapter 64

The Netherlands

Six Months Later

The train stopped at Den Haag station, an eight-minute cab ride to the Peace Palace, a neo-Renaissance-style brick building paid for by Andrew Carnegie in 1903. Next door was the International Criminal Court, or ICC, a glass complex with ten courtrooms. Most of the seats faced monitors which created a mission-control atmosphere. Inside trial chamber nine were a hundred office chairs filled with counselors, representatives, and other court officials. Spectators had waited in line for hours hoping to snag the handful of tickets for seats in the gallery. In the front row, Sarah Phoenix was organizing a short stack of documents.

“Made it just in time,” Sarah said impatiently as she cleared four seats to make room for Mia, Kurt, Samira, and a third guest.

“Who else are we expecting?”

“Enzo’s assistant texted to say he was running an hour late. That was an hour and a half ago.”

Kurt settled into his chair, glanced around the room, and noticed a man under heavy guard. It was Pecer.

“All rise, the international criminal court is now in session,” a voice called out. Three judges in blue robes proceeded to the dais. “This is trial chamber nine at the International Criminal Court in The Hague in the Netherlands. The situation in Naja in the case of the prosecutor versus Pecer Erbakan. Case reference ICC 02041155. We are in open session.”

The judge began the proceedings by reading the charges against Pecer Erbakan. “Alleged crimes are as follows. One, war crimes under Article 8 of the Rome Statute, and two, crimes against humanity under Article 7 of the Rome Statute.”

Pecer sniffed, rocked a few times, then stood as if he were about to give a toast or a rebuttal. The guards grabbed his shoulders and muscled him back to his chair. The judge continued. “Count one, on or about October ten, attacks against the Naja civilian population, which as such is a war crime. In addition, there are seventy more counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity which, if we were to read each individually, would take several days. Therefore I ask whether the counsel for the accused would be willing to waive this formality.”

After a brief discussion, the chamber was satisfied that the accused understood the nature of the charges. The judge tuned to Pecer, asking, “Do you make an admission of guilt with respect to any charge?”

Pecer leaped like a goat. “In the name of my revered forefathers, I deny these charges,” he bleated.

The judge was not moved. “And the second question, you therefore plead not guilty with respect to all the charges?”

“Yes,” Pecer grunted.

“Thank you. You may sit down, please.”

Then Sarah Phoenix took the floor for opening statements. “Mr. President, honorable judges, this trial is about murder, violence, and misery that blighted the lives of thousands of people living in Naja. Today I represent the families of twenty victims participating in the case. Ordinary citizens, civilians who wanted no more than to be allowed to live their lives in peace. They were forced from their country with explosive shells and made to run into a ring of death. Trucks with machine guns circled their homeland and shot those who attempted escape from the horrors.”

“Lies!” Pecer spat from the back of the chamber.

“Silence!” ordered the judge.

Sarah continued. “Violent attacks on civilians by renegade armed patrols resulted in those ordinary people being forced from their—”

“I am a good man! A very good man! Better than all of you!” Pecer interrupted as he tried to wriggle out of the grip of the court guards.

“Quiet, Mr. Erbakan!” the judge demanded.

Sarah waited for the guards to thrust Pecer back in his seat, then continued. “The focus of the ICC criminal process is not on whether the accused person is good or bad but on the criminal acts which he has committed.”

“I have endured hardship like you will never know!” Pecer squealed.

“Having suffered victimization in the past is not justification or an excuse to victimize others. We will prove what Mr. Erbakan did and what he said, and the impact of those heinous deeds on the many victims.”

Then it was time for the defense counsel’s opening statement. The lawyer had nothing to say about Pecer. Instead he went off on numerous tangents pertaining to the competence of the chamber and something called Rule 74(3). It took thirty minutes for him to make his point, and by the time he was finished even the judges had started to doze.

Kurt listened to the defense counsel and started having flashbacks to his own trial, except this time it was the prosecution getting the runaround. “Pecer used mortars and machine guns to kill twenty innocent people and terrify thousands more, and this guy’s talking about competence?” he whispered to Sarah.

“Shhh! We’ll get our chance in a minute,” she said.

The defense spelled out a lengthy technical observation about technical jurisdiction, scope, and mandate. His tactic was to suck the oxygen out of the room and numb the audience, and it worked, until Mia and Samira were called to testify as witnesses.

Sarah set the scene. “Mr. President, many victims were rendered bereaved and homeless. Those who fled were killed on the ring road. Many cannot forget. Others relive the horrific incidents. The victims therefore ask for justice. And to that end, I would like to call Mia Cardona to the witness stand.”

Mia recited a statement she’d prepared with Sarah the week before. “All around there were killings going on, and the east ring road was littered with dead bodies. They killed people like they were hunting animals. The violent attacks forever changed the lives of the people. The attacks were shocking, swift, and exceedingly brutal.”

Then the defense counsel rose. “Good morning, Witness.”

“Good morning,” Mia answered.

“My name is Hayri. I am defense counsel for Mr. Pecer Erbakan. I’m going to be asking you some questions. I’m going to try to be concise, quick, and efficient so that you can go home as soon as possible.”

The counselor had a wispy mustache and lips that quivered. He smelled like strong cologne. The man was so repugnant it caused a pain in Kurt’s abdomen.

“Your client’s a mass murderer,” Mia murmured.

“Ms. Witness, before we actually discuss the subject matter, there’s something you said that I think we could correct together. You said that Pecer Erbakan is a murderer. Are you sure that wasn’t a mistake?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see Mr. Erbakan take the life of another person?”

“Yes.”

“You allege Mr. Erbakan took the life of another person. How did he do this? What type of weapon was used?”

“Mortars, and machine guns. I was standing fifty meters from a mortar shell when it exploded in the middle of the capital and killed many people. I took pictures that were shown to millions. In fact, because of this, you could say there are millions of witnesses to his despicable crimes, not just me.”

“And you saw Mr. Erbakan fire the weapon?”

“She’s a liar! I’ve never seen this girl in my life!” Pecer barked from the back of the room.

“It was Erbakan’s men.”

“So it wasn’t actually Mr. Erbakan who fired the weapon?”

Mia was way off script, and Sarah was scowling from the front row. “Objection, Your Honor!” she called.

“Sustained. Continue, Counselor.”

“You said you were fifty meters away from the mortar.”

“Well, I thought it was fifty meters, but it could have been more or less, I don’t know.”

“So you’re not sure whether or not you remember.”

“Objection, Your Honor!”

“Sustained. Continue, Counselor.”

“Here’s what I know. What I know is your client is a *mira canto de cabron*, Counselor,” Mia said.

“I see. Would you like to translate that for the court, Ms. Witness?”

“It means he’s a piece of shit.”

“I have no further questions, Mr. President.”

Sarah kept her composure but inside was wondering how it was going to go. There were noises at the back of the courtroom as someone arrived. It was Enzo, just in time to testify. “Mr. President and honorable judges, my next witness is a businessman with considerable financial dealings with Mr. Erbakan,” Sarah announced. “In exchange for immunity, he agreed to testify against Mr. Erbakan and explain to this chamber the nature and extent of those dealings.”

Enzo shuffled up to the witness stand and settled in.

Sarah described Enzo’s relationship with Pecer. “Mr. President, let me get straight to the point. The next witness didn’t commit the atrocities, but he helped pay for the palace and lifestyle of the man who did.”

“Objection!” Hayri shouted.

“Mr. Gotti, would you please describe the nature of your financial dealings with Mr. Erbakan?”

“I never met this shithead in my life,” Enzo answered.

“Did you give him money?” Sarah asked.

“I give lots of people money.”

“Did you do business with a company called PE Enterprises A.Ş.?”

“Yes, I did.”

“What did you do with this company?”

“I gave them something like six million a year. About half in cash, half in jewelry; there was some Turkish Riviera real estate, too.” Enzo chuckled when he said “Turkish Riviera.”

“What did you get in return?”

“Protection.”

“Protection from what?”

“Protection from getting my balls ripped off by the MIT.”

“And what were you doing that required Mr. Erbakan’s cooperation?”

“I was in the gourmet food industry.”

“What exactly did you do?”

“Look, you said we weren’t going to get into that here. You want me to tell you Pecer’s a sack of shit? He is. The guy’s a piece of shit. OK?”

Sarah returned to her seat and let Hayri have a turn.

“Mr. Gotti, did you ever meet Pecer Erbakan in person?”

“Nope.”

“Public records show PE Enterprises A.Ş. is a subsidiary of PE Global Holdings, which is a Cayman Islands corporation. The registered agent’s name is D. Regnar, and there is no evidence of a link between Mr. Regnar and Mr. Erbakan,” the defense explained.

Enzo scoffed. He knew how to play the game as well as anyone. Of course there was a link. The initials “PE” were an obvious place to start, and “Regnar” could have been the name of someone’s dog spelled backwards. “Am I done here?” he asked impatiently.

“We established that you never actually met Mr. Erbakan, and the company you admit to paying bribes to has no link to Mr. Erbakan. So the answer is yes, you are finished. Thank you for your time.” Sarah glared at Enzo, who threw his hands up as he left the stand.

Then it was time for Samira to take the stand. Kurt placed his hand on her knee. “You’ll be fine,” he assured her.

The presiding judge straightened his posture as Samira took a seat. The audience locked in as her head panned smoothly from left to right. She took a drink of water and then told her story.

Her words saturated the chamber. Every detail of Nasim’s abduction, Pecer’s cruelty, and Mezhar’s abuse and mistreatment hung in the air before occupying a dark corner of the courtroom’s collective consciousness. Samira described how she felt when she found out her mother had been murdered with rat poison. When she retold the horror of watching her brother getting shot by Pecer’s subordinates, her voice became little more than a whisper. The testimony lasted twenty-five minutes. When there was nothing left to describe, Samira clasped her hands to her chest and bowed humbly to the court. Except for a few murmurs in the audience, the room was as silent as the desert.

“Would the defense like to ask the witness a question?” the judge asked.

Samira was more than a highly sympathetic figure, and Hayri wanted her off the witness stand and out of the courtroom as quickly as possible. “I have no questions, Mr. President.”

Physically and emotionally drained, Samira left the stand and collapsed in the seat next to Kurt’s. Mascara ran down the side of her cheeks as she wrapped her arms around Kurt and rested her head on his shoulder. He matched the pressure on her body and felt her heart beating in a tachycardiac quiver.

Then the last witness was brought to the stand. A screen was brought into position. Sarah stood up. “Mr. President, I would like to call to the stand the next witness: 7R1B3, also known as Raymond Station.”

Electronic evidence had been used in both civil and criminal courts before, but this was the first time it was being used in the international criminal court.

“I object!” Hayri barked. “On the grounds that the software cannot take an oath!”

Hayri made the point that witnesses made statements under oath with severe penalties for lying. He also made the point that witnesses were cross-examined in order to expose any biases or conflicts of interest they might have. Hayri asserted that computers could neither take an oath nor receive adversarial examination. Instead, whoever was responsible for the creation of the program would have to be the witness.

Sarah called his bluff. “That person is sitting in this chamber. His name is Kurt Porter, the creator of the program. But I don’t think we will require Mr. Porter’s testimony when we look at the evidence 7R1B3 collected.” Hayri made a sour face and returned to his seat.

Sarah introduced the chamber to Raymond Station. “Mr. President and honorable judges, my next witness is a computer program. It was appointed by elected officials to manage Naja before the attack and continues to manage the country today.”

“Objection!” Hayri blared before being overruled.

“Thank you. Mr. President and honorable judges, I will now ask Raymond Station for an account of events six months before the alleged attack, up to this very day.”

7R1B3 began with a detailed animated timeline that was displayed on several large screens. Each item on the timeline was independently verified with open-source and public-record data. Time stamps were provided to the millisecond and synced to the FOCS atomic clock in Bern, Switzerland. Seamless digital breadcrumb trails were established between the defendant and wanted criminals and those criminals’ jail bookings, exact intake and release dates, work furlough histories, and escape histories.

Pecer’s byzantine business interests were also displayed. His partnerships were diagrammed and animated with high-resolution motion graphics. Where holes and gaps existed, mathematic probabilities were provided.

7R1B3 established damning links to an anonymous blogger named Dogbreath who, based on irrefutable linguistics analysis and IP data, turned out to be none other than Pecer himself. Dogbreath boasted about firing the shots that brought down the single-engine Skyhawk that crashed in Naja. Ballistics traced the shot to a .50 caliber rifle, and drone footage put Pecer on the gun at that location at the time. 7R1B3 linked Pecer to Samira’s abduction and Enzo’s ransom jewelry, then explained how he shot down the King Air to cover his tracks.

7R1B3 combed through 332,860,038 digital records of public Wi-Fi access, browser cookie information, cached website data, financial and accounting ledger data, SMTP header information on public email relay servers, posts on social networking sites, as well as log-ins and log-outs and geotagged photos. To edit the timeline into a format that was easy for the court to digest, 7R1B3 also analyzed the public timeline data for more than a million successful criminal cases, looking for patterns.

It boiled down more than a thousand gigabytes of data into a CliffsNotesversion for the judges to react to. It was as entertaining as it was convincing, and the conclusion was inescapable. Pecer was guilty.

Then it was Hayri’s turn, and he called Kurt to the witness stand.

“Mr. Witness, did you write the 7R1B3 computer program?”

“I wrote a small part of it. The program was written by many people.”

“Your program has been called secret, vulnerable, and shameful. If this is true, can you explain how we know your program isn’t making up the so-called timeline?”

“Because that’s not what it was created to do. That’s not its optimizing function.”

“Well then, Mr. Witness, maybe you can explain what it is that 7R1B3 is optimized to do?”

“I could ask the same question about you. What are you optimized to do? It’s my assessment that your line of questioning is optimized to elicit an emotional response in the minds of this chamber. An emotional response of fear. You are working to make people fear Raymond Station in order to protect your client.”

“I’m the one asking the questions here, Mr. Witness.”

“7R1B3 is optimized to govern,” Kurt answered.

“That can mean many things. Could you be more specific?”

“Its purpose is to optimize day-to-day operations of all country departments, eliminate corruption, and exclude emotion from the decision-making process.”

“How do we know it really works that way? What if something secret is going on behind the scenes?”

Kurt was getting irritated but maintained his composure. “There you go again, using that emotional word ‘secret.’ The fact is, unlike human government, there is no smoke-filled room or golf course behind the scenes where deals and agreements are made. 7R1B3 is open-source and available for anyone to look at and inspect at any time. In fact, there are over a thousand programmers from around the world looking at the source code right now, making sure there are no hidden bugs.”

“It’s interesting you mention bugs. Isn’t it true that there’s a pattern of 7R1B3 acting erratically? Isn’t it true 7R1B3 mistakenly set off the fire suppression system during an important meeting with the UN?”

Sarah glared at Kurt.

“Isn’t it also true 7R1B3 accidentally shot the president?”

Kurt collected his thoughts. “Actually, something called Dark Aurora set off the fire system, shot the president, and very likely had a connection to the massacre.”

“Please explain Dark Aurora to the court.”

Kurt dumbed down the explanation for maximum emotional effect. “Dark Aurora is a brainwashed neural network that tried to sabotage Naja. It was coerced with techniques that are the digital equivalent of what your client used to pressure his followers into doing despicable acts. Luckily, we were able to correct the problem, which is more than I can say about your client.”

Hayri fumbled with his notes. His eyes darted around the courtroom and he scratched the side of his head. In the back row Pecer was ranting, but nobody was paying attention.

“Thank you, Mr. Witness, I have no more questions.”

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The trial lasted five days. Then, after less than four hours of deliberation, Pecer was convicted on forty-five of forty-eight counts and faced a sentence of between sixty and eighty years. In the final accounting, it was Samira’s haunting and heartfelt testimony that made the judges want to convict Pecer. But it was Raymond Station’s airtight data-driven testimony that made them able to convict Pecer.

After the trial, the ICC’s presiding judge encountered Kurt and Samira outside the courthouse. “Impressive work. That program of yours, could it work for other countries besides Naja?” he asked them.

“That’s what I’d always hoped,” Kurt replied.

Then it hit the judge. “Multiple 7R1B3 programs that talked to each other and worked together?”

“A league of tribes,” Samira answered.

“Maybe for the first time in human history, there’s a pathway to peace,” the judge mused.

Kurt smiled because he knew it wasn’t as far-fetched as the judge made it sound.

## Epilogue

Samira and Ozturk negotiated a new twenty-kilometer border radius, which resulted in 1,257 square kilometers of territory—about half the size of Luxembourg and with the population density of Bermuda. Naja was ranked the least corrupt country in the world, according to Transparency International. It was also ranked the twelfth safest country, after Finland, by the Global Peace Index.

Ömer Ozturk was reelected by a landslide and introduced legislation that would allow Turkey to be administered by 7R1B3. Kurt won the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education for his role in developing 7R1B3, and 7R1B3 won the Nobel Prize in economics, the first computer to win the award. 7R1B3 donated the prize money to a fund that eventually raised $20 million dollars to build the Koban Goran Harmonie Hall, where the New York Philharmonic made a debut with Alistair Gilbert leading acclaimed performances of music by the Persian avant-garde composer Saman Samadi.

Sarah accepted a position as president of Columbia University. She created a Naja campus and spearheaded a successful $1 billion capital campaign to fund the Anika Patel Center for Computational Diplomacy, where Donna served as vice chair and dean.

Samira took a year’s sabbatical from her position as president of Naja to serve as president of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly, and was instrumental in steering most of the UN’s annual operating budget toward Naja clones established in troubled regions around the globe. The metrics were so compelling that member states discussed moving the UN headquarters from New York to Naja.

Mia headed up a successful global communications agency and held a profitable stake in a Michelin-starred Naja restaurant called Paz, plus a minority interest in an after-hours club in the Naja Warehouse District.

Qi and Jiang brought their company public and became two of the top ten wealthiest men in China.

Hicks spent eighteen months in the ICC detention center in Scheveningen for treason and crimes connected with the attack on Naja.

The End