

Chapter 21

The Assist

The Operations Center had several workstations, and Doug sat down and logged into one of them. Rich sat down at the one next to Doug. “What’s that code?” he asked.

“429502893,” Doug told him. Vanessa did the same thing, and motioned to Brey.

Brey sat down at another station while Beth sat down next to Doug. Colin stood by the door and kept watch over the server room while Jim stayed out on the main floor.

Doug watched the fluctuating database. The numbers flickered by at the bottom of each screen, but in the middle, he saw the entry menu.

“Go to Configuration,” said Vanessa. Rich and Doug understood that she was in charge here. They followed her instructions.

“Okay. See the macros icon?” she asked.

Doug looked for it, but could not tell what she was talking about. “No,” he said. Beth leaned over to his screen.

“It has a little script on it. A scroll-thing,” she said.

Doug finally saw what she was talking about. “Ah!” he said, and clicked it. A list of filenames opened up on Doug’s screen. He scrolled down and it looked like there were hundreds of them. They were named like the log files the group saw earlier, but were even more cryptic.

“Shit!” Vanessa yelled. Doug figured this was overwhelming for her because she knew what she was looking at. He and Rich were too ignorant to know exactly how badly they were screwed.

“What?” Rich asked.

“Okay, okay,” she said.

“Okay what?” Doug asked.

“Nothing. We just gotta get a method,” she said.

“Don’t do that!” said Brey.

“Brey, get on a monitor,” Rich hollered.

“Screw you!”

“Guys!” Vanessa yelled. “Listen. Stay in these screens. These things aren’t even alphabetical. Shit. I’m going to look at the rest of the programs.”

“Shouldn’t one of us-” asked Rich.

Doug glanced at Rich, letting him know the too many cooks thing wasn’t going to cut it. Rich smirked and nodded.

“You wouldn’t know what to look for,” Vanessa said.

“Listen, Brey, get a spreadsheet open.”

Brey looked at her defiantly, but she shot him a harsh look that would have melted a brake drum. He sat down at the far monitor and started typing. The row was curved just enough so that Doug could not see his screen.

“Girl power, huh?” said a voice next to Doug, but it wasn’t Rich. It was Beth.

“Okay, guys, I’m looking at the jumps. They’re bigger now. Okay, corn and other ag products look like they are rising

the same. Brey, type these in. \$13.72, going to \$14.68, \$11.02, going to \$12.59, \$9.51, going to \$10.87.

Brey typed them in.

“Well? What is the increase?” Vanessa asked.

“Increase?” Brey asked, looking at her blankly.

Rich decided to open a spreadsheet. “Give me the numbers again, Van,” he said with annoyance.

“\$13.72, \$14.68, \$11.02, \$12.59, \$9.51, \$10.87.”

Rich typed the numbers into boxes and did the math.

“14.3%. All the same.”

Brey looked back at his monitor and started typing.

“Moron,” Doug heard a quiet voice say from his right.

It was Beth again. He looked at her and she smirked.

Doug opened a spreadsheet and Vanessa called out some more numbers. The three of them began to figure out the different markets that were rising and falling together.

Beth watched Doug’s screen intently. He decided to try a new approach with her. “So why did you hook up with this crew?” he asked. “What is it these guys really want?”

Beth looked away. Doug noticed that she seemed to be struggling with her role in the Free Majority. He gave up talking to her and continued crunching numbers.

“I just want to stop this macro and keep the system working,” she said after a few minutes. She sounded like she was trying to convince herself, not Doug.

Doug had a hard time being sympathetic. “That worked pretty well, huh?” he said, trying not to sound too sarcastic.

“Yeah,” she said with a small laugh.

After a few minutes, the group had found more than 15 different industry groups that rose and fell together. They stopped looking when Vanessa felt she had what she needed.

“Okay, guys, look at the macro file lists again. Find anything that looks like it has to do with these: agriculture, utilities, autos, oil, media, dry goods, cigarettes.”

Doug saw filenames on the list that matched some of the industrial sectors they were looking for. Rich did, too. He pointed some of them out.

“What should we do?” Rich asked.

Vanessa bit her lower lip, and then said, “open them.”

Doug clicked on a file called agri317, and saw computer code. It made no sense to him. Rich shook his head. “What are we supposed to do with this?” Rich asked.

Vanessa watched the stock values rise and fall. “I’m looking for a pattern in the figures,” she said. She grabbed a nearby pencil and started to write on a sticky pad.

Brey, Rich and Doug watched her, feeling useless.

“Okay,” Vanessa said as Beth got up and stood behind her. “We need to find these patterns in the files.” She handed each of the others sticky notes, on which she had written short strings of numbers and letters.

Beth held out her hand for one of the notes, and Vanessa paused. Doug looked back at Colin who was standing behind him. He nodded. Vanessa wrote some codes on another

sticky note and handed it to Beth. She sat down again at the monitor next to Doug.

“Why are you helping us?”

“I’m not. We’re in this together right now,” she said.

“You think I want to die?”

“What about them?” Doug asked, gesturing to Colin.

“They don’t either,” Beth answered. “Look, I know a lot about this stuff, so I can help you.” She glanced at Brey and whispered, “at least more than he can.” Doug smirked.

Colin walked over and spoke in a whisper. “Listen, guys, I’m not interested in kicking today either. If you can really stop this thing, I can defuse the activator. I set it up.”

The whole room was silent as Vanessa, Doug, and Rich stared at him. The guy had already killed a couple of guards, and there was no way they could trust him.

“What about Eric and that other guy?” Vanessa asked.

“Don’t worry about them,” Colin said, patting his automatic rifle.

Beth turned to the others. “Guys, I was in with Eric’s plan when I thought we were leaving. Now it’s more important to stop this thing and help the Feds locate Dr. Carrier.”

“And plead out to a lower sentence,” added Colin.

“Good luck with that,” Rich said with a chuckle.

The door suddenly creaked, and Jim went back to his post. Jim looked in. “Any luck?” he asked Colin.

“Maybe,” Colin answered.

Jim left, and everyone doubled their efforts looking through the files for the codes Vanessa gave them. She had them all looking for different codes, so it did not matter what they opened. “Brilliant,” Doug thought.

Doug did not find any of the codes in the first file he opened, but he saw one of them in the next file. Beth held up her note to the screen. She had found one of her codes in another file.

Rich found some, too. “Van, what are these?” Rich asked.

“Hunches,” Vanessa said. She was busily writing down more codes. “Write down which files you see them in.”

Doug grabbed a pencil from the tray next to the monitor and started writing on his notepaper. There wasn’t much room. As he wrote, something started to dawn on him. He saw the same look of realization on everyone, except Brey.

“Guys,” Rich said. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

“Yes,” Doug said. Beth nodded. She looked genuinely surprised.

“These industries are all segmented like the Grid icon.” Rich said.

Rich was right. All the groups were slightly different, but most of them fell into the categories from the grid: Mining, agriculture, finance, manufacturing, manual services, communication, government bonds, legal services, and philanthropic organizations. They had to assume philanthropy was meant to represent religion.

“I can’t believe it,” Doug said.

“We know this guy Currier knows the grid inside and out,” said Rich.

“Yeah, and this is the key, guys,” added Beth.

“What are you talking about?” asked Brey. He couldn’t really be blamed for not knowing. He had never seen the Global Grid.

“It’s a sort of code structure,” Rich told him.

“You don’t know it,” Vanessa said.

“How am I supposed to help you, then?”

“Just write them down. I’ll look for the patterns,” she said. Brey grudgingly kept writing the filenames down.

Vanessa opened a file and started typing. “If I can stabilize one sector, maybe that will help with the rest,” she said. They were done gathering filenames, and they all got up to stand behind her. Even Colin leaned in to watch. The clock on the wall over the big screens read 2:30PM. They had been in the server room for nearly fifteen minutes.

Vanessa opened one of the files and saved it. Doug looked up at the screens in front of them. Half of the companies in the mining and logging sector stopped jumping around. It helped that the building was evacuated, since there were no traders to buy or sell anything.

Vanessa fixed another couple of files, and the entire mining segment flatlined. It worked. A cheer went up in the room, including from Beth. Only Colin kept a tight lip.

“Guys, we found it!” Rich yelled.

Vanessa kept typing. She fixed the financial services industry, and asked about which one should come next.

“Professional services,” said Rich.

“No, agricultural products,” Doug suggested.

Vanessa started working on agriculture. They all watched as the sector stabilized. Doug was just about to cheer, when a couple numbers started moving that should not have been. Exxon. Conoco. Oil & Gas extraction companies started fluctuating wildly. They had been flat since Vanessa fixed the mining industries.

“Guys,” Doug pointed at the screen, though he didn’t need to. They all saw it.

“Something’s wrong!” Rich said. Brey sat back down and looked like he was going to cry. Doug thought he was going to as well.

Something was wrong. They had figured out quite a lot about the database, but Doug suddenly realizes they were probably not going to fix it, not today, and that meant never.

“It’s like a fucking Rubik’s Cube!” yelled Rich.

Doug nodded. This was like an impossible puzzle.

“Beth,” Doug asked. “Is Eric really willing to die to fix the stock market?”

“Yes,” Beth and Colin both answered.

“He’s insane,” said Rich.

“Shhh,” Vanessa hissed.

“But he is!” Doug yelled.

“No, it’s not that. I’m trying to think. You guys know this grid better than me,” Vanessa said.

Doug kept ranting. “Personally, I’ll take living over the goddamn stocks!”

“Speak for yourself,” muttered Brey.

“Guys! I can’t figure this out!” Vanessa yelled.

“Shhh,” said Rich.

“No. I mean, I can’t figure this out,” she was on the verge of tears.

“Beth, any ideas?” Doug asked.

“She’s been doing this right,” Beth said, referring to Vanessa. “But I don’t know why it isn’t working.”

“Shit,” Rich said, and he sat down.

Doug looked up at the clock. It was quarter to 3. They had only a half hour left. After that, it didn’t matter what the database did. The building would be gone.

“I know who we need,” Doug said. “We need Kand.”

Rich and Vanessa looked at him. They knew he was right. Kand knew more about the grid than they would ever learn.

Doug turned to Beth and Colin. “Do you think Eric will allow a swap?” he asked.

They understood immediately. Doug wanted to swap one of the hostages for Kand. “Who do we send out?” Beth asked.

Doug looked at Rich, then Vanessa. She shot back a look that clearly said ‘don’t-you-fucking-dare-recommend-me’. Then he looked at Brey, who perked up immediately.

“I’m going nowhere,” said Rich.

“Brey, c’mon,” Doug said. He felt terrible that he could not send out one of his close friends, but Brey had made himself useless. If he lived, while the rest got blown to bits, Doug felt like that was some kind of reverse poetic justice.

Beth, Brey and Doug left the room, followed by Colin, while Rich and Vanessa were still there with Jim. They walked slowly toward the stairs and climbed to the balcony.

Eric was sitting on the floor in front of the armor, still playing Solitaire.

“So, did you fix it?” he asked.

“No. We’re real close but we need help.”

“Well, soon you won’t,” he said as he nodded to the suit of armor behind him.

“We need to make a trade,” Doug said.

Eric looked at them coldly. “What do you mean?”

“I need Kand to help us solve the macro. Will you send Brey out in exchange for him?”

“No,” Eric said rather emphatically.

“There is no way to make this happen without him,” Doug told him. “It’s based on the friggin’ Grid.”

Eric looked up. “So the macro lives on?”

“We need-”

“You cannot fix the database?”

“We’re almost there, but without-”

“Almost is just another word for ‘not’. If you can’t fix it, let’s get this over with,” Eric said as he stood up.

“Eric! C’mon!” Beth pleaded. Doug had hoped she would eventually pipe up.

“Beth, you knew the stakes all along.”

“There is still a chance! You didn’t see these guys in action,” Beth said even more urgently. “They’re so close. I think they can get this done.”

“You think?” Eric leaned in uncomfortably close to Beth. “You think they can? Thinking gets you nowhere. It’s either they can stop the macro or they can’t! We built the goddamn thing, so if we can’t stop it, it ends now. It has to!”

“Why do you have this deathwish? I don’t want to die!”

“Then you don’t truly believe in our mission,” Eric said as he turned toward the suit of armor.

“Give them one blasted chance!” Colin yelled. “I saw them work. There is still time.”

“Please!” Beth begged.

“Traitors! I will not be my father’s mule!” Eric said, and he reached for the grid icon in the armor. Doug wrestled his hand away and a loud crack echoed through the stock market hall. Beth screamed. Colin had shot Eric in the gut. Eric looked up at his colleague, horrified, and fell backwards, away from the suit of armor.

Rich and Vanessa suddenly appeared at the stairway, followed by Jim, still holding his rifle toward them.

“You want one chance?” Colin asked.

“That’s all. We just need Kand,” Doug said. Colin took the radio from Eric’s limp hand. “Anybody there?” he yelled into the radio.

There was a short wait before anybody answered. “Are you ready to negotiate?” asked the radio, finally. It was Jacobs.

“We’d like to make a prisoner exchange,” said Colin.

“Who is this?” asked Jacobs.

“The whole thing is going forward under new management,” Colin said. “We expect your full cooperation.”

“Where’s Eric?” Jacobs asked.

“Neutralized.”

“What?”

The other three arrived, and Jim’s jaw dropped upon seeing his leader lying in his own blood.

“Never mind that,” Colin said. “We would like to send someone out in exchange for Kand.”

“Kand?”

“Yes,”

“Why?”

“Sir, we’ve set an explosive to detonate within thirty minutes, and we would like to walk out of here.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Jacobs yelled.

“It’s already done. Do we have our exchange?”

The radio was silent.

“Do we have our exchange?”

“Very well. Kand is on his way,” said Jacobs. “Send your hostage to the entrance lobby.”

“Back to the control room,” Colin said to Beth and Jim, who led Vanessa and Rich back down the stairs. Doug started to follow them, but Colin grabbed his arm.

“You’re coming with us. Insurance,” Colin said.

The three of them went to the entrance of the trading floor. As they got to the top of the stopped escalators, Doug saw that the Feds had already started to take positions for a secure hostage release. After a minute, Kand appeared in the entryway, where Doug and the others had first arrived.

Doug felt some trepidation about what was about to happen, but Colin looked a bit amused. Brey looked absolutely scared. Kand looked up and began to climb one of the escalators toward them. Brey started down another escalator and they passed each other in the middle.

After an agonizing minute, Kand stood at the top and Brey was escorted out of the lobby at the bottom.

Colin and the others began to back away from the escalators, when the loudest crack Doug had ever heard went off. He cringed and shook his head, and his ears rang like he was sitting inside a church bell. Doug saw Colin hit the floor with a dark fleshy hole torn through his forehead. It began to fill with dark red liquid, and a puddle of blood began to form underneath him. His lifeless eyes stared directly at Doug.

Eric stood a few feet away with his handgun drawn.

“There he is; the freakin’ Zen genius who knows all the shit about the world!” Eric screamed. He put the muzzle of his automatic pistol into Kand’s neck.

“Drop your weapon!” yelled one of the officers standing below.” The air suddenly seemed to leave the room, and Doug felt weightless. He was suddenly in the middle of a standoff between Eric and a phalanx of Federal officers decked out in riot gear. They began to climb the escalators slowly.

“We’ll see if your secret knowledge of the Grid can save all our bacon,” Eric yelled. He looked pale, and seemed to be limping. He had wrapped his purple jacket around his abdomen and it had already soaked through, turning it a hideous black color. A trail of blood droplets followed him from the trading floor.

“Drop your weapon,” yelled the officer again. The door at the bottom of the escalators opened and a man walked through. It was Mr. Molin. He started to climb the escalators, but was held back by the officer standing near him.

“Now look who’s come to save the day!” Eric laughed.

“Son, you don’t have to do this,” Molin yelled. The officer let go and he began to slowly climb the escalator steps.

Eric held Kand at the shoulder and trained his gun directly at his father, screaming, “This is because of you! Did you tell them that?”

“Eric, I don’t know what you’re-”

“Of course you know!” Eric screamed in extreme pain. “You set this whole thing up. You. Currier. You created this situation so you could look like the hero.”

“What are you talking about?” Molin yelled.

“Currier knew he could never become president, so he enlisted you, didn’t he?”

Molin was almost to the top of the escalator. “Son, I know our ideas are similar,” he said, “but this is not-”

“No, this was all part of your plan. That Chinese company subsidized the entire project. They underwrote the database, the macro, and we were supposed to be your patsies.”

“No, Eric, you-”

“You would stop the macro and turn us in, using the database as evidence. Then you’d run for governor next year, or even president.”

“Son, this is crazy.” Molin said as he reached the top of the stairs.

“Yes, it is. You’d be the law and order guy who turned in his own son and saved the economy! I won’t be your patsy. In a few minutes this all goes straight to hell.”

Eric started to pull the trigger and Molin reached out to grab his hand. The gun went off, and Doug hit the floor. He saw the men at the bottom of the stairs looking for a clean shot.

Eric and Todd Molin pushed each other against the marble walls, the handgun aimed at the ceiling. It went off a third time, and the officers below started to creep up the steps of the escalators.

Kand ducked behind the silver handrails, as Eric and his father continued to struggle with the gun. The gun suddenly swung low and fired. Kand screamed.

Kand looked down at the hole in his abdomen. It began to fill with blood. He fell over, looking at the hole and trying in vain to cover it. Blood began to redden his hands and pool on the floor.

Eric looked down at him and took his gun in both hands. Todd Molin removed his hand when it went off because he had been holding the hot barrel. Eric put the muzzle of the black pistol in his dad’s neck.

“Everybody back off!” he yelled, as the officers froze on escalators. “This guy’s kind of important, my dad. A big fucking deal.”

Eric started to back away, pulling his father with him. “Okay, you got your exchange. Now we’re going back inside. C’mon! You too!” he yelled to Doug. “Grab that radio!”

Doug looked at the radio lying near Colin’s hand, and took it. He saw Kand sitting in extreme pain against the railing. He took Kand’s hand and helped him up.

Doug could think only of Rich and Vanessa. His ears still ringing, he helped Kand limp back into the trading floor.

“You. You should have gone!” said Kand, almost silently. Doug could mostly read his lips.

“My friends need me,” Doug said, “and we need you.”