

The Lord of Bitcoin

by Bryce Laliberte

Satoshi = Intelligence
Nakamoto = Central

"Japanese names in modern times consist of a *family name* (surname) followed by a given name, in that order." -Wikipedia entry for *Japanese name*

Dedicated to my grandfather, Larry.

2037 AD

When I arrived only seven minutes late, I could hear a familiar voice in our usual corner. "I'm telling you, that's totally how he did it! Y'see, he figured out his servant was passing on information. Rather than fire the servant, he kept the knowledge to himself."

"Hey guys," I said, grabbing a chair. "The usual," I said to the bartender. "Is this the one I think it is?"

Along with our friends Jay and Zack, Chet was seated next to an unfamiliar blonde.

"He tells this theory to people regularly," I confide with the blonde. "Your name? I'm Ed."

"Jenny," she says before Chet continues.

"So later on, he talked up like he was planning on making a big move. He said this sometimes around his servant who would hear him, and the servant would tell whoever was at the other end. Then, the news came in from his carrier pigeon that Napoleon died or whatever. You know the rest," Chet said, waving his hand, annoyed I'd spoiled his umpteenth retelling of his theory about how the Rothschilds became so rich. "What you been up to, Ed?"

I shrugged.

"He's still trying," Chet said to Jenny, sniping at me.

"As opposed to you just loafing around," I said sardonically, biting my tongue by taking a drink of my beer.

"You think you're going to make more money than you already did?" Jenny asked, obviously a little more informed about me than she should have been for someone I didn't know.

"Eventually," I said, giving Chet a look. "Chet, what've you been telling this girl?"

Chet tried looking bemused but couldn't hide the guilt. "I just told her about some of our successful business ventures," he chided.

"Jenny," I asked. "What did he tell you about me?"

The smile on her face slowly dissipated as she tried to think of what she could say that would back up Chet's story but would elide what he wasn't supposed to be saying about me. About any of us. I took a long swig of my beer before standing up. "Well, gentlemen, until next time." Then I started walking away.

Jay got up to follow me. "Hey man, I've been telling Chet he needs to tighten it up."

By this point we were just stepping outside. It was cool enough for a jacket but not too cool to stand around, so I took out my little Japanese cigarette case and opened it. I held it out for Jay. He took one, then I lit our cigarettes.

"These the Koreans?" he asked, letting the smoke waft out of his mouth, taken away by the night

breeze.

“Yeah,” I said, taking a long hard drag. “Look, man, I know sometimes I’m more paranoid than necessary, but we gotta keep our crew tight. You know, if everyone knew...”

“I know,” Jay agreed. “But you know how Chet is.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I know. But the guy worries me. He’s not being serious about himself, and I worry that means he’s not going to be serious about me.”

“I’m sure Zack is in there letting Chet have it,” Jay said, to reassure me.

I wasn’t too sure though. “Look, I know I only make it every other Thursday, but c’mon man, I make the effort to be here. You know I’m spending most my time traveling these days, following up on business, making connections, working contacts. It’s hard work.”

“I get you,” Jay said. “Obviously, Chet doesn’t. But you can’t say you don’t see how he sees it. We *literally* never need to work again. For a thousand lifetimes.”

I let the hot vanilla smoke of my Korean cigarette curl over my tongue, taking in its light sweet essence. Then I sighed. “We’re supposed to be...” I trailed off before taking another hit. “*Families*, man. *Families*.”

Jay shrugged. “Only Zack even has a wife at this point. You have... how many girlfriends? I mean, you know, you could get a wife whenever you want too.”

“I only have four,” I replied.

“If you really seriously want to follow up on your dream, you might have to without Chet,” Jay said.

“Fuck Chet,” I said, flicking away the burning butt of my cigarette at a litter bot. It activated, recognizing the litter, before rolling over and hoovering it up. “What about you?”

“I’m ready when you are,” Jay answered.

“Alright, good,” I said. “Then let’s.”

Jay finished off his cig and we walked back inside. Now Zack and Chet were alone, sans Jenny.

Jay made a motion to the bartender, who lined up four shot glasses. “Guys, I think Eddie has an announcement.”

I bit my lip, momentarily indecisive. The other three gathered around, each picking up a shot glass after the bartender had filled each with a rare whiskey. I held up my shot. “I’m getting married,” then poured my shot back and swallowed.

Zack gave a “Hell yeah” before draining his shot. Then Jay. Finally, after a moment of gathering his senses together, Chet simply said “Fuck” and knocked his back. Then we all sat back down.

"It's time already?" Chet asked.

"You know it," I said.

"Finally," Zack said. "I been waiting on you guys."

"I figure ten years is enough time to enjoy our wealth by ourselves," I said, beginning what I didn't mean exactly as a speech. "It is time to pursue the golden braid of history into eternity."

"So who's the lady gonna be?" Chet pressed. "Teresa? Jun? Marie? Who else is there?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "But now I will start looking."

Chet laughed gregariously. "Oh I get it, since they were all willing to be your hookups..."

I let Chet's laughter die alone. "Marriage is a serious business. That was just for fun."

"With you, everything is serious business," Chet shot back.

"Either way," Zack interrupted. "If any of you got any questions, don't be afraid. I might be able to tell you some things."

"You've only been married two years," Jay said. "It's not that big a deal."

"You wouldn't know," Zack replied. "Anyway, we gotta celebrate that."

"I was hoping for something quieter," I said. "Honestly, I wouldn't mind staying here and doing drugs all night." I took a small bag of white powder out of my pocket and set it down at our table. I could feel the bartender eyeing it auspiciously, but I knew he wouldn't be trouble as we always gave a large tip.

"Is that all?" Chet asked, before reaching into his own pocket and retrieving a few pills and setting them next to the bag of white powder. Knowing Chet, they were likely to be Gabaitrium, a pharmaceutical that was yet to be approved but which the printing instructions had leaked and anyone with a medication printer was printing.

"Not too bad," Jay said, setting a little metal grinder on the table. "This some primo stuff, for the end of the night."

"You guys are so vanilla," Zack said, pulling out a small, flat bit of tinfoil. He unfolded the tinfoil, revealing a short strip of blotters.

"No way," Jay said. "Last time that stuff had me up 24 hours straight."

"Same here," I said. "I have business tomorrow anyway."

Zack looked to Chet. "Fuck it," Chet said, tearing off a single blotter and placing it in his drink.

So we started. Our table was sufficiently near the back that hardly anyone walked by us, and on a Thursday it wasn't especially busy anyway. Each of us took a Gabaitrium, did a few lines of coke, and

after a few beers we'd exhausted stories from Zack about what being married is like. Zack got up to go to the bathroom, and a lull settled on us as we sipped on beers feeling the effects of the Gabaitrium kicking in. Gabaitrium was known in the Valley as a "Limitless" drug that made people feel *on*. It wasn't precisely a high or a euphoria, but people experienced interconnectedness with all being, turning even the cagiest and disagreeable introverts into charismatic wizards.

Chet turned towards me. "So, how is your latest venture going?"

"Glad you asked," I said. "So you remember our Cybomaticus project?" I asked.

Chet gave me a look. "Of course," he replied. For a moment he looked like he was concentrating on something, then suddenly his face became animated, like a thousand little electric jolts were flowing underneath the skin, so that his face took on a visage only faintly similar to its natural resting state.

"You integrated it with your 'link?'" I asked. "Impressive."

"Hey man, I ain't just been sitting around y'know," he said, grinning. "And I was the lead on developing it too, I'm sure you remember."

Indeed he had been. Following the Great Reset and feeling a cool ten thousand Bitcoin each burning a hole in our pockets, we'd immediately started a company together with the goal of developing an underlying electric net of artificial nerves that would sit under the skin of one's face, stimulating or de-stimulating in concert to cause one's face to take a different appearance and evoke facial expressions. After a few years of development, they were sufficient to fool naive face detection surveillance algorithms. A few years after that, production had been mainstreamed so that the actual device could be sold and stitched into one's face with a minor automated surgery for only a couple thousand sats.

Collectively we invested what was probably about \$100 million in 2020 dollars. That was the last year the dollar had a meaningfully steady value, so that was how we still reflexively priced things, even though the symbol changed. サ everywhere you looked.¹ Still, internally, you'd see サ10 and know that represented about \$1 2020 USD. The company that originally made the Cybomaticus had become a huge success. We sold the company and patents to Google for an undisclosed sum. The rumors claiming how much the deal was for helped to obscure the legacy of our fortunes. Since then, however, we hadn't found another business with similar payouts. Zack consulted, Jay had put a significant stake of his fortune into venture capital, and I had started lobbying with politicians around the world on my own personal motivation. Only Chet among us was a wastrel, although even his irresponsibly lavish living could be supported over a hundred lifetimes at his current rate of consumption.

"So," I continued. "I've been thinking... Why not use it as a controller?"

"As in," Chet suggested, "instead of using your eyes to scroll through your glasses?"

"Exactly," I said. "Just need to figure out how to integrate a command function. We sold the patent but we still have a lifetime license to it for this kind of thing."

¹ "サ" the Japanese katakana symbol representing the syllable "sa." The Japanese had been the first to adopt Bitcoin as their primary currency, so naturally their symbol became the most widely adopted globally.

“I like your thinking,” Chet said.

Zack returned. “What I miss?” he asked.

“Eddie's starting a new company,” Chet said.

“I wasn't thinking about going that far,” I said. “Just develop a prototype then sell it through our contacts at Google.”

“Ah c'mon, I could program this in my sleep,” Chet said.

“A new Cybomaticus project?” Zack asked, ears perking up.

“Sort of,” Jay interluded. “It's nothing revolutionary, but a good idea.”

“It just seems like the natural next step, when you think about it,” I said. “The control right now goes one way, to controlling your face from an internal 'link or an external device. Most people use the internal 'link. So I figure, why not send the data back the other way too? So you can use your face as an interface device. A lot less arduous than doing everything by eye flicks and focusing on objects on a screen for hands free OS.”

“Hey, that's not bad,” Zack said. “But what I really want to know is... did you?”

I took a sip of my beer, pretending I didn't know what Zack was talking about. “Did I what?”

“You know... with that Brazilian congresslady...” Zack pushed.

“Oh, fuck it,” I said. “Yeah.” I let the moment ripen. Then, I added “She agreed to support my international market zone proposal.”

Everyone laughed. Even the bartender. “You dog!” Chet exclaimed. “I can't believe you're really pulling things together on your market zone proposal.”

I shrugged. “Money talks,” I said. “I have some of the smartest guys running analytics. We're playing it real... moneyball. Find the politicians with the most power per dollar who aren't otherwise getting paid off...”

“Bitches² talks my dude,” Jay said, slapping me on the back. “So that's how many in your pocket now. Two dozen?”

“Depends on how you count the unofficial Polish consortium, but yeah,” I said. “I wish you guys would join me in this venture...”

“We don't have your politics,” Chet said.

“Chet, you don't have any politics,” Zack shot back. “We're just a little wary of, you know, the risk.”

2 Slang for “Bitcoin.”

“We're world players,” I said. “You don't wait for the game to invite you in. You just start... playing it.”

“Ah, well,” Zack said. “Maybe one of these days I'll go in with you, if you bring your operations state-side.”

“You know that's when I'd have a big target on my back,” I said. “Chinese have the Americans all locked up. We have money, sure, but we don't have their information.”

“No luck yet getting an in with the Big Ones?” Jay asked. He meant the social media networks.

I shook my head. “Tighter than a nun's asshole. They know what they got is worth more than any money I could throw at them.”

“That's too bad,” Zack said. “You still thinking about starting your own?”

“It's too late,” I said. “It costs less to piggyback on the Indians for information.”

“I suppose,” Jay said, pondering it over. “Why not go the India route then? You already have so many ins.”

“Nah,” I said. “Problem is, they're already on the same page anyway, so any margin I add will be so low, it's better to make my money work where there's more bang for your bitch.”

“Makes sense,” Chet said. “Alright, fuck it, let's go to the bookstore.”

We got up and, after paying for our drinks and giving a very generous tip, walked out into the cool night air. “You guys tripping yet?” I asked to Chet and Zack, who'd consumed the LSD analogue a couple hours earlier.

“Oh yeah,” Chet answered.

Zack just nodded his head like he was grooving to a song only he could hear. I took out my cigarettes and passed them around. “So,” I started, lighting up my cigarette, “you guys read any good books lately?” Ever since the Bitcoin crisis made us mega-Bitcoinaires, we'd been making an effort to collectively tackle as much of the Western canon as we could. Since I spent so much time in transit, it was easy for me to dedicate at least four or five hours per day reading. Chet was easily the most read between us, averaging one book per day. It also provided plenty conversational fodder so we were never lacking for discussion. In fact, the bookstore was owned by a trust we started with the mission of providing a platform for writers who might otherwise have none, with regular book club meetings, author meet and greets, poetry readings, and so on. There was even a book printer that allowed people to print any book they wanted as long as they provided the appropriate digital format.

“You're gonna love this one,” Chet said. “The Confessions of an MK Ultra Controller.”

“Oh damn,” Zack said. “It good?”

“Fuck yeah,” Chet said. “The guy had some incredible stories. Not sure if I believe all of them, some of them really stress credulity, but otherwise the rest of it is very plausible. He talked about one method for control they used, where they'd implant microspeakers in someone's head right at their ear drum.

Then they could use the radio to send messages, which were usually kept very short, which were just barely perceptible. Subjects would assume they were just hearing a stray voice in their head, or that it was pareidolia, or a random subvocalized thought. Obviously some subjects had a really bad reaction to it, but he says most people just carried on, assuming it was the manifestation of some minor kind of schizophrenia and the like.”

“Fuck, man,” Zack said. “That would be fucking spooky.”

“That's pretty good actually,” I said. “I've wondered about the possibilities of that kind of stuff. I've told you guys about my *voice* before.”

“You think that's what it is?” Zack asked.

“Nah,” I said, but then I shrugged. “Who really knows. Any other good stories?”

“So many,” Chet said. “Let me think another one... Okay, so he talked about altering life trajectories, so that people would end up really good at something that would be valuable to the CIA or FBI. Like this one kid, he was super autistically good with computers. So they kept intervening in the kid's life, by making his parents change their jobs all the time, so he moved around a lot. Since computers were the one constant and only way for him to make and keep friends, he became, like, not a hacker exactly, but an extraordinary social engineer. Super manipulative, knew psychology to a really deep level, basically knew how to play people to get what he wants. So when that kid grew up, they'd manipulate him and the algorithms to get him to make certain enemies, then once he was properly motivated he'd make it his life mission to destroy those people. On the internet. By destroying their reputation, or the communities in which they participated.”

“They ever use divorce to manipulate a kid like that?” I asked.

“Totally,” Chet said. “Guy mentioned that it was a lot easier to get a kid to learn a particular behavior in the midst of a crisis. So they'd find a way to trigger the divorce of their parents, then in the fallout they slowly train the kid into learning and repeating that behavior, over and over. Eventually the kid would just keep acting that way, without realizing why.”

“Damn,” Jay said. “My parents got divorced, and that's when I got into Bitcoin. The oh-eight financial crash hit my parents hard, I was always being shuttled back and forth between them. I'd set up their computers to mine Bitcoin while I was away. You know the rest.”

“That's one of the main principles the guy explained,” Chet elaborated. “Doing things so they would seem like ordinary things nobody would even think to question whether it was caused by someone with an ulterior motive. He said most people have probably been manipulated by techniques which are part of the MK repertoire, and that MK is really just a very in-depth knowledge about those techniques. He said it is usually impossible to detect the use of MK per se, because anyone can figure out some of the techniques on their own. Only a few are ever extensively 'architected,' as he called it.”

“Architected?” Jay asked.

“When they go to great lengths to shape someone's personality in a very specific way,” Chet answered. “People they want to control without that control being detected by others. He said that most subjects essentially cooperate by the end in their own architecting. The subject's own will is needed to accom-

plish certain kinds of learning.”

“Fascinating,” I said as we arrived at the bookstore. We didn't bother putting out our cigarettes as we walked in.

“Welcome,” a bot intoned. “Can I help you with anything today?”

“No thanks,” I said as we walked past. A few others were in the store, standing at shelves of books, perusing them at leisure. We weren't here necessarily to look at books, but to crash in a back office room. As we were walking to the back, I saw a few titles by stray glance: *Silver Lake Chronicles*, *Programming and Metaprogramming in the Human Biocomputer*, and *The Tripods* a few that I noticed. Then my eyes fell on a book cover featuring, of all things, my face. My old face. From before hyperbitcoinization.

“The fu...” I could barely mutter, trailing off in shock. The other guys noticed and stopped to look at what I was seeing.

“Holy shit,” Jay said.

“Madre de Dios,” Zack intoned.

Chet didn't say anything. He picked up the book to look at it. It was a lone copy sitting by itself, featured prominently on the top shelf right at face level. “The Man Who Stole Bitcoin,” he read aloud from the title. “Dude...”

I slowly took a breath. A thousand thoughts racing through my head, ancient memories, bittersweet nostalgia, a little voice screaming *GET OUT OF THERE*. “Let's go,” I said, starting to walk back out the bookstore. “Grab it. Let's go.”

Chet held on to the book and together we walked back out into the night. They followed behind as I paced steadily ahead of them, trying to clarify my thoughts to a single point. *Who did this? Was it one of them? No, they would never... But who else would know about me? I've been someone else this entire time, my face is different, I have a made up identity, all my connections to my past have been severed... All except for-*

I stopped and turned to them. “We obviously can't talk about this here,” I said. They nodded. “I know just the place.” Somewhere guaranteed to be free from surveillance. A place I owned but kept secret, even from the others. They looked at me quizzically. “No talking until we get there. I'll call my car.” I tapped my phone to cause my car to drive towards us from the place it parked. We waited silently, then got in when it arrived. Together, we rode in the car to my selected destination. Each of us were savvy about surveillance, knowing that microscopic bugs could have been planted on our very person, so we knew not to talk lest some information not already known by surveillers would be disclosed.

The drive was not objectively long, but subjectively it felt like forever. We couldn't say anything, only trading glances at one another as the seats were arranged so occupants could talk freely with each other. Chet had his eyes closed, probably using his 'link to close all incoming connections. The others were following similar procedures on their phones, to eliminate all potential points of surveillance. We knew such procedures were imperfect and nothing would truly stop a dedicated surveiller, but there was no reason to make it easier for them. After fifteen minutes, we arrived at a discreet building of innocuous

architecture.

I brought us inside, the doors opening automatically when the AI detected my face. We got onto an elevator and waited – the AI would automatically bring me to my room, which I'd had specially secured. The elevator dinged and the door opened. Before us was a suite enmeshed in elaborate patterns of wire, with another door to enter the room proper. Each of us knew what to do. We placed our phones on a table which circuitry would cause them to shut down, even any processes that weren't supposed to be running. There was nothing we could do about Chet's 'link, but I doubted that could be hacked.

I opened the door and ushered everyone else in. As I closed the door behind us, a faint humming began emitting. “Interference waves,” I said as explanation. The room was equipped with a special AI and sound apparatus which would emit sound waves to destructively interfere with any sound waves so that extraneous devices couldn't record any audio, but would still allow the sound waves to reach from our mouths to our ears so we could hear one another.

“Nice,” Chet said. There was a couch and chairs around a table, so I went there to sit down. Chet set the book down on the table and we examined it. Due to the sound apparatus everyone sounded slightly like they were speaking down a tunnel, and our bodily movements, our steps and sitting down, were eerily soundless.

“Didn't know you had a place like this,” Zack said. “A faraday cage, even.”

“If we're under active surveillance, which I will assume we are from now on,” I said, “then they would now know about this place. But there's nothing they can do to get in here, unless they can hack an AI security system.”

“So who do you think it could be?” Jay asked. “It's definitely not any of us. Old enemies?”

We looked at the cover for the author name. *Quintus Temper*. “Quintus, eh?” Jay asked rhetorically. “A fifth. A fifth musketeer?” he asked, looking around at us four. The meaning was taken plainly.

“Who would associate themselves with us?” Chet asked. My face alone peered at us from the book cover.

“Wouldn't hurt to read it,” I supposed out loud. “*Lentis*,” I said. “Read this book and summarize it for us.”

A little bot came to life and rolled over, stopping smoothly at the table. It picked up the book and then held it in front of its camera. The pages quickly turned, as if moved by a light breeze - but without sound. “Done,” Lentis reported. “The book describes a series of meetings between Jonathan Gilder and various shadowy characters associated with the world of finance and banking. Details are drawn from those meetings to assert that Gilder made a plan with these figures to capture Bitcoin by the same institutions that were responsible for organizing the monetary regime before hyperbitcoinization. Finally, the book ends by detailing Gilder's death in a suspicious car accident.”

“That's your old name,” Jay said.

“Seems legit,” Chet said. “I mean, y'know, the story sounds accurate.”

“How long is it?” I asked.

“110 pages,” Lentis replied.

“Lentis,” I said, “can you tell us all the names of the characters in the book?”

It listed names, many which were familiar from a lifetime ago, including the original names of Zack, Chet, and Jay.

“Fuuuuck,” Chet said. “Someone did their research. This is fucked, man. Totally fucked.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But who? Who would publish this? Those meetings were confidential. And then they made sure our bookstore would have it?” I took the book back from the bot. “Let's see...” I flipped the book over and saw the familiar mark. “I thought so. Someone came in and printed it at our bookstore, then left it there for us. That means-”

“Security footage!” Zack said, his face lighting up.

It was easy enough to get Lentis to download all the security footage from our bookstore, as well as the records of all books printed and when. With a few simple commands I brought up the details about the book's printing. “It was printed... today! Only a couple hours before we arrived.”

“Someone knew you were likely to go there,” Chet said.

“So it would seem...” I said, entering a few more commands to open the security footage. It shown a series of panels, each with video footage of customers going about the store. Only a minute before the book was started printing, a man with a leering face walked in, strode directly to the book printer, and connected a flash drive. The face was unfamiliar, but in the age of Cybomaticus that didn't mean anything. The rather extreme look of his face was probably because the man had augmented his facial features using the Cybomaticus before entering, so that face recognition AI could not be used to track him down. The man waited a minute for the book to print, picked it up when it was finished and grinned in apparent satisfaction. He walked over to the shelf where we found it, looking around the store as though making internal calculations. He rearranged some other books and then put the book between them, my face staring out from the shelf. Then he left.

I searched by the face and found nothing. However, there were more security features to go off besides that. Gait was also a telltale marker. But using that as an ID also returned nothing. It seemed most likely the man had never visited the store before then. His familiarity with the layout seemed likely a result of secondhand information given to him by someone else. So the man in question could just be the agent of someone else. I opened an old file of code and found a function I'd written before that would shift the face to its most likely original before being distorted by the Cybomaticus, and then check it against other faces for ID. But that would take a while.

Meanwhile, the other guys were asking Lentis questions to find out more about the book. “Does the author talk about himself?” asked Jay.

“He does not,” Lentis replied.

“Does the author say how they came across the information?” Chet asked.

“The author only says audio files, video files, and notes about the goings-on of Jonathan Gilder were handed to him, and he drew from these to construct the narrative,” Lentis answered.

“I'm going to do a full surveillance scan,” I said.

“Ah man, c'mon,” Chet protested. “Those are so... exhaustive.”

“I know, that's the point,” I said. “We need to figure out when the surveillance started. They knew about our Thursday night get-togethers, maybe we can figure something out about them if we can figure out how they were doing their surveilling.”

“How good is the network here?” Zack asked.

“Real good,” I said. “But instead of accessing all your records remotely and then processing them here, I was thinking of just exporting the code and making your own computers do the work. That'll be faster.”

Everyone reached into their pockets and pulled out a small flash drive. These were basically their keys that would allow access to their computers remotely for when they needed to pull files from elsewhere. One at a time I slotted them into Lentis. “Done,” it reported when it had sent the code to their computers and started them processing. The program would use Bayesian and statistical reasoning to detect anomalous patterns associated with surveillance, such as people following their same paths more than chance would predict. The AI's I'd designed would sift through the terabytes of surveillance captured by small pinpoint cameras and microphones we kept active at all times for problems just like this.

“Alright,” I said. “This will take a while.”

“In the meanwhile, why not just read the book?” asked Jay.

“May as well,” I said. “Lentis, put on some coffee. The good stuff.”

“Will do,” Lentis replied. “I've also ported the book to a digital file.”

“Alright,” I said, standing up. “Let's see...” I wandered over to the desk in one corner of the room, where I kept spare Kindles. “Load the book on these,” I said, holding up the Kindles so Lentis could recognize them. The light on them briefly turned on, green, then turned off again. “Here you go boys.” I distributed the Kindles to Jay, Zack, and Chet.

I started reading.

The Man Who Stole Bitcoin the title proclaimed. *Quintus Temper*. An obvious pseudonym, and one which implied some secret membership to our group.

Chapter 1: To The Moon... And Back

As Wikipedia relates the story, how we gave up the old financial system dependent on the US dollar, a fiat currency, in exchange for the new and exciting medium of Bitcoin, is familiar and hits all the key points. In the early 20's, the value of the US dollar became much more volatile. This was a phenome-

non observed in other currencies as well, and was attributed to “unexpected exogenous market shocks,” which is just the polite way for economists to say they have no fucking clue what's going on. Despite this volatility, life continued quite normally. Except for the occasional shortage driven by rapid US dollar deflation or, alternately, rapid US dollar inflation, records show that people were preoccupied with other social issues.

At this point, many were already familiar with Bitcoin and people using it as a hedge against the failing financial system, along with other “defi” services that made it easy for people to convert their US dollars into backup currencies or assets that could be liquidated in turn when they needed to purchase something. Although this was considered inconvenient, it was far less an inconvenience than finding out the US dollar had inflated 100% overnight while one was sleeping and suddenly having to go without food and essentials. All the while, Bitcoin gradually rose in value, beating expectations over and over again. \$50,000 per Bitcoin. Then \$100,000. \$200,000. And so on. A few major companies started accepting Bitcoin, then nearly every company followed.

The precise point at which Bitcoin went “hyper,” meaning it had initiated an exponential positive feedback of increasing valuation such that it would become the primary currency, is debatable. Some point to its very inception as such, but that is perhaps overly philosophical. But these are the facts we know. In 2025, central banks announced a coordinated effort to stabilize the volatility of their currencies. They announced a single standard which they were going to peg their own currencies to, a single standard which only they would transact in between themselves. Many assumed this signaled the end for those currencies, and they would turn out to be correct. But the single standard remained in place.

On March 13, 2026, the US dollar experienced catastrophic inflation. A war in the Middle East between some of the major oil-producing nations and their neighbors was slowly heating up. Gas prices rose 50,000% in a single day. On a Reddit forum, someone made a post declaring that this would be it: he would never transact in US dollars again, and only use Bitcoin. That post reached 481k upvotes, making it one of the most upvoted posts of all time. The comment thread was full of people declaring the same. The Reddit post was also boosted by Elon Musk, who tweeted a screenshot of the post and a declaration he would begin paying the employees of his companies in Bitcoin.

On March 14, Bitcoin reached new record high valuations. The platforms selling Bitcoin had record numbers of users as well. Everyone held their breath as Bitcoin shot the moon. \$1,000,000 per Bitcoin. The economy was cratering and everyone was partying. Stores could no longer find anyone willing to pay for their goods in USD. Some bankers either jumped or were thrown out windows. The stock market simply shut down. Some billionaires were on TV, proclaiming this to be the new era of finance. Some other billionaires appeared on TV, declaring an emergency.

On March 15, the President of the United States declared a state of emergency. He made a speech stating that the military would be called in to distribute food and other necessary items to people as they needed them. This would last until monetary conditions were “normalized,” a judgment that would be made by the central banks

On March 16, during a congressional hearing, the chairman of the Federal Reserve said they no longer had any ability to influence the economy using the USD. He said that it would be appropriate for central banks to determine how to incorporate Bitcoin into themselves, rather than being completely run over. People cheered. Then he dropped the bomb. The Federal Reserve, along with other central banks, by operating through intermediary financial institutions, was in possession of a significant amount of Bitcoin, in excess of 2.5 million Bitcoin. When a Senator pressed him about it, he refused to

disclose the precise mechanism used to acquire those Bitcoins, but regardless it was inferred by many that the Federal Reserve had been engaging in reckless printing drives of the US dollar simply to buy up Bitcoin!

On March 17, the chairman of the Federal Reserve was found murdered in his home. Riots broke out in DC, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, New York City, and Minneapolis. Other officials directly associated with the Federal Reserve system in the United States were found and beaten to death by mobs and gangs. The mayors of those cities and governors of those states petitioned the President to declare martial law. Troops were marched out onto the street. Mobs attacked them, using everything from guns to rocks. The troops opened fire with live rounds. This would become known as the First Bitcoin Massacre.

On March 18, heads of state met in Quebec, brought together to find a way through this crisis.

On March 19, an executive order was signed by the President of the United States, in concert with other heads of state imposing similar measures, to require all holders of Bitcoin to sell their Bitcoin to the Federal Reserve, in exchange for a new currency called "Bitcoin Dollars." The old US dollar would be phased out of use in the next three months as they transitioned to the new Bitcoin Dollar. After that, the Federal Reserve would refrain from any new market moves to allow the market to stabilize itself. The military distribution system would remain in place in case of unexpected shocks. Exchanges of Bitcoin would be prohibited except for between central banks in order to stabilize their respective sovereign currency values.

On March 20, a proposal was leaked from a Federal Reserve committee that suggested the exchange rate between the Bitcoin Dollar and Bitcoin could be arbitrarily revised in the future. This was called by its opponents the "Bitcoin Woods System." Opposition was tempered by orders to stay at home. Several Bitcoin "whales," individuals who held large amounts of Bitcoin, were discovered dead under suspicious circumstances. A few others disappeared entirely.

And that is how, in the space of a week, Bitcoin became the new monetary standard. Although everyone would be using a sovereign currency which could be theoretically exchanged for Bitcoin with their respective central banks, in practice that obviously was never allowed by the central banks. The date for the "Bitcoinocaust," when everyone was required to sell their Bitcoin, came and passed without significant protests by the people. Personally holding and transacting in Bitcoin became illegal for all but central banks between each other. Most people sold their Bitcoin in exchange for the Bitcoin Dollars, the Bitcoin Euros, the Bitcoin Yen. A few holdouts were found and imprisoned. An "extremist Mormon sect" was wiped out in Montana, men, women, and children, by the ATF after a standoff. Gradually, everything returned to normal.

This book is not about what happened after hyperbitcoinization. We already know about that. Instead, this book tells the inside story – how Bitcoin was captured by the very institutions everyone hoped it would destroy. Meticulous planning and details were arranged by a single man, who orchestrated the moves central banks and other traditional financial organs would use to conquer Bitcoin and make it their... bitch. This story is about the genius, a bona fide Bond supervillain, known as Jonathan Gilder, who arranged with the world's financial elite a scheme to subvert the Bitcoin phenomenon into precisely what everyone assumed it could not become. The weapon of the state, rather than the people.

Ed could feel eyes looking at him. The other three were looking up at him. They returned their gaze to their Kindles.

Chapter 2: Meeting with Destiny

It was a Tuesday. At 5:36 PM, a post on the blog Always and Never appeared. The title of the post was The Illuminati Plan to Capture Bitcoin. The post was brief, and apparently intended as a satire of certain strains of the enthusiastic Bitcoin community. The year was 2017. Trump was President. The value of Bitcoin wasn't even \$1,000. This is the post:

The Federal Reserve should print money to buy Bitcoin. This will eventually kill the US dollar, but the dollar dying is inevitable anyway and they know it. They will need a new reserve currency. If they print US dollars to buy Bitcoin, they'll end up with a lot of Bitcoin at precisely the moment it becomes most valuable and everyone wants to switch to it. Then they can do like they did already with gold. Force people to sell at an arbitrary exchange rate, with the promise they can exchange the dollars for Bitcoin at a later time (but never actually do). That exchange rate can be changed as necessary, so that central banks will have available all the same tools for “managing” the economy as before (i.e. keeping the already elite wealthy and in power).

It was a short one-off, on a blog where the average post length was over 5,000 words. In the mix, it would be easy to overlook as just a schizophrenic aside. But the idea was powerful. The blog belonged to Jonathan Gilder, an unknown programmer at the time. In another post, he claimed to have bought Bitcoin in 2011. In other posts, whenever he brings up the Federal Reserve or the central banking system, it was always to lambaste it as “nothing more than thievery dressed up with fancy language.” In another post he declares “the entire economics profession exists so that central banks can pick and choose their arguments as necessary to justify doing what they were going to do all along.” So he was not remotely an anti-Bitcoin advocate, and very likely the idea of the Federal Reserve printing money to buy Bitcoin, killing the US dollar while dominating the nascent currency was odious to him. Yet, he would be its architect.

Discerning Jonathan's life story before this point is difficult. He posted little on social media. There is indications he went to college but didn't graduate, dropping out in order to pursue some business venture that eventually went on to fail. At the time of this post, his business was freshly dead and, we can suppose, his despairing mind put this idea together as a form of distracting entertainment. The post received no comments, and there is no sign on the web that anyone read it or linked to it, except for the link Jonathan posted on his own social media. That post received two likes, but that is as far as anyone seemed to take the idea seriously. But, somewhere out there was an agent – of the Illuminati? who can be sure – who stumbled on Jonathan's post, and took it seriously.

One day Jonathan was working at a coffeeshop. A couple men sat down with him. They showed him their badges – FBI – and asked him if he could answer some questions. “Am I under arrest?” Jonathan asked. “No,” they replied. “You're not in any trouble or anything like that. We were just curious about something, wanted to find out what you might know about it.”

“What's this about?” Jonathan asked.

“You wrote a post on your blog, about Bitcoin,” one of them said. “It is your blog, right? Always and Never?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan answered. “But which post in particular? There's a few that talk about Bitcoin.”

One of the agents pulled out paper from a manila envelope. "This one. The Illuminati Plan to Capture Bitcoin."

"Oh," Jonathan said, reading over his small blog post. "I wasn't even thinking of that one."

"Is it something you've thought about more in depth? Is there someone else you've discussed it with?"

Jonathan shrugged. "People barely noticed when I posted it. Maybe it got a dozen views that day. Not really a banger."

"Banger?" one of the agents asked.

"Oh, you know, like... a post that's really popular."

"Ah, I see. So there's no one you've been talking with about any plan like this?"

Jonathan laughed. "Nah, I don't think I've even thought about this post since I wrote it."

"I see," one of them said. They shared a look between each other. "Alright, thank you for your time." Then they got up and left.

"What was that about?" Jonathan asked himself, out loud. He looked around the coffeeshop, feeling suspicious but in a nonspecific way.

In real life, the actual Jonathan, now Eddie, I looked up to meet the gazes of Zack, Chet, and Jay. "This isn't anything more than we already know about," I said, to answer their hypothetical questions.

"No, it's all familiar," Chet said.

"Nothing new to me," Zack chimed in.

"What I want to know is," Jay pondered. "How did they get such good recordings? You think the writer has some law enforcement connection?"

"It's a possibility," I replied, thinking back to that time, so long ago now, when the feds had shown up to sit with me. "I think the signs point to some kind of intelligence operation. Someone had to make an effort to track down all the materials for this book, and then write it. That suggests to me someone's making an effort."

"What for though?" Chet demanded.

"I have no idea," I said. "At least, at this point."

We settled on silence. I grabbed some coffee and continued reading.

Chapter 3: The Usual Suspects

Mind control is not necessarily concerned or principally about "controlling someone's mind." It is largely a misnomer. While there is such a thing as training people's behavior so that they exemplify

particular kinds of activity through the use of reward and punishment, it is usually more effective to simply foreclose alternatives so that the subject will default to the choice the controller wants them to make. Understanding this will make the following story a lot easier to understand. Strings are apparently being pulled in the background, in order to bring together a crew of bright, hungry young men. Literally, hungry – although I as the author can only speculate how these young men were ultimately brought together; the material from which this narrative is constructed depends on surveillance footage and recordings. This was done less by implementing a surveillance system where these young men chose to meet, but rather, by nudging these young men to gather where a state-of-the-art surveillance system was already in place.

“Hey,” Jonathan said, greeting William Dodge. They shook hands. “Nice to meet you. Other guys aren't here yet. Place we were planning on going to,” he nodded his head towards the closed restaurant, “is out of commission.”

“Ah that's too bad,” William said. He looked around. “I guess the place across the street? I checked it out, it has good reviews.”

“Sure,” Jonathan said.

A red Corvette pulled up. Jonathan whistled. “Not bad,” he said, considering his dinky white Toyota Camry for a second, but he wasn't worried. He was certain his idea would be sufficiently meaningful to them. Out of the Corvette stepped a man wearing a suit, dark hair, dark glasses, of an Indian persuasion.

“Aadvik Phadnavis,” he said, greeting them.

“Nice car,” Jonathan said. “I'm Jonathan.”

“William,” William added.

“Excellent,” Aadvik replied. He peered at the restaurant. “Looks like it's closed?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said. “We were thinking the place across the street.” He beckoned in its direction.

“Cool,” Aadvik said.

While they were greeting, another guy walked up to them. “Hey, you guys are expecting a Pedro?”

Everyone nodded. “Yeah man,” Jonathan said.

“Nice to meet you all,” Pedro said, shaking hands. “Pedro Gallardo.”

“Alright, so,” Jonathan pointed towards the restaurant across the street. “Shall we?”

“Is the Chinese Lantern..?” Pedro started asking, before answering for himself by seeing it was closed.

“Yeah, we figured the... Gongyang Weukjyoo?” Jonathan pronounced uneasily. “The Korean place. Would be good.”

“Has good reviews,” Aadvik supplied.

“Let's do it,” Pedro said.

They walked across the street. A cheerful hostess greeted them. “Welcome to Gongyang Weukjyoo. Will it be you four?”

The guys nodded.

“Alright, follow me,” and she led them to a relatively secluded table near the back of the restaurant.

They sat down and the hostess brought them waters. Aadvik ordered a beer. Jonathan a coke. The other two were content with water.

“So,” Jonathan said. “Let's get down to business. I've already talked with all of you about some of my ideas. Business ideas. Bitcoin. What do we think?”

Aadvik nodded. “I think it's gonna blow up soon. And by soon, I mean in a couple years. Maybe as short as ten years from now, it could be the world's dominant currency. Maybe. If it were aggressively pushed.”

“Exactly,” Pedro said. “I think there's a lot of potential in not just setting up a business that provides a transaction layer on top of Bitcoin, in order to expedite transactions so it's usable in an everyday sense, but also to, well, meme it into being.”

“Definitely,” William added. “We have to not just set up a business – that gets us into the sphere. We also have to figure out how to promote it. And I don't just mean, like, shitpost a bunch on Twitter. I'm talking, we use our business as clout to get meetings with people. People who matter. Big money. Old money. Those types.”

“That's exactly what I'm thinking,” Jonathan said. “Of course we'll have a public front, our business, which should also make us decent money, but the bigger part of our investment will be linking up with others. Seeing if we can talk some hedge funds into picking up Bitcoin. Stuff that will make people realize it's legitimate and they might miss out.”

The rest of the conversation followed those lines. There were discussions about what the business should be – they decided a credit system for expediting transactions would be both the most profitable and also the best way to make connections. It would drive a need for money to sustain that credit operation, which would mean investors, which would mean connecting to those networks. Finally, they considered what approach they should take, who they should try and talk to. A few names were traded around, but they ultimately decided on a shotgun approach – they would just send out as many feelers as they could, and meet up with everyone who was interested. They figured what would be more important was a credible mass of investors rather than rockstar names getting involved. But those, too, could be useful.

This was the first meeting between The Four – led by Jonathan Gilder, who would become the CEO of Midas Fintech, Inc. The others would have major shareholder roles. The company was ultimately doomed, but like many Silicon Valley “success stories” of the time, they would all cash out for massive paydays. But even with the company being doomed, nonetheless they were effective at the operation

they proposed – to work connections to get major world players to buy into Bitcoin. That would bring the rest of the world along with them, into a new Golden Age. Or, perhaps better, a Bitcoin Age.

I sipped my coffee. There was a certain gonzo quality that made me feel unsettled, much like when one hears one's voice on a recording and it sounds different than their expectations. Seeing my behavior from such an external perspective was difficult, as I imagined the 20/20 hindsight others would use to judge my actions.

Chet looked up when he finished the third chapter. “So, we've entered the stage.”

“So it would seem,” I said.

“Okay,” Zack said, apparently exasperated. “The people behind this have to be intelligence. Mere criminal gangs are not setting up Korean restaurants as fronts. That's totally a CIA thing.”

“Or NSA,” I suggested.

“Completely possible,” Zack agreed. “Of course, we don't really know. It could be anyone. KGB. MSS. MI6. The French, those fucking bastards.”

“Hey I'll take the French over the English any day,” I said.

“So what do we do with this knowledge?” Jay asked.

We looked between each other for a few seconds.

Finally, I broke the tense silence. “I never told you guys this, but there were occasions before I suspected I was under surveillance by some intelligence outfit. My guess at the time was Chinese, but I have no way to confirm that.”

“You told us this man,” Jay said.

“I did?” I asked, puzzled.

“Y-yeahhhh,” Chet said. “One time you got blackout drunk and told us about the Chinese, AI internet surveillance, those internet cults you helped start.”

“Oh. Shit,” I muttered.

“It's alright man,” Zack said. “Happens to everyone.”

“It's not like it's totally unexpected,” Jay offered. “We're mega-rich. That puts huge targets on our back for all kinds of people, who might just assume we're interesting to them in some way just in virtue of being so damn rich.”

“Let's just keep reading,” Chet suggested. “That'll give us more information to work with.”

“Agreed,” Jay said. He went to get another cup of coffee.

“Yeah okay,” I said, turning back to my book.

Chapter 4: The Goldbug Shuffle

“I don't get it,” Otis Marvin said, and knocked back his scotch. He beckoned to the bartender for another. “What you're saying is, the Federal Reserve would destroy the US Dollar, in a desperate bid to acquire a bunch of Bitcoin? And then turn around and make it their reserve in which a new currency is denominated? But they control the US Dollar already, why would they give it up?”

“Because the collapse of the US Dollar is inevitable, and they know it,” Jonathan said, stirring his whiskey sour. “And I really doubt they're going to just, like, stand by and wait to be owned by Bitcoin, like so many Bitcoin advocates assume they'll do.”

“It's basically state-proof,” Marvin said. Marvin was something of an intellectual in his circles, and a Silicon Valley iconoclast, even more than Silicon Valley iconoclasts tended to be. After cashing out with a tidy sum before the dotcom bust in 2000, he'd since taken to cantankerous and prodigiously lengthy blogging on the internet. A small but influential circle of thinkers had formed around him since then, and many looked up to him as an outsider authority on political ideology. A would-be court adviser by his own admission, it would be an understatement to say he was controversial for certain of his written proposals.

“Agreed,” Jonathan said. “And if they wanted to kill Bitcoin, which they totally could do if they were willing to spend a war's worth of resources doing so-”

“If,” Marvin said. “And that requires the establishment being totally coordinated about that. Which I rather doubt they could pull off something like that.”

“Not without becoming extremely unpopular,” Jonathan said. “It's theoretically possible. They'd just have to spend half a trillion dollars appropriating and buying even more Bitcoin miners in order to irrevocably control the pool. Which is a much larger step than them trying to ban it, which most Bitcoin advocates assume is all they'll try and do.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Marvin said. “It would be difficult for them to develop the popular consensus to do so. It's not like 2001, when everyone was basically a captive audience to their controlled stooges in media. Nobody cares what New York Times says anymore.”

“Which is why I think this is a lot more likely,” Jonathan said, gesticulating with his hands. They were both half a dozen drinks in and, while not totally inebriated, there was definite sloppiness. “Central banks are not going to just sit back and take it. And the steps I've proposed they could do are already within precedent.”

“When they forced everyone to sell them their gold,” Marvin said. “Yeah, I remember that. But I don't know if they could do it again. Today that would be seen as totally crazy.”

“Isn't the existence of central banks as such crazy?” Jonathan postulated.

Marvin harumphed. He saw that Jonathan had finished his whiskey sour. “You wanna try Laphroaig? It'll put some hair on your chest.”

“Oh man,” Jonathan said. “Alright, but last time I tried it, I remember it being... very difficult.”

“Hey, it's not for beginners,” Marvin said, holding up two fingers for the bartender and pointing at his finished scotch. “Anyway, I agree with you, central banks as such are crazy. They are a violation of people's freedom. But for them to pull the same shit with Bitcoin as they did before with gold seems... well, it just seems unlikely.”

“That's because you're deep in confirmation bias with the Bitcoin advocacy,” Jonathan said. “Every time. Every time, I swear, I talk to Bitcoin advocates, especially the stringently libertarian ones, it's the same objections. They fundamentally don't get the game that's being played. They assume the world actors behind the central bank are playing fair, or at least, they misunderstand what counts as 'fair' in the context of ruling the world. They're just total scrubs man. They just assume Bitcoin is this inevitable, invincible force. It's powerful, of course, but that power is exactly why they'd be willing to expend such an effort capturing it for themselves. If that hasn't been their plan all along, and it turns out Satoshi is the NSA.”

The bartender gave them both their tumblers with two fingers of Laphroaig.

Marvin held up his glass for a toast, and Jonathan clinked his against Marvin's. Jonathan took a moment to take a whiff of the complex, smoky essence of Laphroaig, before taking a sip. He didn't exactly wince, but you could see it took some effort for him to accept the powerful flavors of smoke and peat for themselves. He couldn't help letting out an inaudible “hfoof” as he exhaled, feeling it tangibly on his tongue again as vapor. Marvin didn't struggle nearly so much, but even Jonathan could tell it was difficult for him as well.

“Alright, central banks are crazy,” Marvin said. “You're proposing a crazy stunt. That might just work. And you know what? I honestly don't know how something like this could be countered or prevented, if they did decide to do something like that.”

“The main premise motivating my thought experiment is simply that the elite prefer to stay in power, even at great cost to their subjects,” Jonathan said, taking another cautious sip.

“Tell you what, I'll think about it,” Marvin said. “Maybe I'll blog about it too, if it's a good one. But otherwise, damn. I really hope that's not what happens.”

“Same,” Jonathan said.

Marvin finished his Laphroaig. “Alright, I should be going,” he said, placing a few bills on the counter. “And don't worry about the drinks, I got them covered.”

“Oh. Thank you,” Jonathan said.

“And, oh yeah, one more thing,” Marvin said, standing up. “You got any good business ideas, proposals, something you need funding for, come to me about it. I know people.”

“Okay. Yeah, definitely,” Jonathan said, slyly grinning.

This was all recorded, audio and video, at a high class bar in San Francisco.

“Huh,” Chet said, looking up from his Kindle. “I vaguely remember you talking about this meeting with the ol’ Otis Marvin.”

“Yeah,” Jay chimed in. “That guy is the *tits*.”

“Didn't you guys meet him?” I asked. “I thought we'd all been around those circles before.”

“Yeah,” Chet said.

“It was brief though,” Zack added. “We met him at that party that one time, remember? Got to talk to him for like, five minutes.”

“Yeah,” Jay said. “None of us got a whole one-on-one meeting with him.”

“I had a few,” I said. “After that, I talked business with him. That's how I got some of our biggest investors.”

“I remember that,” Chet said. “Nothing like a cool \$120 million getting dropped.” Then his eye twitched. “Wait,” he said. “I got a ping.”

“You got a ping?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Chet said. “Through my 'link.”

“How did you...” I started asking, then I realized he'd pulled one of his old tricks. “You fucking hack me?”

“Only for a good cause!” he exclaimed. “And don't worry, my connect is tight. I went through your computer here, and connected to my computer to keep tabs on the progress of your surveillance detection AI.”

I put my hands on my face, massaging my sinuses. “Next time just ask alright?” I said. “It makes me uncomfortable when you hack my shit. But fine, what's your ping about?”

“Someone is on my computer,” he said.

After a long silence I asked “And..?”

“They're going through my files,” Chet said. “Looking for something. This person shouldn't be there. Let me see...” he closed his eyes a moment, flicking them around beneath his eyelids as he scrolled through an interface that must be projected directly into his eyes from the backside of his eyelids. “They're literally at my place, physically. But the security systems have been disabled. Fuck,” he said.

“What the fuck man,” Zack said.

“Is this all related?” Jay asked. “What the fuck is going on. What do these people want.”

“Chet you motherfucker,” Zack said, standing up, then taking the few steps to where Chet was seated, whose eyes were still closed. Zack punched him in the face, causing Chet to fall out of his chair.

“Zack what the fuck!” Jay said, bolting out of his chair to push Zack away from Chet.

Chet was cradling his face where Zack punched him. “Dude, what was that about.”

Zack huffed and puffed. “You fucker! You're the one behind this, aren't you. You're the one who wrote this book, didn't you? You're trying to fuck us so you can take control of what we've built.”

“Guys, guys, holy shit,” I said, going to Chet. “Dude you alright?” I turned to Zack. “Go fucking cool off you asshole.” Helping Chet to his feet, I brought him to the little kitchenette so he could wash his face with cool water. “You guys have to consider the possibility that whoever's out there that put together this book is trying to divide us against each other. It's not like we don't have powerful enemies out there who might have such a design.”

“Okay,” Chet said. “Before I was interrupted, I was going to implement my Plan D security.”

“Plan D?” I asked.

“It's a little drone that isn't wired into the rest of my house's security system,” Chet explained. “No one knows about it, and unless they know where it's hiding they wouldn't be able to disable it by going through the main security system.”

“I get you,” I said. “So you're going to..?”

“I'm going to take a look at the perp,” Chet said. “See who the fuck this guy is. Breaking into my place and going on my computer is fucking ballsy. Insane that he could hack into my shit too.” After a moment he winced. “Motherfucker.”

“What?” I asked.

“He found the lode,” Chet said.

I felt a sinking feeling in my chest. This was bad. Really, really bad.

“It's okay,” Chet said. “It's encrypted, and only I know the password. He won't be able to hack into it. But he can...” Another moment passed as he searched something underneath his eyelids. “Yeah, he's downloading it. To a flash drive. He interrupted the surveillance program to make it download faster. Fucking bitch. Alright, I gotta sit down for this. Do you have a haptic controller? And a VR headset? That would really fucking help me see who this guy is.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, going over to my computer desk and searching through one of its drawers. I pulled out a haptic controller, just a pair of gloves really, and handed them to Chet. Then I found a VR headset for him.

He sat down, putting on the gloves and headset. “Alright, give me a minute, I have to decrypt the password so I can connect to the drone through my 'link. And... got it.”

He started using the gloves to apparently steer a drone. Meanwhile, Zack sat back down, obviously still angry, tapping his foot, but not with any seeming intent to attack Chet again.

Jay grabbed a glass of water and sat back down with us. “Look, I think dividing us might be one of their purposes, whoever it is that's out there doing this. Chet wouldn't know all of these details, would he? Except maybe in the broad strokes, but not the specific details, right?” he said, looking to me, hopeful I would confirm for him.

“Right,” I said, uneasily. “I think so. Unless Chet was planting bugs on me way back then, which I seriously doubt.”

“He *is* a hacker,” Zack intoned.

“Yeah,” I said. “But he's *our* hacker.”

“That's supposed to be the idea, anyway,” Zack said, waving his hand.

“Guys,” Chet said. “I got him.”

“What's he look like?” Jay asked.

We intently waited for Chet's answer.

“He's a, uhhhh, let me see if I can get a little closer...” Chet said. “He's wearing a mask. Of course. But I can still get details. It's a primitive audio video recording system though, no AI for face recognition or gait analysis built in. Mind if I pass this through your AI surveillance system?”

“You're not already hacked in?” I asked.

“You said to ask,” Chet replied. “Anyway, I'm already in.” He chuckled. “Ah shit. He saw my drone. How the fuck? It's tiny and I'm at least 100 meters away.”

“Maybe he has, what do you call them, “ I said. “Those glasses that can make infrared and other frequencies visible.”

“Scruters,” Chet said. “Yeah he must. He's just staring at the drone though. The download isn't finished, it still has a couple minutes left. Fuck. He's not giving me anything. He's not moving or anything, and I can't see through his mask. All I got is... let's see, the guy is 5' 9”. That's it. Medium build. He might work out, or maybe he just fills out his clothes well. Everything is covered though. He's got gloves on, a hoodie. Can't tell the color of his skin or anything. And he's just... staring at the drone. Fucking spooky.”

“Could he be hacking the drone?” I asked.

“Nah, no way,” Chet said. “Encrypted frequency. He'd have to literally go through the manufacturer, and he wouldn't have time to do that, unless... Shit shit shit shit.”

“What's wrong?” Jay asked.

“Fuck, shut down. Shut down! Fuck!” Chet pulled off the VR headset, visibly upset. “He was getting close to hacking the drone, so I executed a command to brick it. It's dead now. But we know something

now.”

“Which is?” Zack inquired.

“This guy is working with someone powerful.” He looked to me. “I think your thesis that intel is behind this is right. Guy obviously has a team supporting him.” He looked to Zack.

Zack glared back.

“Anyway, the download is finished,” Chet said. “We better fucking bug out.”

I sat down and sighed heavily. “It's *the* lode, right?”

“Yep,” Chet said. “Everything.”

“They're not going to decrypt it,” Jay offered optimistically.

“Yeah, probably not,” Chet said. “But they knew about it, and knew where to find it. That's what's disturbing.”

“How long would it take to decrypt, if they were using brute force?” I asked.

“A million years,” Chet said.

“Okay,” Jay said. “Now what.”

“I think there will be more answers in the book,” Zack said.

“Yeah, and I bet you'll find my innocence proved by it,” Chet said.

“We'll see,” Zack replied.

Chapter 5: The Elevator

Unlike most events and details told in this book, this one has been reconstituted from secondhand sources and recollections. For example, one of the sources is Jonathan Gilder's telling of the tale to his friends, which happened to be recorded at a bar. Another of the sources is from a recording of Kevin Graystone's secretaries telling the story at a party. As such, this telling is not necessarily accurate in particular details, but from synthesizing and reconciling different versions, this seems it would be the gist of the story. Likewise, the tale is very short, so there are not a lot of details that one might miss to begin with.

Jonathan Gilder entered the elevator, on his way to a meeting with an important client of his Midas Fintech company. Their strategy of speaking with influential players had found some modest success, and he'd been running around the world, arranging several meetings every day. He was tired, but optimistic. According to his telling, he was running on only two hours of sleep when who else but Kevin Graystone entered the elevator.

“Graystone,” Jonathan said. “How unexpected to run into you.”

“Yes,” Graystone said curtly.

The elevator doors closed. Jonathan was headed to the 32nd floor, Graystone the 45th.

“I-” Jonathan began. “I have a pitch for you.”

Graystone looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “Alright,” he said. “You have about a minute, I’d estimate.”

Jonathan took a breath. “Power laws. 90% of the market is, basically, ruled by 10% of actors. Bitcoin is a nascent currency. I’ve started a company that works to provide a transaction layer so that people can exchange in Bitcoin quickly without having to wait for the blockchain to catch up. As quick as using a credit card. But the business is only a front. Really, our strategy is to meet with and appeal to the most important movers in the market, and persuade them to adopt Bitcoin as the new future currency. And to persuade them that it is in their interest to defect from government fiat currencies ruled by central banks.”

Graystone turned to him. Jonathan eyed the floor numbers. Just passing the 10th floor. “Alright,” Graystone said, reaching into his suit coat. He pulled out a card and handed it to Jonathan. “This is the number for my secretary. Her name is Martha. Call her and she will arrange a meeting. Don’t worry about needing to explain who you are or what for. No one knows this phone number except people who need to know. What’s your name?”

Jonathan took the card. “Jonathan Gilder,” he said, holding out his hand. Graystone took it formally, and shook.

“I look forward to hearing you elaborate,” he said.

The elevator dinged. The 32nd floor.

“This yours, I presume?” Graystone asked, looking askance out the opening doors.

“Yes,” Jonathan said. “A pleasure meeting you – and I look forward to our future meeting as well.”

“Very well,” Graystone said. “I’ll be seeing you.” He indicated by the tone of his voice that their chance meeting was finished. Jonathan exited, heading to his meeting with a far less important investor than Graystone would turn out to be.

I looked up at my friends. They were still intent on reading. The story as told more or less occurred exactly, and it was probably one of the better known stories among certain social circles in the Valley. Still, it felt intrusive. There was, however, one significant detail left out of the story, and I wondered at the reason for its absence. After handing me the card and introducing myself as Jonathan Gilder, Graystone had replied “I know” before saying he was looking forward to me elaborate.

Chapter 6: The Player

“Right this way,” a servant said, leading him down a hallway. Jonathan was at a mansion out in the New York country, about 60 miles outside of New York City. He was meeting with Gillaume Pais-Clout,

who was somewhat known both for his peculiar style of stock market investment and his affinity for acquiring outre and avant-garde art pieces. The servant brought Jonathan to a room lavishly furnished, old books on shelves, an old atlas, overstuffed chairs and a decadent brown leather couch facing a fireplace. "Gillaume will arrive shortly," the servant informed him. "Is there anything I might get you to drink? Tea? Water? Scotch?"

"Oh, uh," Jonathan stuttered, still taking in his surroundings. "Water is good. Thank you. Oh, and," Jonathan said, taking in a painting he just noticed above the fireplace of a confident young boy wearing fine, soft blue clothing of an early modern style. "Is this – is this a copy of *The Blue Boy*? Gainsborough?"

"It's the original," the servant replied.

"I thought I saw this before... in Los Angeles, at a gallery."

"That one is a copy of this one," the servant said.

"A fake?" Jonathan said.

The servant pursed his lips. "We do not call them fakes. Copies. It is a very common practice. I will be back with your water." Then he left.

Jonathan sat in one of the overstuffed chairs, gazing at the painting. It was a beautiful painting, perhaps one of his favorites in fact. Long ago, in another lifetime he'd visited the The Huntington, a mansion and property of a vastly wealthy family that had been converted to an art gallery and botanical gardens. He remembered gazing for a full hour at *The Blue Boy*, never realizing it wasn't the original. He wasn't sure if he should take the servant at his word, either.

"Heyyyyy," a voice said, entering the room behind Jonathan.

Jonathan turned to see the slender, pale form of Guillaume Pais-Clout, blond and French looking. "Oh hey," he said, getting up from his chair as Guillaume walked around. They shook. "Nice to meet you," Jonathan.

"Of course," Guillaume said. "You too." He sat on the couch, and took out his phone. "I'm feeling great lately, wanna see an art piece I just sold?"

"Uh, sure," Jonathan said.

"Check it," Guillaume said, showing Jonathan what looked like a .gif on his phone. It depicted an ayylmao alien dancing. "I just sold it for 5555 Ethereum."

"Wow," Jonathan said. "Who was the buyer?"

"Me," Guillaume said.

The servant returned with two bottles of water and set them on the coffee table in front of them. He left.

"You... sold a gif to yourself?" Jonathan asked, incredulous.

“Not just a gif,” Guillaume said. “An NFT.”

“Oh, right,” Jonathan said, who was only faintly familiar with their use. “That’s, uh, quite an, er, interesting-”

“It’s bullshit,” Guillaume said, who started giggling. “It’s not about the art! It was just a way for me to launder money.”

Jonathan raised his eyebrows at this. “Uh, really?” He wasn’t sure he felt comfortable having this information revealed to him. It made him liable – and he had a business worth tens of millions of dollars to protect. Rather, he should say, worth hundreds of Bitcoins. The USD lately had been very volatile, very anomalously compared to its historical norm. Bitcoin had also increased vastly in price, also boosting his net worth considerably. But compared to the family fortune Guillaume País-Clout was heir to, it was practically nothing.

“All transactions are traceable,” Guillaume said. “By design. That means, if you steal coins on the blockchain, you have to find a way to launder that money to yourself, so that you can actually spend them. Otherwise, if you can’t spend them, they’re worth nothing to you, right? So... that’s one of the things I do. I sell art. Conveniently, it gives you a plausible claim to stolen goods, as presumably it was stolen by someone else, and the state won’t take money from you earned by, well, ‘honest’ means...”

Jonathan blinked. This was not an aspect of the world of wealth he had expected.

Guillaume smirked, aware of Jonathan’s naivete. “It’s normal, really, I do this for all my friends.”

“Is this – connected to your, stock market investments?” Jonathan.

Guillaume only grinned boldly. “I won’t say. A magician does not reveal his tricks, after all. Well,” he took a sip of his water. “Let’s get down to it. We’ve arranged this meeting because we would like you to help us.”

“Us?” Jonathan said. “I thought this was just a meeting with you, to discuss going public in the stock market.”

“Oh yes, of course,” Guillaume said. “We’ll discuss that. But I’d like to make you aware that I am acting on behalf of... interests... besides myself. People with ambitious designs.”

Jonathan took a sip of his water. “I...” he licked his lips, which suddenly seemed very dry. “Okay. What sort of proposal do you have in mind?”

“Crash and burn,” Guillaume said airily, as though it were nothing. He looked around the room for a moment, his eyes settling on The Blue Boy. “Believe me, what we have in mind, it will make you a lot more money this way.”

Jonathan couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You mean, crash and burn – my company?!?!”

Guillaume merely nodded.

Jonathan formed a fist, banging it against the arm of his overstuffed chair, which simply bounced off without making a sound. "That's my life's work! I've worked on it for –"

"I understand," Guillaume said. "I really do. I've been through this sort of thing myself, and I know what it's like to... lose your innocence. But this is how the world really works. How the people who rule the world, how they really play. And you're either going to play their game, or lose. What we're offering you is, believe me, you will accept it. The terms will be... very amenable to you, you see."

"I don't believe it," Jonathan said. "I really don't. You can't be serious. I thought we would be discussing something of mutual benefit, a business deal. This sounds like, arson and sabotage!"

"It is," Guillaume said. "I know you come from a different world, outside this one, where things work a certain way. And things follow the logic they do out there because they aren't subject to certain necessities. Here, however, those necessities, they cause behaviors adaptive outside to... flip, in utility, you see."

Jonathan seethed. "I'm not sure I see what you mean. It sounds like lies."

"But you have to see, well, you'll see the point. Believe me, you will. The fact this meeting has been arranged already, that you're here meeting with me... it wouldn't have occurred unless we were already sure you would cooperate."

"You want me to... crash and burn my business," Jonathan said dejectedly. "I would never."

"We need an inside man," Guillaume said. "And you will be rewarded handsomely. Believe me, I know. The arrangements have already been made."

"I won't," Jonathan said, standing up from his chair. It was so overstuffed, it was a bit awkward for him, seeming to de-emphasize his resolve in a comical manner.

"You will," Guillaume said. "You will cooperate. All men have a price. And you are a very valuable actor to us. Someone who can help us."

"I'm going to go," Jonathan said, walking to the door. He gave one last look at The Blue Boy, gazing for several moments just to remember it. "You can tell your – whoever they are, tell them I won't be working with you."

Guillaume only raised his eyebrows in response.

Jonathan turned and walked back down the hallway to the entrance. The servant greeted him there. "Your car is already pulled up for you," he said. "Have a pleasant evening," he said, smiling easily. The servant opened the door, and bid Jonathan to his car.

"Aw fuck," Chet said. "I remember you telling me about this guy. What a fucker! I still hate his guts."

Jonathan felt a chill crawling across his skin. Something in the back of his mind was crying out for attention, a memory, gladly forgotten.

"Do you think," Zack started. "Incredible they'd include this in their book. Do you think they'd, really,

reveal this much? Is —”

Jay read his mind. “The same people behind what's going on now? This book, the guy hacking Chet's computer to steal the lode.”

Eddie felt himself nodding, like he was only a ghost inhabiting his body, dispossessed of his usual serenity.

“Guys,” I started, “we need to talk about the lode.” Jay and Zack avoided my gaze, but Chet met my eyes. He understood. This wasn't unexpected. Jay and Zack had always been ambivalent about the existence of the lode. Chet had been there, helping to record and document.

“I'm still convinced it was a mighty coincidence,” Zack said, deciding to head off the discussion with his own opinion.

“Same,” Jay said, following Zack. “The fact we discovered it the very day after we succeeded in hopping identities...”

“Meaning we couldn't capitalize on it, at least not personally,” Chet said. “Meaning there was nothing for us to do but research it, and provide our own commentary.”

“Yeah, but,” Jay said, “it was only you and Eddie that really went deep into it. We were never into that /x/ stuff.”

Zack shrugged. “It was a coincidence, I'll grant that. But for someone else to go out of their way to steal the lode... Well, I guess at the very least, it's something of interest to other people.”

“How many people in the world know about it?” I asked. “It can't be very many. But it must be some, otherwise the signs wouldn't have been there.”

“Out of the millions and millions of signs and landmarks out there,” Jay said, “it'd be more improbable if there weren't some outliers of extreme exception.”

“Alright, here's the plan,” I said, making a bridge of my fingers. “Chet and Zack, you're going to go out and try to track down the lode. I'm sure there's plenty of street surveillance Chet can access for his search. Zack, you'll be conspiring with him, to help him and provide critical feedback.”

“What?” Zack said, bewildered. “But I don't believe in -”

“I know,” I said. “It's *because* you don't believe. That'll make your competing insights more valuable.”

“I... see, I guess,” Zack admitted.

“Got it,” Chet said. “I'm already hacking in and sending searches through the networks. Ready to go Zack?”

“Yeah alright,” Zack said, standing up. “Where to?”

“Coffee,” Chet said. With that they left.

Now it was just me and Jay.

"So what are we going to do?" Jay asked.

"Finish this book," I said.

Chapter 7: Problem-Solution

"Are you sure about this?" Pedro pleaded with Jonathan. "This loan could destroy us."

"Or it could make us," Jonathan insisted.

"Our paper net worth is already in the tens of millions," Aadvik mentioned. "We've already won. And our Bitcoin holdings are almost certainly going to increase in value now."

"I know," Jonathan said. "But I want more."

"You're not even going to really notice the difference even if you do become a billionaire," William said. "But you're 50%. It's your call to make for the company."

"Only Pedro is opposed," Jonathan said. "Neither you nor Aadvik have a stronger opinion?"

"I'm protected," Aadvik said. "If this loan goes south, I'm already mostly cashed out. So for me there's only really gain to be expected, not loss. But for you, the downside is immense."

"It is very risky," Jonathan admitted. "But only for me. I wouldn't take it if you guys were exposed."

William sighed. "How much is enough?"

"It's not about having wealth as an end in itself," Jonathan argued. "It's about what you can do with that wealth."

"Like go into space," Aadvik surmised.

"Yes," Jonathan said. "Exactly."

"It's a noble goal," William said. "Alright, if you're going to do it, I'll back you up."

"Same," Aadvik said.

Pedro appeared to be thinking it over in his mind for a second, before sighing and throwing up his hands. "Alright you crazy motherfucker," he said. "Double or nothing."

"More like 100x or nothing," Jonathan said.

The proposition Jonathan was considering was a massive loan. The influx of cash would be used to rapidly scale the company, so that stores could be opened across America that allowed people to trade cash for Bitcoin, to apply for credit on their transaction layer. Various novelty goods would also be on

sale, which could be purchased for discounted prices if one used Bitcoin or their transaction layer. The purpose of the loan, as Jonathan saw it, was to remain in control of his company rather than selling off shares to acquire the necessary capital to scale. But the loan was very risky. Since so many banks considered Bitcoin and Bitcoin-adjacent products so volatile, the loan came with some very steep penalties if it were not paid back in due time. In essence, if this business venture failed to help establish the company as a major industry player of Bitcoin, Jonathan would lose his business and go bankrupt.

The next two years for Jonathan were tumultuous, as they were for everybody. The first stores opened in early 2021, in New York City and Miami and Austin. By the end of 2021 several more stores had been opened, in Minneapolis, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, Kansas City, and so on. At first the real estate deals they were getting seemed really good, but as it would turn out few people were interested in an in-person Bitcoin experience. Their online credit company flourished, but their brick and mortar stores languished. For a year or two the online credit company's revenue could cover the losses sustained by their in-person stores, but the mathematical extrapolation was quite stark. Even though more people than ever were adopting the fledgling currency to escape the US Dollar, their company wasn't the one that stood out. In fact, the leading industry players emerged around the same time as Jonathan's move to open in-person stores. He would later find out that Guillaume País-Clout was invested in several of those companies, and had been since before their meeting.

In 2023 market research revealed that the in-person, brick and mortar stores weren't having the effect of establishing brand name recognition Jonathan had hoped. In markets where no store was available, there were, statistically speaking, an equal share of people using their online platform. Jonathan decided to terminate the venture, ending the store leases. Paying off the loan would nearly bankrupt Jonathan - in fact he was forced to sell off a precious several of his Bitcoins to cover the loan, but he was able to maintain control of the company. His friends during this time did well, and were living as typical Silicon Valley millionaires are wont to do. But Jonathan felt acutely the difference between his present success and the success he dreamed of as a gaping hole, an absence that muted the meaning of his fortune. He was rich enough for himself, but far short of the dream of becoming a world player, someone with real influence.

It was in the midst of the process of reorganizing his company in the wake of its physical store location debacle that a message was sent to Jonathan personally. It was very short, just a date, time, and location. A meeting to be held at a restaurant in the city. Jonathan knew the place, and that it was easy to find a secluded place to sit and talk. And he was sure he knew who it was - Guillaume País-Clout. They'd remained in contact since their initial meeting, never discussing terms but merely remaining aware of each other. Guillaume always seemed sure that Jonathan would turn to him, and internally Jonathan was considering that Guillaume must be right. How could he, an upstart born to a family of farmers and artisan laborers, think to enter the world stage and take his place as a world player, without the imprimatur of its current world players? Perhaps it was simply how the world worked.

Jonathan swallowed his pride and went to the restaurant at the appointed time. When he arrived, he found two bodyguards - easy to tell by their large stature - at the door. "Go on in," one of them said, clearly recognizing him. "The restaurant's been reserved just for you."

Inside, Jonathan walked through the restaurant, empty except for some commotion in the kitchen. He headed to the back on instinct, and there found Guillaume sitting, waiting for him. He had a glass of red wine in front of him. "Welcome," Guillaume said. "I thought it'd be nice to have some privacy, so I rented out the entire restaurant for tonight."

"I thought so," Jonathan said, taking a seat.

Guillaume beckoned, and a waiter appeared, pouring a glass of wine for Jonathan. Jonathan took a sip. "So," he said, leaving it at that.

"We've done very well," Guillaume said. "As you know. Unfortunately that loan you took for the brick and mortar venture didn't pan out. It was a very bold strategy, and perhaps under more ordinary conditions it would have worked, but lately, well..."

"These have been a few rough years for everybody," Jonathan said. "Well, not for everybody," and he finished the rest of his glass of wine in a single gulp.

Guillaume laughed. "You think I enjoy what's happening?" he asked, rhetorically. He finished his glass of wine. He snapped to the waiter. "Vodka," he said. "I think, well actually I assume you already know, that we do try to keep things working. But as well we can attend to our affairs, most do not. That is the difficulty. So, at times, we... lose control." He pulled his hands apart as if to represent things falling apart. "But it is no matter. We already have a plan that is being executed. And we have a vital role. A necessary role. That we would like you to play."

The waiter came back, producing two shot glasses and pouring vodka into each. He stood by, ready to pour more vodka as needed. Guillaume held up his vodka. Jonathan clinked his glass with Guillaume's, then they both knocked back the first shot. The waiter poured another.

"Tell me," Jonathan said.

Guillaume held up the second vodka. Another clinking of glasses, another shot poured down both their throats.

"This is a dirty business, my friend, and I won't pretend to like it. If you had succeeded in your business venture, well, that would have been fine," Guillaume said. "Nothing we couldn't incorporate into our plans. We're always opportunistic as I'm sure you know. We wouldn't be the ones with wealth and power if we weren't, now would we? So let's get down to it. I remind you, this is nothing personal, and you will be better off for it. We always prefer to operate by mutual benefit, you see. And I'm sure when you realize what we have in store for you, you will be entirely willing to help us."

"Fine," Jonathan said.

"We need... some liquidity," Guillaume said.

"I'm sure you have great credit," Jonathan said. "Why can't you go through the normal channels?"

"We need, a lot, of liquidity," Guillaume said. "And at a good rate. Free."

"So you want to perform a heist, basically," Jonathan said.

"We wouldn't call it that," Guillaume said. "Just a... diversion of resources to their optimal use."

"So where do I come in to this?" Jonathan asked.

"You have tens of thousands of Bitcoin locked up in your company," Guillaume said. "We could use those to grease some palms around the world. For a good purpose, of course. Just, some people are being reluctant to get on board with switching over to the new currency."

"You're talking about triggering hyperbitcoinization," Jonathan said.

Guillaume nodded. "Of course. My organization, we are like, revolutionaries you could say. Always trying to manifest the eschaton. Or immanentize the teleology or whatever."

"Your organization?" Jonathan asked.

"My organization is several centuries old," Guillaume said. "We were there for the American Revolution. The French Revolution. Ah, that went very poorly, didn't it?" He laughed. "We were there for pretty much every event in history you know about. And even some events that you're currently living through."

Jonathan frowned. "So you're, like, the Illuminati?"

"Yes," Guillaume said plainly, without elaboration.

For a second Jonathan was caught off-guard. Then he started laughing. "Okay. Alright. Sure. Look, I know you and your people are very rich. But this sounds like some LARPy bullshit."

"Larp-y? Guillaume asked.

"Something the kids say," Jonathan said. "Like... people pretending to play a role."

"Oh, well, yes," Guillaume said. "I guess you could see it that way. But we're not pretending. We really do have such a legacy."

"Okay, sure," Jonathan said.

"It's fine if you don't believe," Guillaume said. "Not yet, anyway. But I'm sure you will."

"So why tell me?" Jonathan said.

"Who would believe you?" Guillaume asked, grinning, canines flashing.

Jonathan felt a cold shiver. He realized Guillaume might be insane. Telling the truth, and insane. "I see your point. So you want to trigger hyperbitcoinization."

"Yes," Guillaume said. "Of course, we're already loaded with Bitcoin. You see, we've been following your strategy..."

"My strategy?" Jonathan asked, pulling a blank. "I didn't realize I had any strategy laid out, for the Illuminati of all people."

"Of course you do," Guillaume said. "Perhaps you've forgotten." He pulled out his phone, and showed Jonathan his old blog post from 2017. The Illuminati Plan to Capture Bitcoin. "It's quite a savvy plan."

Very simple. Elegant. The kind we like the most."

"Oh my god," Jonathan said. "Okay. Yeah, I remember now. Fuck." He took a moment to recover himself.

Guillaume smiled and beckoned to the waiter. A glass of red wine was poured this time.

Jonathan drank it in one swig. "Alright. So where are you at in the plan. I presume you've been using your central banks to buy up Bitcoin these last few years."

Guillaume nodded. "Yes. Since 2018. We've also been leaning on law enforcement, to make them hand over confiscated Bitcoin to us at great rates. At this point we've acquired, altogether, approximately 7 million Bitcoin. Most of that is held in secret by central banks, of course, as we require them to stay in operation, otherwise we couldn't maintain our superior position in world politics."

"If you need to bribe people, why not just use your own money?" Jonathan said.

"There are reasons," Guillaume said. "Bitcoin transactions are traceable, as I'm sure you know. We need Bitcoin that's in the dark."

"So that's where I come in," Jonathan said. "If you steal the coins from my company, although the coins will be traceable back to the heist, you can launder them more easily than you could your own holdings."

"Exactly!" Guillaume said. "I told my people you're smart. And not just smart, but prime Election material."

"Election?" Jonathan asked.

"Not politics," Guillaume said. "Divine election. You are among the Elect. Chosen by God. You have a special mission here on earth. I vouched for you to my people to become one of us."

Jonathan laughed, very nervously. "Sounds great. Where do I sign?"

"Don't worry about that yet," Guillaume said. "You'll know when you know. Everyone always does."

"Oh good," Jonathan said. "I love vague bullshit."

"It's anything but," Guillaume said, icily. "It's not important to elaborate right now. And it couldn't be. You will have to be shown what the Illuminati can do. Our technology. The way we operate. How we control people and the world. Because, quite simply, you wouldn't believe otherwise, without demonstration."

"Fantastic," Jonathan said. "So let me get this straight. You need me to help you steal my company's Bitcoin holdings. An inside job. For helping you, I will be rewarded."

"Not just you," Guillaume said. "Your friends also."

"Are they also to become Illuminati?" Jonathan asked.

"No, no," Guillaume said. "They don't quite have the constitution for it."

"I see," Jonathan said. "Then let's get down to it. The details."

"Yes, let's," Guillaume said.

Over the course of half a dozen more shots of vodka, several bottles of wine, steak tartare and lobster and caviar and "steak-frites" as Guillaume called them, they hashed out the details of a rather convoluted plot to trash Jonathan's company while allowing him to bail with a golden parachute. The most enticing part of the plan was Guillaume's promise to give Jonathan and his three compatriots 10,000 Bitcoin each. In fact, Guillaume didn't only promise 10,000 Bitcoins, he showed Jonathan the 40,000 Bitcoin in escrow, guaranteed by an escrow agent Jonathan was already familiar with from business. By the end of the meal they had solidified their relationship as a matter of mutual professional interest, their rivalry dissolved by the necessity of their circumstances.

After their meal and while Jonathan was riding home, he sent a single text to the groupchat with William, Aadvik, and Pedro. "One trillion satoshis. Each. That enough to sell out?" Then he got home, went to bed, and slept.

I yawned. It was early morning now, and not sleeping all night was catching up to me. I got up and punched a button on my espresso machine so it'd make two shots of espresso. I looked over to Jay. "What do you think?" I asked.

"I hate this feeling of being scrutinized," he said.

"Yeah," was all I could say. For a minute or so I spaced out, waiting for the espresso.

"Yo," Jay said. "Make me some."

"Right," I mumbled. A few seconds later the espressos were ready, so I hit the button again. "Here," I said, bringing him one over. We sipped our espressos.

"I had a thought," Jay said. "I've heard about people who, like, they have a lot of money, y'know. But they get used. Like, as a front guy. So he can legitimately buy things, for others to use the stuff he buys."

"Yeah," I said. "But they haven't made any indication..."

"Sure, sure," he said. "Not that we've seriously spent down any part of our fortunes. Excepting Chet, but even so, that's only a couple percent."

"True," I said. "You think they're coming back? They want to use us for something?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense to me right now," Jay said, finishing his espresso. "Though I'm pretty tired."

"No kidding," I said, finishing mine. Then I grabbed the next espressos.

Although there weren't windows for my little safe house, a fiber optic array in the ceiling was slowly starting to glow, conducting sunlight from the roof into the room. The sun was coming up.

"The lode," Jay said. "If they wanted that, then combined with our fortunes... I'm not saying I agree with your and Chet's ideas about that thing you found, but..."

"With our fortunes combined, and recent advances in technology..." I offered.

"Yeah," Jay said. "Exactly."

I was unsure whether to finish the book or step out of the safe house to call Chet and see if he had any preliminary findings. There was only a little bit of the book left, about a chapter it seemed. I decided to call Chet.

"Hey," Chet's voice said.

"Find anything?"

"Well, sort of," he said. "More like, we were found."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Chet said. "You should probably come here. There's some guy wants to talk to you."

"Fffffffrick," I uttered. "Where you at?"

"The coffee place."

"Who is it?"

"You won't believe me unless you come see for yourself," Chet said.

"Alright," I said. "I'll be there." Though there was an irony in that Jay and I had just pounded a couple shots of espresso, it provided at least some of an edge we'd need for meeting with whoever was there with Chet.

"What is it?" Jay asked, when I came back and started getting ready to go.

"Someone," I said. "With Chet. He said we wouldn't believe unless we saw for ourselves."

"Oh shit," he said. "Should I come with?"

I stood for a second, thinking it over. "Yeah," I said.

As we were walking there - the coffee place I knew Chet was at was only a few blocks away - the streets seemed still. Unusual for early morning, but it seemed it would pick up a little later. Not that where we were was centrally located, somewhere on the outskirts of San Francisco. The brisk walk gave us a second wind, and despite the weirdness of what was going on I felt calm. As we turned the corner to the coffee shop, I saw Chet sitting at a table, smoking a cigarette. With him was someone fac-

ing him, his back turned to us.

As Jay and I walked up, Chet saw us and waved. He didn't seem panicked. Then the man turned around.

"Guillaume," I said, mildly surprised.

"Hello old friend," he said. "Bet you didn't expect me." He grinned. He was older now, a little grey in his hair making him look distinguished.

"Well, I guess not," I said, on guard. The last time I'd seen Guillaume was over a decade ago, shortly before the "accident."

"You should know," Guillaume said. "It's been hard to track you down."

"Well, yeah," I said.

"Come, come, take a seat," he beckoned to the other chairs at the table. Then Zack came out of the coffee shop, carrying a coffee. A worker came after him, carrying a tray with more coffees and cream and sugar. The worker set down the tray and promptly returned inside. "So, you're probably wondering why I've brought you together..."

I couldn't help being disgruntled. "I was hoping to not see you again."

"Ah, well," Guillaume pursed his lips. "Understandable. But I have a request."

"Oh? You have a request," I stated sarcastically. "*You* have a request."

"This time it is I," Guillaume said. "I've moved up to leadership."

"Congrats," I said wryly.

"Yes, yes, I know," Guillaume said. "Anyway, on my own initiative, and on behalf of the parties the council represents..."

"I never understood exactly," Chet said. "Eddie explained it to me before. You're, like, a secret government person?"

"Eddie?" Guillaume asked.

Chet nodded his head towards me.

"Oh, right, of course," Guillaume said, laughing. "Edward. He mentioned that as a possible name he would take. The last time we talked you were still Jonathan."

I felt a cold thrill at the use of my old name. "That was someone else, very long ago," I said. "Jonathan is dead now."

"Yes, I know," Guillaume said. "Anyway, it's very simple really. We're the Illuminati."

Jay and Zack chuckled nervously. "Really?" Jay asked, incredulously.

"Yes," Guillaume said, entirely straight.

"Look, I get secret government conspiracies and all that," Zack said. "But the Illuminati? I thought that was just made up."

"Well, of course it was made up, at least initially," Guillaume said impatiently. "People had to start it. Form it. Organize it."

Chet and I looked between each other. Much like the event we'd witnessed after our respective "accidents," we'd only found it difficult to believe at first before initially giving in. Jay and Zack, on the other hand, who hadn't witnessed the event, were always more skeptical.

"I'm not sure I believe it," Zack said.

"That's okay," Guillaume said. "Point is, you will help me."

"Why would we help a crazy person?" Jay asked.

Guillaume pursed his lips again. "Chet," he said. "You explain."

Chet sighed, uncomfortable at this duty being laid on him. "The lode," he said.

"What about it?" Zack asked. "I thought it was just rants and notes you guys took."

"There's more to it than that," Chet said. "Jon- Eddie and I, we succeeded in *pinging something*."

"You guys... pinged something?" Jay asked.

"Something... out there." Chet offered.

"Precisely," Guillaume said. "Which is why we need you."

"Why don't you guys do it?" I asked, even though I knew the answer. "You guys already have communications open..."

"Naturally," Guillaume said. "But of course you know we have to rely on *them*. And if they make it plain they prefer to work with someone, we can only do as they request."

"You guys are fucking serious right now?" Zack asked. "Illuminati, *them*? What is them, aliens or some shit?"

A moment of silence. "Yes," I said softly. "Aliens."

Jay and Zack looked between each other. "I don't believe it," Jay said. "Look, we're friends, and that's not changing, but I'm not going to involve myself in this crazy bullshit." Jay got up to leave, and Zack followed suit.

"You can leave if you like," I said. "It's not going to change anything."

"What could change?" Jay offered. "You're going to take our money without our consent?"

"More or less," Guillaume said.

"Yeah okay dude," Zack said. "You're gonna crack a custom hash function."

"Do you need a demonstration?" Guillaume asked, clearly growing more impatient.

"No," Jay said. "Because you couldn't demonstrate cracking my passwords."

Together, Jay and Zack started walking away.

"If you let them walk away, they're going to suffer for it," Guillaume said. "You know how much it costs them to operate even when we're cooperating. They'll make them pay for refusing."

"Fuck it," Chet said, getting up and running after them.

They were just out of earshot, so I couldn't be sure what was said, but apparently it was enough to convince them to return.

"Fine," Jay said, sitting down, exasperated. "I'm here for curiosity's sake."

"Same," Zack said. "If you've really made such an effort to track us down and bring us together, then, well, sunk cost and all that."

"At least you can see it from a perspective of self-interest," Guillaume said. "Good. We can work with that."

"So you mean we'll see a return on our investment," Jay asserted.

"Of course," Guillaume said. "Now, can we finally get down to business? I'm not one much for chitchat."

"So what's the business?" Chet asked.

"I'm glad you asked. First off, I presume you've all read the book one of our people left for you?" Guillaume asked rhetorically.

"I haven't finished it," I said. "In fact I'm on the last chapter."

"That's the best part!" Guillaume said. "Who doesn't love a good story? No one else here has finished it, have they?" He looked around, taking in their looks. "Well, I would insist you read it first. It will make our negotiations much easier."

"I thought you didn't want to wait," Chet said.

"I don't mind waiting for something such as this," Guillaume said, sipping his coffee. "You'll see what I mean when you read it, of course." He leaned back, looking off into space, giving us leave to finish the book while he waited.

Chapter 8: The Plot

"Of course it's not our money," Jonathan said, finishing up his explanation. "It's our customers'. So we'll need it returned. If you're able to get access to drain the company's wallet, send it to this account. That's how we'll know you were successful, and it's already been set up to automatically return the coins." Jonathan pushed a piece of paper across the desk.

The short, gaunt man picked it up and looked at the address written there. "Got it," he said.

Jonathan stood up and offered his hand. "Good luck," he said.

The short man shook his hand, nodded, and made his way out of Jonathan's office. Jonathan slumped back in his chair, opening up a drawer at the bottom of his desk. The special occasion scotch. He didn't bother with a glass and took a straight pull. Then another. He put it back. Then he took out his phone, and called Chet.

"Hey," Jonathan said when Chet picked up. "You ready to go? Yeah. Yeah. Okay, see you there."

From the office to the sushi bar where they often met was a short walk. Jonathan looked dour, a hard frown on his face, the eyes turned downward, his hands in his coat pockets. When he arrived, he saw Chet in their usual spot at the end of the bar. Chet gave him a questioning look.

"It's done," Jonathan said as he sat down. He held up two fingers to Izaki, their usual bartender, who poured a shot of vodka and a small cup of warm sake. When Izaki wandered away, Jonathan continued. "The pentester should be able to get in. I surveyed his past exploits and methods and made sure to leave a 'flaw' in the system he'll be sure to try. How long I don't know. Maybe a day or two. Then it'll take a day for the money to completely transfer, and when it's done that money will automatically be dispersed to several dozen others dark wallets held by banks outside the US."

"Then they'll put cash in the accounts we've set up," Chet supplied.

"Yep," Jonathan said. He grinned bitterly. "You gotta love the Caribbean for their legal non-compliance with US financial law. Once the coins have been transferred down a string of wallets, bought and sold multiple times, they'll be irrecoverable. You can't steal back from someone coins they legitimately bought even if those coins were originally stolen, as long as that person doesn't know they were stolen. The wallets we'll receive won't be associated with any of those wallets and cash accounts, of course."

"Exquisite," Chet said, holding up his sake. They toasted. "How long until we get to see you again?"

Jonathan grunted. "I don't know," he said. "What do you think? Dragon roll, or phoenix roll?"

"Phoenix," Chet said. "Obviously."

Jonathan chuckled. "Yeah, you're right. A fine last meal, I suppose."

They exchanged few other words the rest of the meal. Their minds were too wrapped up in what was about to happen. That night was, of course, the same night Jonathan "died" in a car crash. Jonathan stumbled out of the sushi bar, as he often did, quite drunk but not obvious to those without an eye trained for it. His gait was smooth, his eyes a little glassy, but otherwise there was nothing that would indicate to casual passerby that he was substantially too drunk to drive, but then again it wouldn't matter since cars could drive themselves. After a couple minutes wait while Jonathan burned a cigarette, a Tesla rolled up and opened its door. Jonathan got in, and the car pulled away.

The car crash would be attributed to a glitch in the car's self-driving system. As car crashes resulting from self-driving were rare, and Jonathan Gilder had some minor fame in the Bitcoin community, it was front page news for a couple days. Pictures of the wreckage showed a totaled Tesla, barely more than a tumbled heap that had driven off the road into a ditch at high speed and rolled over several times. Jonathan was reported dead at the scene.

Just when the news from the car crash was dying down, it was revealed that Midas FinTech had been hacked, and nearly all its Bitcoin holdings disappeared. Nearly 80,000 coins in total, with a then-valuation of approximately \$28 billion, although the valuation of BTC in USD was becoming a less meaningful signal for recognizing its value. Since only Jonathan knew the password, and only Jonathan was supposed to have known the password for the wallet, his death was taken to indicate the coins would be irrecoverable. The company folded. It was speculated but never confirmed that Jonathan was in on the hack, and that he might have faked his own death, but there was never any proof.

Savvy observers on social media documented the transfer of the coins to successive strings of dark wallets, whose owners were unknown. It was speculated that these dark wallets were associated with Caribbean banks that had gained notoriety for giving cash for ill-gotten coins. Some years later, those coins started trickling into the accounts of legitimate art dealers, but by then nobody was paying attention to them anymore. Much more exciting events were taking place - hyperbitcoinization! The US dollar was in its death throes, Bitcoin was rapidly becoming the most accepted species of currency. This was it. Anyway, in order to suppose that Jonathan Gilder esconded with the Bitcoin to a paradise required suggesting that the entire financial system was in the control of mere thieves and bandits, who were at least complicit if not actively supporting such theft.

And so the story for Jonathan Gilder ends, so far as we are able to trace his actions up to the point of his car crash.

What are we to make of these events? Certain parts of the story are verifiable fact. Midas FinTech really existed, and it had millions of customers. Jonathan Gilder really existed, and perhaps he still exists under an assumed name. The conversations written here are transcribed from real audio and video recordings. But the implications are perhaps too much for people to accept. A faked death? An inside job? The capture of Bitcoin by the same institutions hostile to it? The Illuminati?

Individually, such events might be credible. But putting them all together beggars belief. But as it is, these are the authentic transcriptions of your humble writer.

*Signed,
Quintus Temper*

Finishing it, I realized who the author must be. "You," I practically spat, glaring at Guillaume. "You wrote this!"

"Of course!" Guillaume heartily agreed.

"Why, though?" Zack asked, quizzically. "If these events are true, why document them for others to find out about them?"

"Because," Guillaume said. "You should know by now. *Who would believe you?* But for our own, it is necessary to record such events for posterity, so that our future heirs will know their own history and learn from the past. That is why we always make sure to document the truth and put it out there, for the few with ears to hear and eyes to see. Everyone else - they just choose to believe the world is beyond control, chaos, to suit themselves, a story to satisfy their ego."

"Convenient," Zack said haughtily. "So what's the point of this? By your own reckoning, it's not like anyone would believe this, let alone do something about it."

"Oh, I just wanted to show you guys the book I wrote," Guillaume said. "I thought you'd all appreciate it."

Chet laughed. "You motherfucker. So what's the deal with breaking into my home and hacking my computer?"

"That was for the purpose of doing business today," Guillaume said. "The book and the hack aren't related, except coincidentally."

I shook my head. "You really got us good, I'll give you that."

Guillaume flashed a canine. "We do have our fun. Now, let's get down to business. There is something we need from you, which I believe it in our mutual interest so that you'll be inclined to work with us."

"So what is it?" Jay asked. "We already have money."

"It's what we want you to do with that money," Guillaume said. "Each of you must start a dynasty. A family. You will need to figure out how to invest your resources so that your families will be positioned as major players in future world events."

"You had to bring us together to tell us that?" Zack asked, frowning. "We've already decided to do that on our own."

"That's good," Guillaume said. "Very good, in fact. Because it is better to not have to coerce people into marriage. But you do need women. Very good women. Wives who are as capable as you are with wealth and influence. Who will give you and raise good children."

"I see," I said. "And you have those networks, I presume, for selecting such women? Because they'd have to meet very demanding criteria to be eligible."

"Of course," Guillaume said. "You need the best. Not just women who will fall in love with you, but women who are dedicated and committed to taking control of human destiny."

"So why do you need the lode?" Chet asked.

"For study," Guillaume said. "While you know we have some reliable capacity for... interpreting their messages, as it were, guessing their ontological structure is another thing."

"So you don't even know what you're interacting with?" Zack asked, incredulous. "You don't even fucking know what's on the other line sending these messages?"

"Of course you must realize, it's not like talking over a phone," Guillaume explained patiently. "Throughout the millennia, many different mediums of communication have been found and used, changed over time as new techniques come into provenance and the old ways stop working. I'm sure you know the ancient practices of augury, divination, and so on."

"Yeah," Jay said. "But you're kidding me. You're telling me, the aliens or whatever these things are, have been communicating with humans through these superstitious practices?"

"They're not superstitious if they work," Guillaume said. "But they won't work for you, because their working depends on the entities from the other side exerting influence. And they change their methods as humans 'catch up,' as it were, with our technology and science and general understanding of the world. They only ever reveal themselves to a few, providing hints, help, instructions so that humanity is shepherded to our destiny."

"How can you know they mean us good?" Jay asked. "They could be leading us all into a trap."

Guillaume shrugged. "No one can know. One must have faith in love. Hope."

"Now you're talking like a Catholic," Zack said. "Are you gonna tell me the aliens were behind Jesus or something?"

Guillaume chuckled. "Well, actually, that was a pretty good trick. But it's a long story, and I'm not sure you believe in the essential foundations that would make the trick intuitive to you." He looked to me and Chet. "They would know. You can ask them."

Jay and Zack looked between each other. "We've heard their stories," Jay explained. "About strangely improbable coincidences, events happening with perfect timing, the mysterious correlation of thoughts with sounds in their environment as if to answer their questions. That's just schizophrenia."

Guillaume shrugged. "If you don't believe your friends, then, well. I suppose that should help you understand why the aliens communicate as they do. They are so exceedingly beyond us, that when they interact with us, what we take for granted is radically remote to them. We are tiny, short-lived... they interact with us as we do with micro-organisms. In a manner that seems very rough to us. It is better to not have the aliens interact with you, it is very dangerous to your mental health by its very nature."

"I don't get it," Zack said. "If they're so smart, why is it so hard for them to communicate with us like a normal person?"

"Can you communicate with a dog?" Guillaume asked. "Of course you can. But can you communicate in the dog's own language? No. And the only way you can make the dog understand you, is by using rewards and punishments to control their behavior. So too do these aliens interact with us, cajoling the behavior they need out of us by supplying the reward even when we don't understand what intentions

they have beyond that. And of course, the difference between us and these beings is far greater than that between humans and dogs."

"Yeah okay fuck that," Zack said. "This sounds like spooky bullshit to me. I don't buy it. But, as to your proposition, well, I wouldn't mind the help. It's hard to find bitches these days, let alone good ones."

Guillaume merely smiled.

"What about the aliens?" Jay asked. "Where do the fucking aliens come in?"

"The future," Guillaume said. "Many generations hence. So we must begin preparing now. In fact, we've been preparing for millennia already."

We looked between ourselves. I caught Jay rolling his eyes. Zack looked flustered. Chet was smirking, very smug. "So where do you come in?" I asked on behalf of my friends.

"Oh it's not really that big a thing," Guillaume said, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out four cards covered in gold leaf. "Here," and he handed them over to us.

They were invitations. To a party. In Monaco. The host gave instructions to fly in from Vancouver on his own private jet.

"This is the beginning of your new lives," Guillaume said. "Welcome."