



ARRIVAL OF
THE GODS

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If aliens visit us, the outcome would be much as when Columbus landed in America, which didn't turn out well for the Native Americans.
Stephen Hawking, 2010

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In retrospect, it was not difficult to understand why Pope Francis had renounced his office. Even an open minded, modern and progressive pope was not ready to accept truths which contradicted two thousand years of Christian belief.

1. Hans

Hans Staffel, son of General Hans Staffel and grandson of General Hans Staffel – the only surviving member of the failed 20 July plot to kill Hitler – was staring at his half finished plate of spaghetti carbonara as Earth raced by some four hundred and fifty kilometers below.

He sat in the far corner of the Asimov, the best canteen on the Lot. Not that it meant much. But food was cooked, not printed, and this made all the difference when you spent enough time up here.

The Asimov was a bleak gray-green room where people hunched over their plates in quiet resignation while TV screens flashed visual white noise off the walls. The ticker at the bottom of the screen indicated they were showing something about a gunship exploding on its way to the Titan.

The scrubbers were making dull mechanical noises behind a wall panel. This stuff should be silent, thought Hans. It was not supposed to remind you that you were hurtling through space at one orbit every hour and thirty-three minutes, and that your supply of air was in such fragile hands.

Hans hated the thought of being so far from the ground and not being in the pilot's seat. Considering how attracted he was to terrestrial life, he had difficulty understanding how he had become a fighter pilot in the Luftwaffe first and then an entrepreneur piloting his own Lift. When he flew commercial he still asked for the aisle seat because it gave him the feeling he would not be trapped in case the plane called a

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mayday. As if aisle or window would make a difference if the plane dropped out of the sky.

Hans stared at what was left of his spaghetti – there was something different about eating carbonara up here. Maybe it was the recycled water or maybe it was the scrubbed oxygen. Hans' latest theory blamed the eggs. Eggs did not take well to artificial gravity.

A news anchor on one of the screens was celebrating the winner of Big Brother Mars, Russian edition. This brought the total number of guests to six, said Gideon Rush, the anchor – a small logo in the corner indicated that this was *Rush Hour*, with Gideon Rush. The Indian and US members would be up next. Once the sixteen guests had been selected they would fly to Mars for a nine month stay on the Red Planet. All the major networks across the world had been hyping up the show for the last two years and it was believed it would be the most viewed program in history. Ahead of the Olympics, the FIFA World Cup and the British Royal weddings, concluded Gideon with genuine pride.

Hans looked up and groaned quietly as he saw Eddie walking in.

"The Valkyrie is not for sale," he said.

"I'm not here for that," said Eddie.

"What can I do for you in this case?" said Hans forcing up the corners of his mouth.

"I have a drop for you."

Hans nodded.

"I need you to do it now."

"Is that why you came here? I already have a drop," said Hans. "I can be back in twelve hours."

"That won't do. My drop is time sensitive. Switch them around."

"Customers don't like when I pull this kind of shit."

"I can make it worthwhile."

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Hans shook his head.

"JFC Hans, you owe me this one and much more."

Eddie hated cursing.

Hans stared at Eddie. The two couldn't have looked more different. Eddie was short and overweight. He had beady eyes, a handlebar mustache and a bald spot which tapered off into a ponytail. He reminded Hans of a fish. A crafty one.

Hans, on the other hand, could have been the poster boy for holidays in Bavaria: tall, athletic, with sand colored hair and blue eyes.

"Do I hear a yes?" said Eddie putting on a smile which did not reach his eyes.

The world rushed beneath their feet. Forests, mountains and oceans sped by as the Lot raced through its orbit.

Eddie had been Hans' instructor at Holloman Air Base in New Mexico. They had met again, years later, during a NATO training, when Hans was having difficulty landing on the USS Nimitz due to heavy crosswinds.

"JFC, is that you kid?" Hans had heard over the radio.

"Eddie?" he had replied barely recognizing him.

"Bank more into the wind and stop crabbing. The wind is strong and is coming in gusts. Do you copy?"

"Roger that."

"Then why are you doing the opposite?"

"Because that is what you taught me," Hans had fired back grinning.

"Just do as I say. You can buy me a drink when we port, okay?"

"Okay."

"And stop grinning," Eddie had added.

Hans had stopped crabbing and banked into the wind. For a moment he thought he would be off-axis, but a gust realigned him with the runway just as he was about to touch down. The tailhook of his Panavia

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Tornado snagged the third of the four arresting wires and the hydraulic system slowed the plane down to a halt.

The Nimitz never ported during Hans' stay. He only got to pay his debt years later when Eddie convinced Hans to join him as one of the first private contractors on the Lot. The partnership only lasted a couple of months. Hans had told himself he did not want to be tied down to someone telling him what to carry, where and when. It would have been too much like being back in the Luftwaffe and he had just left the Luftwaffe.

The reality was that Hans liked the air force. The armed forces had been a family tradition for three generations. Back then he had no idea why he left. He did not understand that the problem had nothing to do with hierarchy.

"What's the cargo?" asked Hans looking at his egg-challenged spaghetti.

"Batteries."

"Batteries? Why do you need me for that?"

"We just had a delivery. The cargo arrived a couple of hours ago. Did you see the freighter when you docked?" asked Eddie looking away.

"Why do you need me for an AG drop?" insisted Hans.

"You are to go to LXD—," said Eddie. "It's a two manifest job."

Two manifest jobs were not legal. You could lose your license for pulling shit like that. Even jail time. On the other hand, LXD's lack of security and the sheer extent of the corruption were legendary. There were few places which could be considered better for a two manifest job.

LXD, Sao Paulo's former Viracopos International Airport, had been expanded in a bid to become South America's main hub for shipping cargo to and from the Lot. The airport had been renamed in honor of Luiz Dantas, the Brazilian diplomat who was awarded the title of

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Righteous Among the Nations for having helped hundreds of Jews flee from Nazi France.

"I can add something for the inconvenience," said Eddie.

"How much?"

"Double?"

The formula for good money was simple: first you got into a position where you were the gatekeeper to a valuable commodity, second you earned the trust of the right people and, third, you signaled that you were willing to bend the rules for the proper reward.

If there was any indication that something was off, it was when Eddie doubled the rate, but Hans was too busy counting the money and remembering how many times Eddie had got him out of trouble to notice this.

"The next window for an LXD drop is in forty minutes," said Eddie looking at his watch.

Larger than the largest aircraft carrier, the George Washington – the Lot – was the United States' projection of power in space. Over one hundred thousand metric tons of arachnographene, steel and fiber optics orbited four hundred and fifty kilometers above the equator. It was the largest vessel built by mankind and an engineering wonder in its own right. It had taken three years from design to deployment: a true marvel considering it had twice the mass of a normal aircraft carrier and that all components had to be flown into orbit before final assembly.

A satisfied grin appeared on Hans' lips as Eddie left.

He turned his attention back to his plate questioning if he should eat the pasta – even cold carbonara was still carbonara and Hans was not going to recycle any of it. He finished it quickly and then cleaned off the plate with bread. Hans was serious about his food.

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Hans found Art, his partner on the Valkyrie, passed out in sector C. Somebody told him Art had gone all in one too many times, lost everything, and then decided to dedicate the rest of the night to drinking. Art was not going to be of any help getting the Valkyrie down to the mainland. Hans would split today's drop money with Art, as he did when he found him in this state.

Flying solo was more of an interference with his pre-flight routine than an actual risk, but insurance would not pay if you flew without a copilot. I should have a routine for this, thought Hans. It was happening often enough.

"Want to join us?" asked a guy with a big pile of chips stacked in front of him.

Hans shook his head.

"Wise man," commented another. "He took money off Jens too."

Hans had no idea who Jens was.

"Tall dude, bald, round face," he continued. "Biggest thief in LEO."

"Art almost cleaned him up, but then Jens claimed some business with the new freighter, left and when he returned he won all his money back."

"All of it!"

"Until Eddie came down and cleaned him out."

"Eddie who?"

"Eddie Chapman."

"Jens was furious."

"You a friend of Eddie?"

Hans nodded.

"You tell him to be careful. I have seen him pull this shit on others. One day he will piss somebody off."

Art pushed himself up and stumbled out. Hans let him go without saying a word. He was in no condition for coherent thoughts.

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"Have you seen the freighter docking?" asked the first. "Fucking secretive they were today. They didn't even allow us close to those crates. They brought their own people to offload the cargo!"

"Is this normal?" asked another who couldn't be more than eighteen. His jumpsuit still showed the fold marks of a new uniform and the US flag patch on his shoulder shimmered new in the dim light. He stood up slowly, probably following his drill instructor's instructions to avoid dizziness until he got accustomed to gravity pointing in one direction while his inner ear told him he was moving in another. It was bullshit, Hans barely felt anything even when moving from the outer to the inner levels.

Hans had to admit that he too had been awed the first time he had seen a freighter dock, but wonder faded fast when you saw this every other day.

"Hell no! They are normally drinking while we are busting our asses. Not this time, though. This time they were sober. They wheeled the cargo to the container units, locked them and I heard they are still standing guard outside. If rumors are correct, they will stay until the shipment drops and then they will leave immediately. After six months stuck on that ship I imagined they would be hitting the bars until they no longer cared that they had another six months to get back home."

The Lot was claustrophobic. The ceilings were low, the corridors narrow and the light never seemed to reach all the corners. The entire structure had been painted a monochromatic gray-green and the sensation was that of crawling through the entrails of a gigantic beast. An angry, semi-dormant beast whose raspy breathing thrummed through the structure.

Hans reached the bay where the Valkyrie was docked and found a Ret waiting next to his Lift. The Ret mumbled something into his comms

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piece and fifteen minutes later more Rets arrived pushing a bunch of crates stacked on electric pallet trucks. One of the Rets handed Hans a tablet on which the AG batteries cargo was detailed. Hans signed the manifest after counting the crates and unlocked the hatch to the Valkyrie's cargo bay. He caught whiffs of rotting fish as they walked by. Small puffs of white powder gently exhaled from their sleeves and their trousers every time they moved.

The Rets worked efficiently under the bright halogen lights. They didn't utter a sound besides a few grunts to indicate that a crate should be shifted over or that another had to be pushed all the way back. Hans kept his gaze on the crates to make sure they were being stowed properly. When finished they stared at Hans until he climbed on board, closed the hatch and locked the Valkyrie. Even then they only left when they saw he was in that part of his pre-flight routine where he ignited the engines.

Hans was a methodical person. He had a precise routine for everything important and alarms set up to make sure that he wouldn't forget even the simplest of things. Preparation for flying, being flying the thing he feared most, had developed into a superstitious liturgy.

Hans picked up the Giants baseball cap he kept on his seat. He didn't wear it immediately. He first went through the paperwork – the Operating Handbook, the Weight and Balance, the insurance and the manifest. Then came the visual inspection of the control panel. He sat down, tested the stick for strange noises and started the automated pre-flight check. That was standard procedure. In the meantime he ran his personal pre-flight check.

When he was satisfied with that he started the engines. He went into full burn for a couple of seconds and then slowly powered down again.

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He was putting on his baseball cap when the comms light flashed. It was Eddie asking him up to his office. Hans was sure there was no good reason for Eddie to want him in his office, but went anyway.

He stormed back to the Valkyrie asking himself why Eddie hadn't given him all the paperwork when they met in the canteen. Besides having missed his window he had to go through his pre-flight routine again!

The detachment sequence required no radio interaction with the Lot's air control. He just received the green light and dropped. Re-entry was a simple matter with a Lift. Drops were timed to make the most of the platform's momentum and for minimum fuel consumption. The Valkyrie would glide until the Kármán line – one hundred kilometers above the Earth's surface – where the atmosphere started thickening. There Hans would fire the engines to help him steer the turbulence and to fine tune the re-entry angle. The Valkyrie needed a forty-point-five degree angle not to bounce off the atmosphere.

Eddie's instructions were to land in Brazil just south of the border with Venezuela. Some three thousand five hundred kilometers north of the port of entry indicated on the manifest.

The map showed he was heading for the kind of jungle where you needed a good machete just to open enough space to stand. There was no village or runway within a hundred kilometers. A two manifest job implied he would need to switch off his beacon as soon as he left the Lot's radar cone and before entering any radar on the mainland. If anything happened to him in the middle of the jungle nobody would even know he was there. Hans was never happy with this part.

The Valkyrie began to shake as the atmosphere thickened, but Hans' hand was relaxed on the stick. The Lift only required minimum thrust adjustments. He was practically gliding all the way down. The thick slab of arachnographene on the Valkyrie's belly reduced friction with air,

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cutting down on the problems caused by overheating which older aircraft models had struggled with.

The display indicated that he had left the Lot's radar cone. Hans reached over and deactivated the Valkyrie's beacon. In pilot lingo he had gone dark.

2. Aristotle

Aristotle Rainwater closed the conference room door as the last member of the negotiating team left. Their lawyer had not looked happy – it was he who would have to report the outcome to the board.

Aristotle was on the thirty-seventh floor of the Park Inn Hotel overlooking Alexanderplatz and the concrete sprawl of former East Berlin. The room's wall-to-wall carpet looked like a giant chessboard illuminated by the grid of orange city lights. He sat down and folded his hands over his lap – he knew what came next.

Forty-nine years old and standing almost two meters tall, Aristotle Rainwater wore his one hundred and forty-seven kilos with grace and a certain kind of elegance. Overweight, but with that solid fat of former athletes, Aristotle was not considered a good looking man. He had effeminate features hidden behind a perfectly trimmed goatee, small paw-like hands and oily dark curls down to his shoulders.

He always wore a tailor made suit, a tie and dress shoes. Summers in Rio were hot, but Aristotle would not leave home without a suit even for the most mundane of tasks. There was an air of dignified ugliness, sophistication and strength about him. It was like watching a bison pull a four-point-fold handkerchief from the top pocket of his dinner jacket.

"You saved us from a long legal battle," said Laurence Marshal, CEO of Ono GmbH.

Aristotle nodded.

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Laurence was sixty-five, but nobody believed that. Everybody guessed he was fifty. At most. While leading a one hundred and twenty thousand people company was a sure way to attract unreasonable compliments, this one was sincere. He had aged well. He had white hair, a face with no wrinkles and a boyish smile which still caused women of all ages to sigh.

"I don't usually work with people I know so little about," said Laurence. "Even with the recommendation you were given, I was this close to doing it my way."

The conference room's floor-to-ceiling windows provided an unobstructed view to Berlin's orderly mesh one hundred meters down.

"I need to thank Gustavo for insisting," continued Laurence.

Aristotle smiled.

"How did you know he was only posturing?"

Aristotle could not explain how he knew what he knew. He just did. To anybody who asked him he would say this was the fruit of two decades of experience. During the debrief he would talk about all the micro expressions and the emphasis words he had picked up, but the truth was that he just knew it. That it made sense in a way he knew was right. He could never admit that he was being paid tens of thousands of dollars for his gut feelings.

"He was telling us himself all along," said Aristotle. "When he tried to intimidate you using his position, when he refused to listen to you, when he ignored your R&D. You will see all the signs yourself if you think back to what he did *not* say."

"He was immediately dismissive," said Laurence thinking back. "Anybody pushing so hard from the beginning is trying to distract you from something."

Aristotle nodded.

"Do you think he came here knowing he would give up?"

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On the wall hung a painting of a knight threatening a bishop. Next to it was another one showing a king checkmated by a queen.

"He came here to distract you. He knew about your AG patents and was hoping to intimidate you into not understanding the cards you are holding. We stopped the war before it started."

"I want to extend your contract for another couple of days," said Laurence after some thought. "I want you to put together a strategy in case they have second thoughts."

"They won't. They have accepted that you'll litigate if they do. You can start producing the AG as soon as you are ready."

"We're ready now. The machines have been on standby for weeks, but the board will not allow me to start production if there is even the slightest possibility that they'll take us to court."

"They won't. They were only trying to slow you down."

"I prefer to hedge my bets."

Aristotle nodded knowing he would not convince him. Nor was it his job to do so.

His phone rang. Aristotle looked at the number on the screen.

"I have to take this," he said.

"Seu Gustavo, it's a pleasure hearing from you," said Aristotle switching to Portuguese.

He stood up and listened to the voice speaking on the other end of the line. He paced back and forth without paying attention to the view in front of him.

"Certainly. I can be in Brasilia in twenty-four hours."

Aristotle hung up and sat down again.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to accept your offer," he said turning back to Laurence.

"I understand, the matchmaker requires your services elsewhere," said Laurence with a smile. "It's been a pleasure working with you."

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Aristotle smiled back.

Aristotle walked into Berlin's steel and glass Brandenburg Airport terminal. He fast-tracked through security and made his way to the Lufthansa lounge. His phone buzzed once. Aristotle read the email while walking. Everybody moved out of his way without second thoughts when they saw him bearing down the corridor.

He was to meet agents Augustino and Benedito of the Policia Federal in Brasilia's Asa Norte, the northern wing of Brazil's dove shaped capital. They had chosen what looked like a typical boteco from Rio – the Boteco do Galinha. Not his first choice for a meeting place: food was usually bland and drinks were limited to cheap beers. With few exceptions Aristotle did not do botecos.

Aristotle handed his frequent flyer card to the lounge attendant who slipped it into the reader. The attendant's routine pleasantries became what Aristotle imagined was his VIP smile after he read what appeared on the screen.

"This way," said the attendant. "You have access to the Executive Lounge. You will find a menu on the table. Let me know if you need anything."

Aristotle was hoping against reason to be surprised by Lufthansa's Executive Lounge food.

He canceled two meetings he had planned for the following day – his short fingers moved with surprising agility on the phone's screen – and another scheduled for the day after that. He called all three of his clients, made the appropriate apologies and all three managed to rearrange their engagements in order to accommodate Aristotle's new schedule.

His calendar was a slotting masterpiece – something which Adriana had not appreciated as much as he did.

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A gray light filtered through the clouds of Berlin's permanently overcast sky and even the warm tones of the lounge acquired a metallic sheen. Aristotle tucked his curls behind his ear and read the email again. He hadn't missed anything. Had this not come from Gustavo he would have declined.

The Boteco do Galinha was the copy of a real Rio boteco designed by an architect who had never been to one. It was like a hustler selling you an idea he did not believe in. Aristotle had no doubt that the people who had chosen this did not see the problem.

He crossed the two agents as he walked into the boteco's bathroom. They didn't recognize him. They gave him a cursory glance and then ignored him – they were too busy checking every stall. He overheard them referring to this as operational security, although neither of them looked like they had ever drawn a gun outside of the firing range.

"Do you know this Aristotle?" asked Augustino adjusting his tie in the mirror.

"No," said Benedito tilting his head to one side and slicking his hair back.

Augustino threw a last glance at the mirror and walked out. He adjusted the gun at his hip, while Benedito felt for his badge.

The two agents shrank back in their seats when Aristotle joined them at their table and they realized who he was.

Benedito handed him a file and told him what they had prepared.

Aristotle took his time reading the file from cover to cover. The two agents exchanged glances asking themselves what they were supposed to do while he read. Their inner monologues were loud, and fretted over the lack of respect and the value of their time, but they remembered their orders and kept their eyes on their coffees.

When he finished, Aristotle closed the file and gathered his thoughts.

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"Calling him in is not an option according to what's in here," said Aristotle.

"We don't have anything," said Benedito. "We were hoping you would think of something."

"What if we ask for his help? A consultation. In a nice place."

"As connected as he is, he's still a criminal," said Augustino. "Why are we giving him the white glove treatment?"

"Because we can't be wrong," said Aristotle.

To Aristotle, the junior suite of the Santa Cruz Hotel was a gaudy, upscale version of a brothel. There was an overly large couch upholstered with a fake jaguar print, a huge cow hide lay on the floor and marble adorned the half moon tables positioned under gilded mirrors.

The two agents nodded approvingly as they walked in.

Aristotle was listening to the radio softly broadcasting through the suite's sound system. A speaker was announcing the departure of the unmanned space probe Vesta on a mission in search of Janus, the elusive planet thought to be the cause of some of the stranger orbits in the solar system. Its path was supposed to be almost perpendicular to the planetary plane. The orbit was so large, continued the speaker, it took Janus one hundred and fifty thousand years to go around the sun once and Vesta might never find it.

As nobody knew where Janus was, Vesta was being sent where it was believed the planet would leave the most evidence, the Kuiper belt – the asteroid field extending from Neptune to almost once more the distance between the Sun and Neptune. Even with the aid of flux engines, it would take weeks before the probe's sensors were turned on. What an exciting time to live in, concluded the speaker.

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Aristotle was following up on emails when Carlos Eduardo Rocha entered the twelfth floor suite with an expression of contempt and boredom. Aristotle was not surprised that the two agents' choice of hotel had not had the intended effect.

Carlos wore a navy blue suit – the kind a policeman would respect and a politician would appreciate. He took in the room for what it was, not what it appeared.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with us, seu Carlos," said Benedito.

"It is not every day that your expertise is requested by the Policia Federal," replied Carlos.

Benedito and Carlos sat next to each other on the jaguar print couch, while Aristotle sat on an armchair to the side. Augustino was in the adjacent room recording the session.

"Who is he?" asked Carlos indicating Aristotle.

"An observer," said Benedito. "We need to follow protocol."

Carlos stared at Aristotle, but did not say anything.

Benedito played the perfect host and only came to the point of the meeting after the ritual pleasantries.

"Pindorama SA, of which you are the CEO, has recently been awarded a contract for the protection of a seven thousand square kilometer area of the Amazon rainforest along the border with Venezuela," said Benedito. "Am I correct seu Carlos?"

"Not exactly," said Carlos. "We have not been tasked with the protection of a piece of land and some trees. Our charge is the welfare of the twenty-one Yanomami villages in this area."

"How was Pindorama awarded the contract?"

"Like every other contract," he said. "My team monitors the market for opportunities we consider a match for our office. When we find one

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we prepare a proposal, we submit it and we wait for the committee's decision."

Augustino and Benedito were trying to understand how Pindorama had won a contract for which no part of the government had issued an RFP. In fact for which the budget had not even been discussed because the project, and the law supporting it, had not yet been approved. And yet, a request for proposals had allegedly been issued, the proposals evaluated and a winner had been selected. The first installment had even been paid.

"Is this what happened in this case?"

Carlos' eyes widened for a fraction of a second and his mouth opened ever so slightly. Fear, thought Aristotle. What was scaring him?

"Indeed," said Carlos.

"Are you aware of— how can we put it? —ways to influence these decisions?"

Carlos relaxed. It was almost invisible the way the tension seeped out of his shoulders.

"Are you referring to bribes?"

Benedito nodded.

"I know of some," said Carlos with a smile on his lips, "although this is not something my office engages in."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"This conversation is off the record?"

"Absolutely."

Carlos went on to describe the complex process through which politicians and civil servants received votes, money and favors without having their actions connected to their rewards. Carlos was comfortable talking about those procedures which allowed budgets allocated to hospitals and schools to be siphoned off to cover for the unexpected

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over-invoicing of roads leading to the middle of nowhere, so that politicians could receive benefits somewhere else.

Nothing that Carlos said was getting Benedito closer to what he wanted to hear and his frustration was starting to show.

"Would you say that drawing up a plan to protect seven thousand square kilometers of tropical rainforest, and the twenty-one Yanomami villages within this area, is an easy task, seu Carlos?" asked Aristotle following a gut feeling.

"No, not at all."

"Who did you have work on this RFP?"

His lips contracted, but this time he managed to control the muscles around his eyes. Carlos was worried about where this could lead.

"I worked on this alone."

"Now this is a surprise," commented Benedito. "I didn't expect somebody in your position to be so operational. Wouldn't you normally have a team preparing RFPs?"

"Yes, I do, but this is the most meaningful project I have worked on since founding Pindorama. It is not unusual for the CEO of a company to take an active role in such cases. I wanted to feel I had personally contributed."

"When was the last time you were this involved in a project?" asked Aristotle following up on his previous intuition.

Carlos fell silent and stared into his lap for what seemed a very long time. Got you, thought Aristotle.

"Did you show the proposal to your team while you were working on it?" asked Aristotle trying to avoid Carlos getting away with an easy lie which would be difficult to verify. "As a sounding board. I believe this is how people in your line of work operate, am I right?"

"Yes, this is how we normally work," said Carlos choosing to answer only Aristotle's last question.

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"I assume that there will be versions of your proposal at various stages of completion in your email records."

"Yes," said Carlos. "There definitely are. I'm not sure what you're expecting though, there might not be as many drafts as you think. I only involved my team during the final phase. There is a very short paper trail, if this is what you're looking for."

"Seu Carlos," said Benedito losing his patience. "I have to say that your position appears somewhat unusual."

"Do I need my lawyer?" asked Carlos unruffled by the comment. "I came here to consult the Policia Federal about RFPs and government dealings. Should I ask my lawyer to join us?"

The honest answer was that Benedito would have loved for there to be the need for a lawyer. But his task was not to build a case against Carlos. His task was to find a clue which could lead them to whoever was pulling the strings of the sloppy clerk who had issued an RFP and declared a winner before the law had even been approved.

This is what was bothering Aristotle: why the sloppiness? The law would have passed, the RFP would have been issued and Pindorama could have won the contract without the risk of raising suspicions. Why the rush?

The clerk, one Renato Bastos, had admitted to his wrongdoing and had justified it by saying he needed the money and that the law would have passed anyway. He had only accelerated something which would have happened anyway.

The police agreed he did not know who had paid him. Whoever was behind this was confident enough not to fear the consequences of such haste.

"Not in the least," said Benedito backpedalling. "Your help is much appreciated. If you needed a lawyer we would not be having this conversation in a five star hotel."

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Carlos turned to him and Aristotle saw fear in his eyes. It was not fear of Aristotle, Benedito or the police. It was a primal form of fear. The feeling that the person in front of you has full rights over you: like a slave owner in a sugarcane plantation two hundred and fifty years ago. If you were black, the white man could as well have been God himself. A god with a whip, a short temper and the belief that you were no better than the animals in his courtyard.

Aristotle was reaching a very different conclusion to what the two agents had told him they suspected. Carlos' proposal was legitimate, it was not a cover up to justify a bribe. Augustino and Benedito had stumbled upon something, but not what they thought. Carlos said there was a short paper trail not because he had worked on this alone, but because he had not worked on this at all. The proposal had been handed to him already finalized. Somebody was expecting him to win and to implement the plan as submitted.

What Aristotle was seeing was an intelligent man used to steamrolling over people and obstacles. He had not built a company worth hundreds of millions of dollars by playing nice. He was not accustomed to feelings of respect, deference and fear.

"Agent Benedito," said Aristotle. "I think seu Carlos deserves a coffee."

"Yes," said Benedito puzzled. "Let's get him one."

The two stood up and walked to the adjacent room where Augustino was recording the proceedings.

Aristotle looked at the two agents trying to understand if they had seen what he had.

He explained his insights while the two looked at each other asking themselves if Aristotle had been in a different room the whole time. Do you want to take a look at the recording? Augustino almost blurted out.

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Then he remembered what he had been told about Aristotle and how he should behave, and decided to keep the question to himself.

"If you will allow me," continued Aristotle, "I would like to take the lead."

The two agents realized their instructions had been clear and they had little choice but to agree.

Aristotle walked back into the room as a waiter knocked on the door with a coffee on his tray.

3. Euler

The three of them stared in disbelief as the words appeared on their screens. Scattered across the globe, thousands of kilometers apart, they were having difficulty accepting the reality of their accomplishment. It felt unreal. They had been trying to crack this for two years, and now it was done.

gentleman: We've done it!

Euler: You have.

gentleman: We have. Mine was just the finishing touch.

1con: Accept the compliment, these don't come often.

gentleman: This was a team effort, I didn't do it alone.

It was true, it had been a team effort, but the praise was due nonetheless.

gentleman: The solution was simpler than I thought, it was me that wasted time looking for a complex one.

Euler: What kind of simple?

gentleman: A differential attack. I guess when you have quantum computing you don't think too much about the algorithm itself.

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A kid was shouting with joy in the apartment next door. Shrieks of pure happiness echoed through the wall. He probably scored a goal in his videogame, thought Euler leaning back in the chair.

gentleman: What's next?

Euler: Send me the source. I will merge it and run it on the encrypted file.

The rule was that nobody ran software which they had not compiled themselves. It was not lack of trust, it was just common sense to know what was running on your machine. Euler trusted gentleman the same way gentleman trusted Euler, but it paid to be paranoid doing what they were doing.

Euler went through gentleman's source code admiring its elegance. All code had texture. Euler could feel it as if it were something physical. Bad code felt coarse. gentleman's felt like caressing silk.

Euler: Code is good. I have no idea how you derived the math.

gentleman: I can show you. Just tell me when.

Euler: No IRL meets. Not with me, not with anybody.

gentleman: It never hurts trying. Do you want me to scan my notes?

Euler: Scan? Do you work on paper?

gentleman: I can't do math on a screen.

Euler: You must be older than you want us to believe if you're still using paper.

Euler knew exactly how old gentleman was. Euler might not be as gifted with numbers, but was a league apart when it came to coding. Euler had tracked down every member of the team before they even knew there was a team to join. This was no membership club, you earned your way in.

gentleman – Bill –, who had inherited a pub in London, had never finished high school. fax was a high school math teacher and a voracious reader based in Beijing. Euler had managed to trace her

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through a dozen hops, and then had shown her how to make sure that the Chinese police would never be able to do the same. Ikon was a fourteen year old slob with even less social skills than the rest of them, but she was a savant when it came to network security and microprocessor architecture. The only reason Euler had managed to track her was because she had allowed it.

Euler: Yes, send the notes.

gentleman: I'll do better. I'll type them up so you won't need to decode my scrawls.

If gentleman's code was like silk, his math was like an old master's painting. Equations had form in Euler's eyes. Each fragment was a unique shape and Euler could tell at a glance when two fit together by their shape alone. There was an artistic element to this. There was kalithena.

School could only give you a formal explanation about the relationship between numbers, symbols and the abstract concepts they represented, but it could never give you that instinctive understanding which required no explanation. You couldn't teach what they had done. That kind of understanding was something you had inside, it was not something you could train. Few people could appreciate this difference.

While Euler's math was not at gentleman's level, it was Euler who had made all of this possible. It was Euler who had found the first cipher texts allowing the team its start. And it was Euler's obsession which had assembled them from a purposeless group of unrecognized geniuses to the team which had cracked a nut that not even the NSA or the Chinese had managed to.

Euler: It's beautiful.

gentleman: Does it qualify?

Euler didn't want to admit it, but it did qualify. With flying colors. It was the most beautiful piece of code Euler had seen in a long time.

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Euler: Not a chance.

gentleman: I see. Is it working at least?

Euler: It compiled. I pinged the binary to send me a batch of emails. I'll send the plaintexts as soon as it's finished decrypting.

gentleman: Have you secured the new C&C server?

Euler: I have.

gentleman: What about 1con?

1con: I've done my part.

gentleman: Good. We do not operate an unsecured server, do we?

Euler: No, not anymore. I've learned my lesson.

1con: The Ono raid was too close.

gentleman: No more cowboy rides.

The binary pinged back with its load of encrypted emails. Euler would check the server's security later.

Euler: I received the emails. It's decrypting as we speak.

The file was much bigger than expected and Euler agreed to get back to them as soon as this had finished decrypting.

Euler stared at the blank walls thinking of what would come next. Specks of dust floated in the shafts of light filtering through the curtains. It was the middle of the night and the streets were quiet.

Euler's apartment was a hollow shell crammed with books and electronics. There were books everywhere and on every subject. English, Chinese and Morothì grammars sat in piles with books on number theory, hereditary captaincies and financial modeling. Frank Herbert sat with non-linear equations and the Treaty of Tordesillas. Tolkien, The Jungle Book and game theory were stacked under the Bletchley Park Archives, Rommel's biography and the White Rose.

Euler loved the smell of books, especially the old ones. They smelled like home.

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A series of numbers and debugging symbols appeared on the screen indicating that the script had finished decrypting the emails. It took Euler a single glimpse to understand that they would need months to comb through all the plaintexts. Even a team of experienced journalists wouldn't take much less. They had breached the email backup server of the Morothì embassy in Berlin after all.

The kid next door started shouting again. This cannot be just a mid-season goal, thought Euler, he must have won the whole championship. Whatever he had accomplished, it must have been truly amazing because he could not stop screaming.

Euler wandered into the kitchen and looked at the leftover pizza sitting on the table. Euler opened the cardboard box and gave it a sniff – it still smelled good enough. Euler had neither the patience to microwave it, nor the time to wait for delivery. This would have to do.

Euler: It's finished. I'm sending it over.

gentleman: How big?

Euler: It will take us months to go through it.

gentleman: I thought it might be the case. I've been working on script, a Bayesian filter which I trained on some email dumps I have lying around. It should speed up things.

Euler: Are the emails you used relevant for what we need to reduce?

gentleman: No, but it's a starting point. We can iterate as we go along.

1con: Have we changed our protocols when it comes to securing C&C servers?

Euler: What do you mean? No, nothing has changed.

1con: I found some binaries which shouldn't be there. I ran them through my scanners and they have NSA fingerprints all over them. Is this something one of you is testing?

Euler: No.

1con: Then the server has been compromised.

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The specks of dust froze in the frayed light.

Euler: Was it before I pinged the binary or after?

1con: I don't know. My objective is to make sure we have covered our tracks. I will do a post-mortem after that.

gentleman: Slash and burn. Don't allow them to track you.

Euler: On it.

gentleman: Let's make sure we are ready in case the police come knocking.

1con: Do I need to remind you that all of this needs to be done manually? No automation and no scripts, okay?

Euler: Of course.

Euler put the decrypted emails to the side and went to work.

They scrubbed all intermediate machines, purged logs and rotated IPs so often it became a challenge to keep track. It took hours to sanitize everything – they were meticulous about it – that is how they kept out of trouble. By the time they finished Euler was ready to crawl into bed. On any normal night this would have been the case, but not tonight.

Although Euler wanted to dive right in and see what the emails contained, the signal-to-noise ratio was too low and many of the emails were in languages Euler did not understand or covered irrelevant topics like travel expenses, meeting minutes and new laws in faraway countries. There was little to do except wait for gentlemen's script to reduce the email dump into something more digestible.

gentleman: I'm sending over a quick analysis. I set up my script for speed so it will have missed a lot, but at least we can start going through the results and optimize the parameters.

1con: I'm sure fax would be online if she knew how fast we progressed.

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gentleman: Don't get your hopes too high. We still need to wait for the script to finish the deep analysis. The reduction makes little sense as it is.

1con: It's floated a Brazilian company, Pindorama SA, multiple times. The script scored it high. There's even a partial transcript of a police interrogation of its CEO. They believe he's bribing some politician to win contracts.

gentleman: Have you seen the article? The script attached it in full, not a summary.

Euler found the article and scanned through it. It described how AG batteries had stopped terrorism in the Middle East. How the arrival of a cheaper and cleaner alternative to oil as a form of energy storage had caused the value of oil fields around the world to plummet almost overnight. It had taken AG batteries and solar paint two years to destroy a market that had survived a century and a half, said the article. Crude oil had gone from being a premium raw material to a low cost commodity relegated to the production of clothing, medicines and skin care products.

Academics had debated the idea that emerging markets would not be able afford AG batteries, the article continued, and would take over the demand for crude oil once prices fell, but with western hunger weaned off of oil for energy purposes, the price of the barrel could not be resurrected and the Middle Eastern economies were crushed. AG batteries and solar paint had been more effective in crippling the jihad than any US invasion ever had. Peace had been forced onto the Middle East not through blood, bullets and bibles, but by bankrupting the war chests of global terrorism.

gentleman: They're planning a visit to Venezuela and are debating if this should be lead by the UN ambassador or by the Berlin embassy.

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Euler: They have a busy schedule of official and unofficial visits, why has this one in particular been floated?

gentleman: Have you noticed that there is no communication with Bouvet Island?

Euler: They are not using email to communicate among themselves. Email is only used with us.

gentleman: So it's true.

Euler: I would love to get a line on whatever they are using to communicate internally.

gentleman: So would everybody else. Including how they communicate off planet. Be proud: we have accomplished something nobody else has.

gentleman was right, Euler was still in shock when thinking about what they had pulled off. No one had ever boasted of having hacked into the Berlin embassy or having cracked its encryption. Let alone both. They were in the big boys club now. Nobody would ever know it, not even the cliques which had bullied them all through high school, but they were.

1con: Yes, be proud because I don't think we will be able to repeat this any time soon. I have a bad feeling about those binaries.

gentleman: Are you sure?

1con: No, I'm not sure. They're inactive. They haven't been transmitting since I found them, but their encryption smells of NSA.

Euler: Here's another reference to Pindorama: they're flying down some cargo from the Lot. It says AG batteries.

Euler was reading through gentleman's document. Despite the reduction it was still impressively long.

Euler: Wait. I have another manifest saying that the Valkyrie is flying empty.

gentleman: Where did you find the manifest?

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Euler: I'm looking at the original emails. The script left too many gaps.

gentleman: The Valkyrie was supposed to fly to LXD. What's so important about a cargo of AG batteries to Brazil?

Euler: An empty drop according to the second manifest.

gentleman: Why is the Berlin embassy even looking at a commercial transaction?

Euler: Brazilian rosewood?

gentleman: Could be. They love ancient trees and Brazilian rosewood is at the top of their list.

Euler: Do we have an ETA for the deep analysis?

gentlemen: It will be ready by the time we wake up tomorrow.

Euler: Then let's focus on what we have.

gentleman: Could they be smuggling Brazilian rosewood?

Euler: Could be. They're not allowed a commercial license below the Kármán line so they'll need to make use of a licensed Lift even for an illegal operation. It would—

Suddenly the apartment went dark. The uninterruptible power supply under Euler's desk kicked in and kept the stack, three concealed cameras behind the windows and a fourth on the landing outside the front door, powered up. Euler's eyes went to the black and white monitor showing the views from the four cameras. The three behind the windows didn't show anything out of the ordinary, but the last one showed half a dozen Carabinieri – the Italian gendarmerie – standing on Euler's landing. They wore black tactical and were about to knock down the front door with a handheld battering ram.

Euler had barely time to start the emergency procedure – which included dropping all SIM cards in a small canister of acid, encrypting everything and starting a secure delete process doing multiple

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overwrites on all memory – before hearing the door crashing into the wall and the police shouting, "Step away from your computer!"