

Chapter 23

In Balance

Eric stopped in the middle of the empty trading floor, and did not look back at Doug and Kand. He tightened his grip on the handgun at his father's throat and took the radio from Doug. "Pull them back! Pull them back, Now!" he screamed into the walkie-talkie.

Beth and Jim watched from the control room doors across the trading floor. Doug looked back at the escalators. He did not see any heads cross the horizon.

"I will take out the fucking block! I swear it!" Eric yelled.

"What are you trying to pull?" demanded Jacobs through the radio.

"You promised a fair trade!" Eric screamed. "One for one!"

"Son, don't do this," Molin said.

"That's not what happened. You tried to block it," Jacobs responded.

"You sent in my father, thinking you could appeal to my sentimentality. Well, I don't have any!"

"We did not try to-" said Jacobs.

"Never mind. Do not try that shit again or I drop everyone. You, too. This will take out the entire area."

"It would be an act of good faith to tell us if anyone is hurt."

"No. You've given me two hostages, so I can afford this," Eric said as he held the gun high in the air. Doug blocked his ears. A loud bang echoed through the room. Eric had fired at the ceiling.

"What was that?" asked the radio.

"An act of mercy."

"What did you do?"

Eric put the radio back into his jacket and prodded his father into the control room, leaving Doug with Kand behind. Beth and Jim craned their necks to try to see their fallen Freemer, Colin. From where they were, it was impossible. They did not dare go any further toward the doors.

Kand was bleeding out quickly, and Doug was sure that he was doomed if he did not get immediate medical help. Doug had none to offer, but he knew he could wrap the jacket around Kand's stomach, like Eric had done. Doug kneeled over him.

"Beth, do you know if there's a bathroom in here?" Doug asked.

"Yes," she said, pointing toward the far exit.

"I need a first aid kit, or a roll of paper towels, anything."

Beth nodded and ran toward the exit. Doug looked up at Jim and tried to gauge his interest in helping out. Doug saw no expression, but Jim did move close enough for to whisper.

"Eric would tell you to stand there and do nothing, right?" Doug asked him quietly.

“What?” he said. It sounded a little like a challenge, but also a genuine question. It was not easy to speak to Jim without causing the entire room to vibrate with the echo.

“Never mind. We need this man badly, you know.”

“I do know,” Jim said.

Kand’s blood started to pool on the floor. He was conscious, but distant. He was clearly focused on fighting the agony. He took a painful gulp every now and then between his slow breaths.

“Are you all as committed as Eric is to this cause?” Doug asked. “You’ll die to create a diversion from a crash?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“Even if you don’t have to?”

“I would rather not have to,” Jim said. It was the answer Doug was looking for. Jim and Beth did not seem to share in Eric’s death wish.

There was one other thing Doug had to know. “Do you know how to defuse that activator?” he asked Jim.

“No,” Jim said, looking toward the entrance. “Only Eric can do that now.”

Doug held Kand’s coat to his wound. He did not dare remove the cloth, even though something in him wanted to see the wound very badly. It wasn’t just to see how bad it was. It was curiosity.

Beth returned with a roll of gauze and paper towels.

“There was a kit, but this was all I could find that looked useful,” she said as she kneeled to help Kand.

Beth and Doug folded the towels into thick squares and pushed them into Kand’s stomach. He groaned loudly. Doug looked up at Jim and decided not to ask him to help. Kand wasn’t heavy, so Doug lifted his back while Beth wrapped the gauze around him, then they tied the jacket around his abdomen to hold the whole mess together. They had enough gauze left to do this again maybe once.

“Kand, can you stand?” Doug asked.

“I can try, uh-” Kand gasped as he struggled painfully to sit up. “God damnit!” he yelled.

Doug put his arm under Kand’s shoulder to lift him. “Do you think you can help us in the control room?” he asked.

Kand’s voice was hoarse and thin. “I will stand. I will help you,” he said.

Beth’s eyes watered as she watched. Doug nodded to her, and she took Kand’s other arm and lifted, Doug took most of the weight. They lifted Kand into a sitting position, and then helped him stand up. Jim led them back to the server room.

The blood on the floor had soaked through everything Kand had on, and it was all over Beth and Doug as well.

They helped Kand walk to the control room doors, where Jim held them open. As they came in, Rich ran over to help Kand sit down in his chair. Vanessa screamed.

Eric stood in the front of the room, looking at the screens from up close. Todd Molin sat in a chair near the front. Eric held the gun at arm’s length, and kept it aimed at his father’s head as he walked around the desks toward Kand.

“Not so bad, then?” Eric asked. Doug wanted to beat him senseless.

“What is wrong with you?” Beth yelled. “Are you trying to kill everyone?”

“Maybe you’ve noticed, but yes, I am. We will die for this cause if we have to!” Eric yelled.

“Son-” Todd Molin said.

“But this man is our last chance!” Doug screamed.

“Yes, he is.” Eric said, suddenly somber. “Can you help solve this riddle?” he asked Kand. Then he looked at Vanessa and asked, “Why don’t you show him what you’ve done so far.”

Vanessa sat back down next to Kand. She could see that there were only a few minutes left to figure out the macro.

“This is what we’ve found. The industrial sectors are tracking each other, and we can’t fix one of them without the rest spiraling out of control.”

Kand watched carefully as Vanessa showed him how the database was behaving. It was very much like a Rubik’s Cube. Once one segment was fixed, it was impossible to fix any others.

“It works like the grid,” she said. “Resources, labor, law, and all the generations of each.”

“Generations?” Kand asked.

“Well, yes. We started with those and then tried to fix religion, government, technology, and then the-”

“That is why you’re having trouble,” Kand said. “These are not generations.”

“What do you mean?” Vanessa asked.

“These people,” Kand said as he looked at Eric and the others, “believe the basics are the basics, and the rest are forms of progress.” Kand paused to fight a bout of pain. “As if they are improvements.”

“They’re not?” Rich asked.

“No. All the segments are basic. Equally important.”

“You mean we have to solve them all equally?” asked Vanessa.

“Yes. Otherwise, there is no balance.”

“Balance.”

Kand winced. “Yes,” he said.

“How can we do that? We’ll each have to take a monitor,” Vanessa said.

“We don’t have 9 people,” Doug added.

Rich looked at the floor. Eric looked at his father and started to smile. “Looks like your newly-minted MBAs cannot fulfill your little plan, father,” he said.

“You need only one person,” Kand said quietly.

“How?”

“Seek to balance all of them together.”

Vanessa looked at him, and everyone else but Eric and Mr. Molin stared at her. Kand coughed and slumped over in his seat.

“Kand. Kand!” Doug yelled as he helped him sit up.

“Balance-” Kand said.

Kand hemorrhaged more blood than Doug had ever seen in any gory movie. The blood was dripping from the chair. He was soaked in it.

In an instant, Doug felt Kand’s breath stop. There was a short pause, and then his body slumped down ever further, until he was almost curled. Doug leaned him back until his head rolled back against the chair. His eyes were closed.

Doug felt Kand’s neck for a pulse, but could detect nothing. Beth ran over and did the same. She shook her head.

Doug and Beth stood over Kand, covered in Kand’s blood and some of their own tears. Rich leaned forward in his seat and put his head on the desk.

Doug had watched too many people die for most of the afternoon, and he was suddenly engulfed in waves of rage, sorrow, despair, and hatred. Each of them came in bursts, causing him to shake severely. He looked at Eric, ready to scream and lash out against him, despite the gun Eric held.

Eric said nothing.

Vanessa was the only one in the room who looked grounded. The look on her face caused Doug to stand up straight. She seemed to suddenly realize something.

“I know how to fix the macro,” she said.

“What?”

“Balance. I know what he means. I need to create a program.”

A computer program sounded like something that could take months, and they now had less than ten minutes.

“A program?” Rich asked, sounding incredulous.

“Not like you think,” she said. “It’s another macro that will allow the nine sectors to balance each other.”

Todd Molin listened intently. “Vanessa, you mean a diversified fund, don’t you?”

“Shut up, father,” Eric hissed as he tightened his grip on the gun.

Beth ran over to Vanessa. “I know what you mean. Get up,” she said to Rich. He stood up and let her take his seat next to Vanessa.”

Vanessa leaned toward her. “Can you create the matrix for me? The relationships?”

Beth nodded and looked at her screen. She started scribbling something on a sticky note.

Vanessa opened up a text window and started typing code. Rich and Doug looked at each other.

Eric walked toward Vanessa from the front of the room and asked, “What about the-”

“Shh!” Vanessa hissed.

Beth passed a note to Vanessa, and both of them kept doing what they were doing. Everyone else stood back. Doug felt for Kand’s pulse once more. Still nothing.

After a few minutes, Vanessa sat up. Beth had stopped handing her notes, and the two seemed like they were ready to try something.

“Guys. This is it,” Vanessa said. Beth smiled.

They all looked at the large screen in the middle of the wall in front of the room. It was Vanessa’s monitor. She opened the database’s configuration page and loaded her new macro. After a short progress bar came to its end, she fed it the run command.

On the other screens, the price fluctuations began to increase in size and frequency.

“Is it working?” Eric asked.

Vanessa was calm. “Watch,” she said. Beth was still grinning.

Rich’s eyes darted back and forth as he watched the numbers fly, then something suddenly surprised him. “The jumps are starting to match,” he said. He began to sit down at a monitor to crunch numbers.

“No need!” Vanessa told him.

They were right. The stock prices looked like they were jumping around by the same ratios, something they were certainly not doing all day.

Soon, the ratios started to diminish. Everyone watched as the jumps uniformly began to level off until they were very close to zero.

Finally, the database flatlined. The final numbers were very close to what the market started with in the morning. The market was now frozen.

Vanessa had a huge smile on her face. Todd Molin grinned and looked at his son. Eric and Jim stood in front of the screen, dumbfounded.

“Great job, Van!” Rich said as he stood behind her and grabbed her shoulders.

“You did it!” Doug said. “I can’t believe it,”

“Believe it,” Beth answered as she pointed to a monitor. “See that code right there? That’s means the bomb disarmed.” She was breathing heavily with relief.

“I believe you have created the perfect managed portfolio,” Rich said.

“Balanced,” Vanessa told him.

Doug stepped over to give Vanessa a hug, then realized he was still covered in Kand’s blood. She looked up and smiled, and that was enough.

Beth stood up, covered in blood as well. They all stood for a minute trying to decide what to do next.

Doug looked at the clock. It was 3:11. “This market is closed,” he said, then he looked at Eric. “Will you end this seige?” he asked.

Eric stood silently. He looked at his father and his face reddened with blood. “My father taught me to go down swinging,” he said as he raised the gun to prompt everyone out of the room. “And I’m going to. Everyone out!”

Suddenly, there was a loud beeping sound coming from Vanessa’s monitor. Everybody turned to see what was happening, and looked up at the front screen in horror. The

numbers started moving again, like a wagon beginning to roll down a hill. Values and indices began to drop, first slowly, then rapidly. There was only one direction for most of it. Everything seemed to be crashing.

“What is going on?” Doug yelled. Vanessa sat down and started typing.

“Something’s wrong!” she screamed.

“Can you fix it?” Doug asked.

“This isn’t us. This isn’t the database!”

Beth watched the monitor and shook her head.

“There is nothing I can do!” Vanessa yelled.

They watched helplessly as the stock prices that had once been perfectly stabilized began to scroll toward zero. The numbers cascaded downward. Technology companies collapsed. Commodities prices fell to almost nothing. Blue-chip companies that had been flying high for decades were reduced to pennies. Indices started to read values that they had not breathed on since the 1930s.

Not everything fell. The dollar collapsed, but prices of commodities hit the stratosphere. Oil, silicon, aluminum, gold. All of them hit heights that nobody in the world had ever dreamed of.

The numbers rushed like water tumbling through a ravine for about a minute, and then began to slow down. Finally, they stopped moving completely. The markets settled at roughly the levels they were at when Doug’s grandfather was shooting spitballs and catching frogs.

“What happened?” Rich asked.

“I don’t know,” Vanessa said. She started to tear up.

Eric looked at his watch. He stood at the front of the room with his father, and he suddenly looked saddened. “It’s a correction, kids,” he said. It was much more than that, but nobody corrected him. “Doesn’t matter. I don’t care.” He slumped in a chair and put the gun to his head.

“Eric!” Beth yelled.

“No!” Mr. Molin hollered, standing up.

“Sorry, folks!” Eric said. He winced as he began to press the trigger.

The radio in Eric’s coat clicked to life again. “Eric,” it said. He stopped. “Eric,” said the radio again. He turned white and lowered the gun. The voice was not Jacobs, but somebody else. Doug recognized it.

“Dr. Currier,” said Eric into the radio as well as to everyone else.

“This is a closed band, sir.” Another voice said. It was Jacobs.

“Eric, do not do this,” said Currier.

“Sir, I have to. This is-”

“Where are you?” asked Eric. He turned and looked around the room until he spotted the camera in the ceiling.

“Close by,” said Currier. “Close enough to have been killed by your explosion.”

“I’ll bet,” Eric said.

“Sir, please refrain from using this band,” said Jacobs again.

Doug suddenly realized where his father had gone. He went looking for Currier in some nearby building. There was no way to know if he had found him, but if he had, he was also in danger of the bomb if it had gone off.

“Eric, what your father has done is over now. It cannot be fixed. He has failed.”

“We have all failed, Doctor,” Eric said. His eyes began to fill with water as he looked at his dad. “It’s all collapsed.”

“Let it collapse,” Currier said. Doug felt himself nod.

“It was always going to crash,” Currier continued. “Someday. Maybe next year, maybe decades from now. Since the market became a shell of true commerce, it was doomed.”

“But our entire way, everything we know, it’s all destroyed,” Eric said, he sank further in his chair.

“It was born to die, Eric. It was created to be destroyed.”

Eric was reduced to tears. “There is no future, Doctor.”

The voice of Dr. Currier was calm and grandfatherly. “There was never any other fate.”

In a way, Eric was right. Doug’s whole future was in jeopardy now. For Todd Molin and everyone else at the company, the valuation of stocks and portfolios was the only thing they knew. Doug watched Rich and Vanessa, and he knew they thought the same thing. Their fates, their careers. In an instant, they were changed.

But that was all. Their fates were changed, not ended. They were alive, and that was difference enough to fill volumes.

Eric looked at the dead Kand lying in the chair right in front of him. “Doctor, what did I do?” he asked plaintively.

“You have tried, Eric.”

Eric looked at his watch. He picked up the radio. “There is one more act,” Eric said, as he lifted the handgun and aimed it at his father.

“What are you doing?” Beth yelled.

“Son,” Todd Molin said.

“You set me up. You set us all up!” Eric screamed. He put the radio down on the desk and left the channel open.

“Eric, I never meant to make you the scapegoat in this,” Mr. Molin said.

“You admit to it?”

“I wanted these guys to figure it out,” said Molin. “That’s why I put them on the Shangzhen project and gave Doug the access code. That’s why I introduced them to the world by name.”

Doug, Rich and Vanessa looked at each other. It was their turn to be dumbfounded.

“And with your leadership, of course, you’d look like a hero,” Eric said. “My own dad. He fooled you, too, didn’t he? You didn’t know there would be a crash.”

“No, but it doesn’t matter now,” Molin said.

“But you hedged your bet, didn’t you?” Eric demanded. “That’s what all that gold was about?”

“Son-”

“Look what you’ve made me do!” Eric screamed.

“Eric, things will be different, now,” said Currier through the radio. “What matters is not what you’ve done, but what you will do from here.”

Doug got the sense that Currier spoke not only to Eric, but to everyone else in the room. Perhaps he knew that the authorities outside, and probably the media who had tuned in, were listening to his voice.

“Of course it matters!” Eric yelled. He pointed the gun at his father and began to pull the trigger.

“Eric, no!” Beth yelled. Jim stepped forward and raised his rifle toward Eric. Eric pulled the trigger and shot his father directly in the forehead. In one instant, Todd Molin fell backwards, dead before he hit the floor.

Everyone in the room gasped and looked at Eric in total disbelief. Doug’s mouth fell agape.

“What happened?” Currier asked through the radio.

“I have killed my father,” Eric said. “And now I must join him.” He lifted the gun to his own temple.

“Eric, no!” Beth yelled. Doug and Jim were standing near Eric, and they ducked.

“Eric, you don’t need to do this,” Currier said. “Look at what the others tried to do, all to help you fulfill your mission.”

Eric looked at everyone else in the room. First Vanessa, Rich, Beth, and Jim. Then Eric’s eyes landed on Doug. He looked at him for a long minute.

“Sorry, guys, I have failed,” Eric said, and he squeezed the trigger. With a loud bang, his brains and blood splattered against the screen at the front of the room, and Eric collapsed over the desks, then fell to the floor.

There was a long moment of silence from everyone in the room and outside.

“Is the building safe?” asked Currier after a moment.

Doug stood over the dead Eric Molin and his father.

“Tell them we’re okay,” he said.

“Everything is in balance, now,” said Currier.

Doug took the radio and spoke to Jacobs and the people outside. “We’re done. Send your men in,” he said.