Tommy Rantti

ATLAS KICKS THE BALL

Brainpaingames 2023

ATLAS KICKS THE BALL
© Tommy Rantti
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

A Note on the Translation

This translation seeks to remain faithful to the spirit and style of the original Finnish.
The novel functions as a satirical response to Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. To preserve the effect of the original text for an English-speaking audience, the names of certain characters have been adapted to maintain the direct allusions to figures from Rand's novel. Similarly, some corporate names are satirical plays on real-world entities. These are foundational features of the author's social commentary.

There are two novels that can change a bookish fourteen-year-old's life: The Lord of the Rings and Atlas Shrugged. One is a childish fantasy that often engenders a lifelong obsession with its unbelievable heroes, leading to an emotionally stunted, socially crippled adulthood, unable to deal with the real world. The other, of course, involves Orcs.

- John Rogers

THIS BOOK IS A WORK OF FICTION.

A word from the author

This free edition of *Atlas Kicks the Ball* is complete. The only difference from the paid edition is these additional nag pages, which appear a few times along the way.

You may share the book freely for non-commercial purposes (CC BY-NC 4.0). You can also build the book yourself, in any format, from the source at **git.brainpaingames.com/tommy/atlas-public**.

If you'd like to support me, you can buy the PDF and EPUB editions without these nag pages at **store.brainpaingames.com**.

Thank you. The story continues on the next page.

Chapter 1

"My Resignation." The words, glowing on her computer screen, made Tanya slump back in her chair and curse out loud. She had just been about to shut down her machine when the new message had appeared. She opened the email and scanned through it quickly.

Tanya cursed again. At the next desk, Eddie, a Scottish nuclear physicist, glanced over at her but then returned his focus to the equations he was scratching onto graph paper with an old-fashioned, sharpened pencil. Tanya sagged against her backrest and sighed. Ville was the third key member of the thorium project to resign in the last two weeks. All three seemed to have quit in the same way. They had sent a polite, apologetic email personally to Tanya, and the bureaucracy had been handled with the HR department by arranging for their unused annual leave to cover their notice period. In practice, they had simply vanished. Eveliina and Antti had left on the same day. At the time, Tanya had been too annoyed to even call after them, figuring if they couldn't be bothered to say goodbye face-to-face,

then let them go.

Tanya read the message one more time. When she reached the end, she jolted and leaned closer to the screen. The email didn't end with Ville's name. After a few blank lines, a hashtag was written, as if an afterthought:

#whereisjonas

Tanya dug up the resignation emails from Eveliina and Antti and found the same hashtag at the end of both messages. She leaned back and rubbed her temples. Memories from her university days flooded her mind, from back when that hashtag had been born.

Jonas had gotten a summer job at a prestigious consulting and auditing firm. At some point during his first project, he had realised it was fundamentally about international tax avoidance. The next day, he hadn't gone back to work. Instead, he had published what he knew on social media, tagged with that hashtag. It had since taken on a life of its own, a tag people used when refusing to do unethical work.

Now Tanya stared at the familiar hashtag, but it made no sense. There was nothing unethical about their projects. All three had been fully committed to the project.

Her thoughts drifted to Jonas again, and she wondered how he was doing. It had been years since they had last met.

Then she refocused on the resignations and decided to talk to them, to find out what was really behind all this.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and called Ville. After a short wait, a voice came from the phone:

"The person you are calling cannot be reached at the moment."

Tanya frowned and found Eveliina's number.

"The person you are calling cannot be reached at the moment."

She already suspected what the response to Antti's number would be, but she tried anyway.

"The person you are calling cannot be reached at the moment."

She was pondering which person in HR might be willing to dig up their next-of-kin information when Jacob walked into the open-plan office, giving her jeans and flannel shirt a meaningful look.

"What are you still doing here? You're not thinking of skipping the charity gala, are you?"

Tanya looked at her brother, who was smiling relaxedly in his bespoke suit. Once again, as happened so often lately when she saw him, the thought crossed her mind that their parents couldn't possibly have told them the whole truth about their biological relationship.

"I was just leaving, but another person from my team just resigned. The third one in two weeks."

Jacob glanced at his watch and replied, "Sort out new recruitments with HR tomorrow. Look at the time. Don't be late."

"Tomorrow? You haven't had much to do with the HR department, have you? I've been trying for over a week to get the recruitment process started for the last two who left, but they're busy organising the summer party or something. And you don't seem to understand what rare expertise we need. This is a real problem. Besides, there's something strange about these resignations. I can't reach any of them by phone, it's as if they've vanished from the face of the earth."

Before she had finished her last sentence, Jacob was already on his way.

Tanya locked her computer, stood up, and said to Eddie, "I have to go to that stupid charity gala now. Ville just resigned, and I don't think he'll be coming to say his goodbyes. Book some time in my calendar for tomorrow so we can figure out how to move forward."

"Ah, I thought you were cursing your evening plans. But Ville? Why?"

"Personal reasons, he didn't specify. But the message had the hashtag #whereisjonas, and his phone is unreachable. If you have time, try to get in touch with Ville, Antti, or Eveliina somehow. I'd like to talk to them. But we'll talk more tomorrow, I'm already running a bit late."

"Aye, that makes no sense at all," Eddie said. His eyes brightened as he continued, "How to find them, though? We'll have to check their social media accounts for clues. And relatives and friends... Maybe one of them left their Strava account open. You can see their bike rides on there."

Tanya laughed, cutting off Eddie's flood of speculation.

"Thanks. I knew I could count on you."

Tanya headed for the car park. The rest of the Fartum office was already quiet. Fartum consisted of two business units: power grids and nuclear lifecycle management. Those on the power grid side worked as people in a monopoly usually do, meaning hardly anyone stayed overtime. The nuclear side, however, had more of a start-up atmosphere, and problems were often mulled over late into the evening. The reason for the different vibe had been discussed in performance reviews and was clear enough. The employees felt strongly that they were doing meaningful work, and the group was made up of the sharpest minds in the field, who greatly valued each other's expertise.

But why these two business units were under the same roof was as much a mystery to Tanya as how Jacob had ended up a major shareholder in Fartum's privatisation. *Fartum.* She still couldn't believe it. The board had paid a Swiss consulting firm millions for the global rebrand, and they'd delivered a name that was a schoolyard joke in the planet's primary business language. Tanya often wondered if a single executive had bothered to type it into a search engine.

Tanya retrieved her bicycle from the car park and wheeled it outside. She was thankful that the exceptionally strong northeasterly winds of the past few days had eased. The air was nearly still as she started cycling from Keilaniemi toward her home in Leppävaara.

Just before the Turunväylä motorway, she stopped at a checkpoint to show her ID. The check was quick in this direction; it was usually slower in the mornings. After the checkpoint, it was easy to see the transition from the city of West Helsinki to Espoo. The bike paths were in poor condition, there was rubbish everywhere, and the green areas were untended. Right behind the checkpoint was – as almost always – a familiar, ever-changing group of down-and-outs. This time there were three men: an older, bearded man in an old tracksuit who was surely approaching retirement age; a gaunt, narrow-faced man in his thirties with his hoodie pulled down low; and a sturdy, buzz-cut man in his forties. As on so many evenings before, the oldest of the group came to greet Tanya.

"Good evening, young lady. A bit earlier than usual?"

"Well, I'm not so young anymore. A bit of work on the schedule for tonight."

The man's breath smelled of stale liquor.

"That's how it is these days, I suppose. Those who have work have too much of it, and then there's us, no good to anyone anymore. What keeps you on this side of the fence? Why don't you move over to the side of the better people, since you work there anyway?"

Tanya shrugged.

"I lived on this side of the border when West Helsinki was turned into its own gated city for the better class, and I like it just fine here. The glitz on the other side of the fence gets under your skin after a while."

The man chuckled hoarsely.

"I wouldn't mind a little glitz now and then. But they don't let people like us in there."

The narrow-faced man spoke up.

"I heard you can go to the Free City in Kainuu. Get a flat and food."

The buzz-cut man shot the narrow-faced man a sharp look and snapped, "I'm not going there to be with a bunch of shitskins and Muslims. Now that we finally got them fenced off in there so they can't ruin Finnish culture, they can stay there."

Tanya swung her leg over her bike and said, "Excuse me, I have to get going." As she pushed off, the older man followed her and asked, "Could you spare a coin for an old man, for supper?"

A few years ago, Tanya would have just said that with Finland's social security, no one needed to beg. But after the government's austerity measures, social security had been entirely shifted onto the municipalities. As a result, the social safety net in poorer areas had eroded so much that you could no longer count on it for a living. So Tanya had started giving money to those in need now and then.

"For supper, or for a little something to take the edge off?" she couldn't resist asking.

The man first looked down at the ground, a little ashamed, then glanced to see where the others were and said quietly, "I'm saving for a train ticket to the Free City. An old man like me doesn't want to spend another winter on the streets."

Tanya thought for a moment.

"Listen. If that's your plan, I'll buy you the ticket. Then you don't have to worry about your savings getting lost along the way."

The man looked at her.

"But... I don't want to leave yet. Not until autumn. This is my home, after all."

Tanya smiled.

"Well, you can find me here most days after work. Just let me know when you want to go."

The man looked at her, bewildered.

"Why are you so helpful? You don't have to be. Most people just turn up their noses and walk by."

Tanya laughed.

"Why? Selfish reasons. I'm not so stupid that I don't notice things are getting worse for more and more people. While I'm not scared yet, at some point someone's going to get the idea that you can get money by force from people coming from the better-off area. At that point, it would probably pay to have friends in circles that know what's happening in the area. Wouldn't you agree?"

Tanya winked and pulled a couple of coins from her pocket for the man.

"Buy bread instead of other malt products for your supper."

The man watched in silence as Tanya started pedaling toward Leppävaara. Her eyes caught a new piece of graffiti on the motorway's noise barrier. For some reason, she felt really irritated when she realised what it said:

#whereisjonas

Chapter 2

After a shower, Tanya went to her wardrobe and frowned at its contents. Her parents had bought her an evening gown for her school ball, and she had worn that same gown to everything from her doctoral defence to her friends' weddings, which suited her just fine. The dress would have to do tonight as well, but if she didn't get out of these pointless dog-and-pony shows soon, she would have to buy more suitable clothes. Once dressed, she grabbed a lipstick from the table for her handbag, ordered a taxi, and went outside to wait.

Soon, a dark blue Mercedes pulled up with its yellow light off, and before the driver could even crack open his door, Tanya was already in the back seat.

"The New Tower hotel in Jätkäsaari, please."

As the taxi queued at the checkpoint on the West Helsinki border, a traffic report interrupted the song by schlager crooner Jari Sillanpää playing on Radio Nova.

"On Motorway 1, traffic heading towards Helsinki has been stopped between the Saukkola junction and Lohja. A serious accident has occurred in the Karnaisti tunnel,

and both tunnels have been closed for the time being. Traffic is being diverted between the Lohja and Saukkola junctions. The police will hold a press conference at 8:00 PM."

"Whoa," the taxi driver wondered. "Wonder what happened there?" "Someone was probably texting and drove into the back of a truck. I'm sure it'll be on the evening news," Tanya guessed.

Jari Sillanpää came back on the air, and soon the taxi pulled up in front of the new tower hotel in Jätkäsaari. Tanya paid for the ride with the Fartum credit card she had received a month ago for just these kinds of events. The hotel doorman opened the taxi door, and Tanya stepped onto the red carpet.

"Good evening. I'm here for the charity gala organised by Fartum. Where might that be?" Tanya asked the doorman.

"In the seminar rooms on the top floor, the 58th. The lifts are on the right side of the lobby."

Tanya thanked him and walked, unsteadily in her high heels, toward the lifts. In the lift, she pressed the button for the 58th floor and mused that allowing tall tower blocks was one of the few sensible things the country's ruling parties had managed in recent years.

The lift doors opened to the lively chatter of the early evening, and a waiter poured Tanya a welcome glass from a black bottle of Lanson. The sharp bubbles fizzed in her mouth as she wrinkled her nose. As with all wines, the taste of spoiled berry juice overpowered any potential finer nuances. She'd never gotten over

it. Tanya scanned the room for familiar faces she could join, but most of the faces she recognised belonged to people whose company she didn't want. Later, however, it would be unavoidable. Jacob seemed to be having a slightly irritated conversation with Pia from HR, who was responsible for the event's arrangements, and Tanya had no intention of joining that discussion.

Her eyes fell on a board displaying the seating chart, and she moved closer to inspect it. The table company held no surprises. Besides Jacob, the management team was represented by Heidi, responsible for corporate social responsibility, and Simo, the head of the nuclear lifecycle management business unit, who was theoretically in charge of the thorium project. Simo had no technical background, however, so there was no one in management who understood a thing about the thorium project's technology. Since the project had recently been Fartum's main source of positive publicity, public events required someone who could discuss the topic. *That's* why Tanya was here – not because she was Jacob's sister or otherwise important in the organisation. In addition to Simo and Heidi, the table also included Frank and Wes, Jacob's closest friends since their university days. Tanya took a deep breath and braced herself for a long evening.

Since people had not yet moved to their tables, Tanya went out to the open balcony to admire the view. The tower was so tall that the lights of the Tallinn TV Tower were visible on the horizon. She was just considering how she might peer over the railing when Pia's voice

came over the loudspeakers from inside:

"Welcome, everyone, to the magnificent seminar facilities of the New Tower hotel. I would ask you all to move to your tables, as Fartum's CEO, Jacob Taggard, will be giving a short opening speech shortly. Thank you."

Tanya watched the movement of people for a moment and then started walking toward her table. Heidi and Simo had already arrived.

"Hi Tanya, so nice you could be here," Heidi began.

"To be honest, there are a couple of things at work at a stage where I'd much rather be sorting them out than be here."

Heidi smiled.

"If I recall correctly, you've said pretty much the same thing at every recent event. But surely you understand that it's important for our company to communicate outwardly that the thorium project is at the core of our operations and a significant means by which we carry our social responsibility."

Tanya thought for a moment about what to say. She despised the trend of continuously reducing companies' legal obligations to care for the environment and society, trusting instead that customers would demand corporate responsibility. The change had only led to companies figuring out how to create the illusion of social responsibility as cheaply as possible, without regard for their actual environmental and social impact.

Tanya let out a short laugh and said, "In my opinion, it would be more important to actually solve the

problems than to look like you're solving them. Perhaps that's precisely why I'm in R&D and not marketing. And if the thorium project is so important, maybe you could show it during the budgeting season as well."

Just then, Frank arrived. Frank had inherited a majority stake in Finland's largest media conglomerate, Sanomme Plc, and now served as its chairman and CEO. Wes, who had not yet arrived, had risen to the chairmanship of the National Coalition Party at a young age and was now serving his second term as Prime Minister. Tanya had significant disagreements with both of them on fundamental societal issues, and she couldn't understand why, despite this tension, Jacob so often seated them at the same table.

"It looks like Jacob is going to the stage before coming to the table, so I suppose we can sit down," Heidi said.

Frank had clearly had a couple of welcome drinks already, because he looked at Tanya with a mischievous glint in his eye and said, "Hey, Tanya, I read a wonderful little story a while ago and thought you might like to read it and comment."

Here we go, Tanya thought, and said, "Let's hear it."

Frank pulled out his phone, scrolled for a moment, and then handed it to Tanya. She saw a story on the screen that she had seen many times before:

Suppose that every day, ten men go out for beer and the bill for all ten comes to $100. If they paid their bill the way we pay our taxes, it would go something like this:

The first four men (the poorest) would pay nothing.
The fifth would pay $1.
The sixth would pay $3.
The seventh would pay $7.
The eighth would pay $12.
The ninth would pay $18.
The tenth man (the richest) would pay $59.

So, that's what they decided to do. The ten men drank in the bar every day and seemed quite happy with the arrangement, until one day, the owner threw them a curve. "Since you are all such good customers," he said, "I'm going to reduce the cost of your daily beer by $20." Drinks for the ten now cost just $80.

The group still wanted to pay their bill the way we pay our taxes so the first four men were unaffected. They would still drink for free. But what about the other six men—the paying customers? How could they divide the $20 windfall so that everyone would get his "fair share?"

They realized that $20 divided by six is $3.33. But if they subtracted that from everybody's share, then the fifth man and the sixth man would each end up being paid *to drink his beer. So, the bar owner suggested that it would be fair to reduce each man's bill by roughly the same amount, and he proceeded to work out the amounts each should pay.*

And so:

The fifth man, like the first four, now paid nothing (100% savings).
The sixth now paid $2 instead of $3 (33% savings).
The seventh now paid $5 instead of $7 (28% savings).

The eighth now paid $9 instead of $12 (25% savings). The ninth now paid $14 instead of $18 (22% savings). The tenth now paid $49 instead of $59 (16% savings).

Each of the six was better off than before. And the first four continued to drink for free. But once outside the restaurant, the men began to compare their savings.

"I only got a dollar out of the $20," declared the sixth man. He pointed to the tenth man, "but he got $10!"

"Yeah, that's right," exclaimed the fifth man. "I only saved a dollar, too. It's unfair that he got ten times more than I!"

"That's true!" shouted the seventh man. "Why should he get $10 back when I got only two? The wealthy get all the breaks!"

"Wait a minute," yelled the first four men in unison. "We didn't get anything at all. The system exploits the poor!"

The nine men surrounded the tenth and beat him up.

The next night the tenth man didn't show up for drinks, so the nine sat down and had beers without him. But when it came time to pay the bill, they discovered something important. They didn't have enough money between all of them for even half of the bill! [1]

"I've heard this story before," Tanya began.

Frank smiled mockingly and asked, "So what do you say to that?"

[1]This story has been circulating on the internet for a long time. The origin is unknown.

Tanya sighed. "I think the story was left unfinished. Why don't you tell me how it continues first, and then I'll give you my opinion. Where was the tenth man on that last night?"

Frank looked bewildered. "What do you mean, where was he? And what do you mean, how does it continue? That's where the story ended!"

Tanya shook her head and sighed.

"Alright, let me finish it then. The tenth man didn't show up because he was building a high fence and a security system around his residential area. You see, the tenth man wasn't a complete idiot – unlike some," Tanya muttered, "and he understood that the five poorest would soon be hungry. And since the tenth man couldn't be bothered to buy work, services, or products from the five poorest, they would soon come begging for food. Once they got tired of begging, they would try to take the food by force, so the tenth man decided to isolate himself and no longer dared to move outside his own residential area except with the doors of his armoured car locked."

"Is that the kind of society you want?" Tanya asked in conclusion. "Or, well, of course you do. What else was the fencing of West Helsinki?"

Frank leaned toward Tanya, his voice rising in frustration. "No, no. The point of that story was just to illustrate the moral questions of taxation. And West Helsinki wasn't fenced off because we didn't want to bear social responsibility, but based on hard statistical facts. An overwhelming majority of the crimes in West

Helsinki were committed by people from out of town."

"Statistical facts? Don't give me that crap. The statistical fact is that crime in the West Helsinki area was at an all-time low when your newspaper started fishing for clicks by blowing every petty theft into a major crime story and engineering a social media campaign that labeled outsiders as bad and untrustworthy people. *That's* what made people afraid of crime, nothing else. And as for the moral questions of taxation, be that as it may. My continuation of the story tells what will happen regardless of the morality of taxation. Now answer my simple question: is that the society you want to move towards, or are you so stupid you don't understand that your current actions are leading directly to it?"

Frank's voice rose even higher.

"It's about the fact that if I create prosperity and jobs, no one has the right to come and steal the fruits of my labour, neither through taxation nor with a crowbar."

"*You* create jobs and prosperity, all by yourself?"

"Who else? It's my company, so I decide how many people to hire. Don't I create the jobs then?"

"I'd remind you that you inherited the majority of your wealth without lifting a finger. In the ten years you've been running Sanomme, its stock price has lagged behind the index, so the value you've created is negative. Do you understand that you wouldn't even know how to tie your own shoelaces if someone hadn't taught you? If it's *you* who creates all this prosperity, I have an exercise for you. Move into the forest wearing only your

underwear and start creating that prosperity *without* using the help of other people. Don't use food or roads made by others, dig the ore out of the ground yourself and make your own tools, and then we'll see how much prosperity *you* create."

"Since you're acting so clever, missy, why don't you tell us how they should have handled it in that restaurant story?"

Tanya sighed.

"Have you stopped beating your wife yet?"

"I haven't. I never started beating my wife, so I couldn't have stopped. Even if a question is poorly framed, you can usually still answer it. How, in your opinion, should the restaurant dinner have been divided after the discount? It's a perfectly understandable and justified question, isn't it?"

Tanya sighed again.

"Alright. In the dinner party you described, it's of course completely unreasonable to start a brawl if you don't get a discount when you'd previously gotten your food for free. However, the story of the dinner party doesn't describe society in any relevant way. Society is a community where people primarily produce well-being for each other by buying and selling various services and goods, not by distributing unsolicited alms from one to another. But I doubt I'll convince you of this, so I'll ask instead: if the restaurant had raised its prices, who do you think should have paid the increase? If there was some sort of agreement that the wealthier pay a larger share, wouldn't the increase then have fallen to

the rich?"

Wes Moulton arrived before Frank could come up with a witty reply. The bags under Wes's eyes told of sleepless nights, but his face wore a relieved expression.

"It was a bit tight, but we managed to hammer out a new trade agreement with the Kainuu Free City. A press release will probably come out over the weekend, and the agreement will be officially signed on Monday."

"Excellent," Frank enthused. "So are those communist hippies finally agreeing to respect copyrights and patents?"

"Yes. The Free City has promised to respect all European intellectual property rights, as long as they are not directly illegal in the Free City, and we couldn't think of any examples of an IP right that would in itself violate the laws of the Free City. They wouldn't agree to sign the Berne Convention, of course, but it's something that they at least recognise IP rights now."

The conversation was interrupted as Jacob walked to the stage and took the microphone.

"Welcome, on my behalf as well, to this charity event hosted by Fartum. I am Jacob Taggard, CEO of Fartum."

"As you all surely know, the proceeds from this event will be used to support two organisations doing important work. End Drugs Now does valuable educational and advocacy work to reduce drug use. The Support for High Culture Association, in turn, is active in many areas of culture, but its most significant role is managing the operations of the Googenhime Museum, which

opened last year. I have the great honour and pleasure of serving on the boards of both organisations. Representatives from the associations will tell you more about their work later this evening, so I won't go into more detail on that now."

"Instead, I would first like to draw your attention to the factors that have truly made this event possible. We have with us tonight a representative of our country's government, Prime Minister Wes Moulton, who has promised to say a few words later."

"But briefly: four years ago, our country made a clear step forward in corporate taxation when we adopted the so-called Estonian model, where a company's profit is only taxed when it is paid out. What wasn't properly considered in that reform was that when paying out company profits to shareholders began to be punished by taxation, company owners started leaving profits in the companies in increasing amounts. The average dividend payment of Finnish companies has thus decreased significantly."

"Returning to this evening's theme: charity is not, as such, part of a company's duties any more than what social responsibility issues and public relations require. It is up to the shareholders whether they put their money into charity and how much. The main funders of many important charities are people whose primary wealth is in companies. This tax change caused a decrease in these people's free cash flow, which in turn significantly reduced the income of charitable organisations. For example, both of the organisations targeted this evening

were at one point forced to lay off staff."

"A few years ago, the government began to experimentally promote voluntary, anonymous tax payment, which has turned out to be a surprising success. The revenues from this anonymous tax system have, in part, made it possible to correct that flaw in the tax code last year. Now, company profits are no longer taxed at all."

The audience burst into spontaneous applause.

"Yes, the tax exemption for corporate profits will of course lead to positive economic growth. For this event, however, it is more significant that it also leads, indirectly, to an improvement in the finances of charitable organisations. Fartum has changed its dividend policy and will tomorrow pay out its first dividends in four years. Hopefully, both this event and the dividend payment will become a recurring tradition."

"One final thing: we had to change the programme at the last minute. The original surprise performer got stuck in a tunnel on the motorway between Turku and Helsinki a short while ago due to an accident and is unable to make it. However, our booking agency found a replacement performer on an incredibly tight schedule. As this performer has another show tonight, we will have to have this surprise performance now as a warm-up act instead of at the end of the evening. Stand-up comedian Ville-Veikko Virtanen, please take the stage!"

As the audience applauded, Jacob arrived at the table and huffed. "This didn't go exactly to plan. Stand-up would have been perfect for the end of the night, but it's a bit corny to start with. Still, it's incredible

they found a replacement on this schedule. The accident happened less than two hours ago."

A man in a flawlessly fitting dinner jacket, with a bushy moustache, thick dark hair, and heavy-framed glasses walked onto the stage. In his hand, he carried a small black bag, which he placed next to the microphone stand.

"Greetings, everyone. Ville-Veikko was the one who was supposed to come, but he's now trapped in a tunnel. My apologies for the programme changes caused by the accident. But let's get to it. I have many names. But for tonight, let's just say... Galt.

John Galt."

Frank started coughing and spat champagne all over the table. Jacob, Wes, and Frank exchanged glances. Tanya's lips twitched slightly. In her opinion, Jacob, Frank, and Wes had taken Ayn Rand's literature and ideas a little too seriously since their university days.

John Galt glanced at Frank and continued, "Well, this is a promising start for the show. The audience is choking with laughter before I've even gotten to the first joke."

Galt took the microphone from the stand and took a few steps, pressing his fingers to his forehead.

"In stand-up, the audience affects what kind of jokes you have to be careful with. For example, in Germany a while back, it wasn't a good idea to joke about which would be finished first, the Berlin airport or the Sagrada Familia."

The whole room burst into laughter. Jacob nodded

in approval. Tanya remembered several occasions when Jacob and Frank had cited the Berlin airport as one of the strongest pieces of evidence that government should not get involved in such construction projects.

"And if a certain president of the United States happens to be in the audience, joking about his small hands will lead to trouble."

The audience laughed again, and Galt looked up, scratching his temple with a furrowed brow.

"But now I just can't remember. What on earth was it you're not supposed to say when the audience consists of wealthy people who consider themselves better than others, whose wealth comes mainly from inheritances or otherwise questionable dealings?"

An awkward silence fell over the room. Tanya tried to hide a smile as she looked at the bewildered expressions around her.

Galt turned his gaze back to the audience and chuckled.

"Oh, right. That was it. You're not supposed to remind the audience that they are wealthy people who consider themselves better than others, whose wealth comes from inheritances or otherwise dubious dealings. For some reason, that doesn't seem to amuse the audience at all."

"But let's continue. The first theme of the evening was supporting high culture. That was fitting, in a way. I, too, have been thinking a lot about high culture lately – not least because I produce some of it myself..."

The audience seemed to relax a bit, and a faint laughter returned to the room.

"Normal economic exchange works like this: I offer the event organiser a performance, and the event organiser offers me money for it. If I value that sum of money more than the time I spend on the performance, and the organiser values my performance more than that sum of money, I come and perform, both are happy, and value has been created through a completely voluntary exchange."

"If, instead, the state comes in with its machinery of violence and messes things up, for example by saying that my performance must be paid more than the organiser wants to pay, then either the performance doesn't happen, or we're back in the good old Soviet Union, where the state forces the organiser to buy performances it doesn't want. And that doesn't sound very good."

Tanya watched heads nodding in approval around the room.

"He's actually making sense," Jacob whispered.

John walked a few more steps before continuing.

"But real high culture, the culture of the better people, doesn't seem to work according to the rules of free exchange at all. Let's start with the fact that in a normal exchange, the payer and the consumer are the ones who define quality. That is, the organiser of this event is the one who valued my performance highly enough to buy it. But in high culture, it's the opposite. A certain small group, mainly a bunch of high culture producers, has defined itself as the expert on what constitutes good high culture. It's as if *I*

were to say that *I* am the one who assesses the quality of my performance, not the event organiser. And if someone outside that small group, a consumer or payer of high culture, comes and says, 'Hey, even the state budget has better art, I'm not paying for that,' how is that met? Does the producer of high culture try to improve the quality of their product so that the paying customer is more satisfied? Oh no. This group of high culture experts looks down their noses at the payer and concludes that the payer or consumer just doesn't *understand* this art."

"And that's not all. Who actually pays for this high culture? In recent years, tax-funded education, healthcare, and most of social security have been dismantled. State support for culture, on the other hand, has been increased. But instead of using that support to produce art that people want to see, they make art that the payer – not my dear audience, I might point out, as there are very few taxpayers in this room – considers utter rubbish. Of course, in addition to the taxpayers, there is also a group of people who want to specifically demonstrate their own superiority and betterness by buying their way into the inner circle of high culture producers through patronage – as long as the taxpayers foot most of the bill. This is what happened with the Googenhime Museum, for example."

An awkward silence had once again fallen over the room.

"Strange. My first main joke of the evening didn't get a laugh, even though I thought it was perversely

funny. Let's move on to drugs, that was the other topic of the evening. And taxes – there was talk of those too, when I hinted that there don't seem to be many taxpayers in this room. As you sip your black Lanson, have you ever considered that when you, the pillars of society, can't stand your own minds sober and try to get high on fancy champagne, you have to pay outrageous alcohol taxes, while the pot-smoking hippies get high tax-free?"

John paused for a moment.

"Well, you have thought about it, because soon a law will be passed in parliament that exempts more expensive alcoholic beverages from the alcohol tax."

Tanya noticed that some people had started shaking their heads and whispering among themselves. Jacob looked at least annoyed, and soon he beckoned the security guard standing by the door to come over.

John glanced at the approaching guard and quickly continued, "Indeed, the alcohol tax is one of the last taxes paid in this room. The value-added tax was also changed last year so that the VAT on the private consumption of a company's major owners' families can be deducted from the company's VAT."

"And then there's this charity thing in general, there's something strange about it too. When I buy a cinema ticket to entertain myself, it's just me spending my own, multiply-taxed money and paying all sorts of value-added taxes. But when you, the slightly better people, donate money to charity to get a different kind of entertainment, it's not enough that the service providers get

to produce their services tax-free. It's not enough that the money spent on these entertainments can be deducted as expenses from the last few pennies you would have had to pay in taxes. On top of all that, you still expect us ordinary mortals to admire your benevolent altruism. I just don't get it."

The guard reached Jacob's side. Jacob snapped, "I don't know what this is about, but it needs to be stopped. And I want to talk to that idiot. Escort that clown to the side room, by force if necessary."

The guard nodded and started walking toward the stage. Jacob apologised, got up from the table, and headed for the door at the side of the room.

John continued, "But do you know what's funniest about this anti-drug charity? Do you know who mainly funds it? 30% of the organisation's income is easy to find out, as my dear audience has made sure that we know about their noble donations. But what about the rest? 70% of End Drugs Now's income comes from anonymous donations. Isn't it an interesting question where they came from?"

John paused briefly and glanced at the approaching guard.

"Of the anonymous donations, 96% come from our country's three major drug leagues. For them, the legalisation of drugs would be devastating. End Drugs Now is one of the most significant lobbying groups opposing the legalisation of drugs."

A gasp went through the room.

John picked up his bag and started to walk off the

stage.

"It seems I'm not a very welcome performer, so it's probably time for me to leave. But don't worry. In about half an hour, the media will receive a package detailing the sources of End Drugs Now's funding. Investigative journalism at its finest."

"Oh, and by the way," he added, "the fires in the motorway tunnel are probably being put out, so Ville-Veikko might still make it for the end of the night. So I wish you a very pleasant rest of the evening. Thank you to the audience, and as I said at the beginning, I suppose this was a kind of high culture too – the creator of the performance appreciated it more than the viewers."

The guard quickened his pace.

Straps had appeared from John's bag, which he was fastening around his legs as he walked. At the same time, Tanya realised what the bag was, and why John was not walking toward the exit and the guards but toward the balcony. She glanced around, but it seemed no one else had realised what was happening.

John nimbly climbed onto the balcony railing, saluted with a flick of his hand, and shouted, "Enjoy the rest of your life!"

Tanya couldn't believe her eyes. She would recognise that salute anywhere, anytime. Then John turned outward on the railing and jumped.

Chapter 3

No one else was there yet when Jacob arrived at work in the morning. He had slept poorly and was up even earlier than usual. He closed his office door behind him and switched on the "occupied" light outside. After the previous evening's catastrophe, he didn't want to see anyone, not before the management team meeting at eight.

Jacob drank his morning coffee and scanned the main headlines across various media outlets. The tabloid headlines sent shivers of disgust down his spine. Why were drug criminals funding his anti-drug work? And *why* on earth would someone go to so much trouble to publicise it in this way? The stand-up comedian's booking agency had never heard of the substitute performer. A car had been waiting in the car park for the BASE jumper, but unfortunately, it had disappeared before anyone could do anything.

And, of course, someone had secretly filmed the whole spectacle and already uploaded it to YouTube. Jacob simply couldn't bring himself to open that link.

Instead, he opened his email client and started writing a message:

```
"To:  Fartum-all"
"Subject:  Commenting on yesterday's events
to the media"
"Body:"
"Greetings everyone,
Last night's event did not go quite as
planned.  The media may show interest in the
subject.  All inquiries should be directed to
Communications Director Riikka Mäkinen, who
is responsible for all related
communications.
Best regards,
Jacob Taggard, CEO"
```

Next, he took his online banking credentials out of his wallet to check that the dividends had arrived. This was the payday for many years of work, and Jacob hadn't wanted to count his chickens before he had seen the money land in his account with his own eyes.

"Strange," Jacob muttered. Previously, dividends had shown up in the account first thing in the morning. Perhaps this larger sum is somehow slower, he thought, and decided to check later to make sure everything had gone as it should. Next, Jacob familiarised himself with the material for the board meeting. This time, the list of items to be discussed was short.

There was a knock, and the door opened. Even before Jacob looked up from his papers, he recognised his secretary's expensive perfume. He looked at Saara and found it hard to tear his eyes away from the open neckline of her red dress and the long legs revealed beneath its hem. A slight irritation born of unattainability surfaced as Jacob recalled trying to get a little closer to Saara at the Christmas party, but she had pointedly tapped her wedding ring.

"Just thought I'd remind you that the board meeting starts in ten minutes."

"Thank you. I'll be right there as soon as I've glanced through this last paper."

Saara closed the door behind her, and soon Jacob shut the lid of his MacBook, gathered his papers, and headed for the conference room. His iPhone began to ring in his pocket. The screen displayed the name of the bank that managed his Asian investments: Morgan Sachs Private Banking Singapore.

"They're quick to circle the carcass," Jacob thought, rejected the call, silenced his phone, and continued toward the conference room. No one dared to even wish him a good morning, for which he was grateful.

The management team gradually arrived, and at one minute to nine, the last person closed the door.

Jacob cleared his throat and began, "This isn't on the agenda, but yesterday's charity gala didn't go exactly to plan. Riikka, I assume, as we discussed yesterday, that your team will have a press release ready for my approval before noon?"

"Yes, we started working on it last night. The finalised version should be in my email any moment. I'll review it and send it to you for approval as soon as possible."

"Good. Let's move on to the actual agenda, the report from yesterday's board meeting. The board essentially only discussed the company's capital structure and dividend policy. Everyone was pleased with the direction of the capital structure's development. In the winter, the board decided to change the company's capital structure from being nearly debt-free to a more efficient one in terms of equity, aiming to keep the net gearing ratio between 40 and 50 percent. The general meeting also approved this when this year's dividend payment was decided, and the net gearing ratio was raised to nearly 40 percent. So, everything has gone according to the board's decisions. The only minor issue requiring additional work arose when a new board member, elected at the annual meeting, took issue with the fact that the bonds were primarily issued in Kainuu Free City Thalers. He asked why this was done and how the associated currency risk was hedged."

"Before I could answer, the other board members explained the main reasons. I still don't understand how it's possible for us to issue bonds in Thalers with a negative interest rate, but for some reason, we can. I mean, really, cheaper than free loans. We're being paid to take out loans. We discussed currency forwards at the time, but hedging that negligible risk would have eliminated most of the benefit, so we decided against

it."

"In any case, the board decided that a separate paper on the currency and interest rate risk policy for debt financing should be prepared for approval at the next board meeting. Vesa, as CFO, I believe this falls to you?"

"Yes. Should I draft the first version based on this, or is there anything else to add?" Vesa replied.

"I don't think there's anything else, as long as the current situation is officially approved. Does anyone have anything else to add on this?"

No one said anything, as Jacob had expected. The members of the management team were all top professionals in their own fields, but apart from Vesa, there were usually no comments on finance-related matters.

"Good. Let's keep this short so we can get back to cleaning up yesterday's mess. Riikka, come to my office with that press release as soon as you can. I just have one call to make, and then I'm free."

Riikka glanced at her phone and replied, "Right. The final draft is already in my email. I'll look it over and come then."

Jacob returned to his office and checked his bank account again. The dividends were still not there. He called his private banker at Syrdea, where he kept his shares. Jyrki Öhman answered the phone quickly.

"How's it going?" Öhman asked. "You must be feeling good, seeing the fruits of your labour showing up in your account?"

"Well, that's actually why I'm calling. The money

is *not* showing up in my account. Can you check the status?"

"Whoa," Öhman said. "Strange. I'll look into it and get back to you."

***

After lunch, Jacob's phone rang.

"Hello," he answered.

"Jyrki from Syrdea here."

"What's the story with those dividends?"

"From our end, everything seems to have gone as it should. And even though it's a rather large international payment to Singapore, it should definitely be in your account today."

Jacob jolted.

"Singapore? What the hell, Singapore?"

"Well, to Singapore, where your dividends were paid. I can pull up the account number from the system if you like."

"Do it," Jacob snapped. "Do it now."

"It'll take a minute or two for me to get into the system. Will you hold, or should I call you back when I have the information?"

Jacob waited, and a moment later, Jyrki continued, "Here's the number. SWIFT MOSASGSG. Account number 234 234 4322."

Jacob sighed in relief.

"Yes, yes, I think that's my account. I just don't understand why that account is in your records. Thanks so much for your help."

"So, dividends haven't been paid to this Singapore account before?"

"It's been many years since Fartum last paid dividends, but I'm pretty sure they haven't gone to Singapore before."

"I'll check when and why that information was entered, but it'll take a while. I can't promise anything today."

"Check it, and let me know as soon as you find something."

Jacob shook his head, walked to the small safe in his closet, and took out his Morgan Sachs online banking credentials.

He keyed the codes into the Morgan Sachs website. The account information seemed to take an eternity to load. When the page finally loaded, a faint smile appeared on Jacob's lips. The screen showed the number 350,754,287.16 EUR. A fraction of a second later, his brain registered a second line with the exact same number, but with a minus sign in front of it. The lingering smile vanished from his face.

A word from the author

This free edition of *Atlas Kicks the Ball* is complete. The only difference from the paid edition is these additional nag pages, which appear a few times along the way.

You may share the book freely for non-commercial purposes (CC BY-NC 4.0). You can also build the book yourself, in any format, from the source at **git.brainpaingames.com/tommy/atlas-public**.

If you'd like to support me, you can buy the PDF and EPUB editions without these nag pages at **store.brainpaingames.com**.

Thank you. The story continues on the next page.

Chapter 4

Tanya sat alone in the conference room, absent-mindedly turning her phone over and over in her hand. It was perfectly clear that last night's "John Galt" was Jonas. She had seen that salute too many times in a jump plane for there to be any possibility of a mistake. Tanya and Jonas's paths had diverged when Jonas began to focus more on his hobbies than on his industrial engineering studies, and Tanya, in turn, began to focus more on her postgraduate studies than on her hobbies.

A small smile formed on Tanya's lips as she recalled the times Jonas had pontificated about some societal injustice or the absurdity of an economic theory. His sermons had gone in one ear and out the other for her and most of their friends. However, the societal developments of recent years had made her think more about such issues, and she realised she missed those discussions and a conversational partner who wasn't ensnared by Ayn Rand-style market fundamentalism.

She decided not to reveal yet that she had seen Jonas's performance. He clearly didn't want to be recog-

nised, so the conversation would be safer if she didn't bring it up.

Jonas's number was still in her phone, though it had been a while since they had last been in touch. The phone barely rang a few times before a familiar voice answered:

"Jonas."

"Tanya Taggard here, it's been a while."

A brief silence.

"Well, hello! It has been a while. How are you these days?"

"Good, thanks, though it's been pretty much all work and no play lately. But where in the world are you, and are you still in the skydiving scene? I've been thinking I need to get more active in my free time to counterbalance work. And I figured you probably haven't quit jumping."

Jonas laughed.

"Of course I haven't quit jumping, though I've been busy with other things. I just got here to the Kainuu Free City this morning. Spring is far enough along that we can start the jumping season here. What employer has managed to captivate you so much that you've had to sacrifice your free time for it?"

"I'm at Fartum. We're trying to develop a modular thorium reactor for electricity and heat production. In the last couple of years, we've made such breakthroughs that there's finally light at the end of the tunnel. The first prototype should be ready this year."

There was another moment of silence on the other

end of the line. Tanya had dreaded the question about her employer beforehand but had decided to be honest. Lying would only cause problems later.

"A modular thorium reactor?"

"Yes. It could solve some pretty big problems. It consumes high-level nuclear waste as fuel and produces clean electricity and heat."

"I've heard of thorium reactors, I just didn't realise you were designing them. Right, you did study nuclear physics. Interesting. But let's get back to your free time problem. Today is Friday, so by all rights, you should be able to take a couple of days off. Take the evening train and come here, the weather forecast for the weekend is good for jumping."

"To Kainuu? I don't think I have anything on for the weekend, but I'll check. Is it okay if I ask a colleague to come along? He's also done some jumping."

"There's room. I'll arrange accommodation."

"Okay. When does the train leave? Can't you fly there?"

"The train leaves at nine in the evening and arrives here at eight in the morning. Flying is a bit tricky because the airports here no longer comply with Western security regulations. In plain English, you can bring your own water bottle on the plane. So flight connections are practically limited to between the free cities and some less developed countries."

Tanya laughed.

"Right. I'll get back to you soon."

Eddie was muttering to himself by the copy machine

when Tanya came out of the conference room. Noticing her, Eddie huffed, "They've brought in a new copy machine. And this piece of junk won't do double-sided copies."

Tanya couldn't hold back her laughter.

"Oh dear. So all that effort you put into setting up your own shortcut on the old machine went to waste?"

"You can laugh. Half the office used my shortcut. I guess I'll have to give up and find the user manual. What is it with these things? The device is called a copy machine, and it has *one* primary function: to make a copy of a stack of paper. Yet it has more buttons and settings than my computer! If Steve Jobs had focused on office equipment and home appliances instead of computers, we'd probably have a copy machine with a single button that would copy just fine but do nothing else. Instead, we have a culture where people refuse to learn how to use a computer, even though it's their primary work tool. They click away with the mouse at a snail's pace, and Ctrl-C, Ctrl-V is some scary nerd stuff. It's like a taxi driver who thinks using the reverse gear is too complicated to learn. Or, in Apple's case, like a taxi driver whose car manufacturer has decided that drivers don't need to reverse, so they've made reversing impossible. And the taxi driver boasts about how easy his car is to use."

Tanya waited for Eddie to finish his rant.

"Did you find any clues about Antti, Eveliina, or Ville?"

Eddie nodded.

"I tried calling them last night. It was just as you said, all their phones were off the network. Since Eveliina and Antti are a couple and Ville is single, I didn't even try looking for spouses. Then I thought that Ville's last name, Hairto, isn't very common. He's from Pori, so I called directory enquiries. I found one person with that last name, Aune Hairto. She answered the phone and seemed like a rather chatty elderly widow. And yes, she is Ville's mother. Ville had left her a message to pass on to anyone who asked. Aune read it to me over the phone, and I wrote it down."

Eddie took a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Tanya.

```
Hi.  I'm fine, but I'll be unreachable for a
while, as planned.  Leave your contact details
with Aune, and I'll get in touch when I'm back.
Apologies for any inconvenience.  Ville.
```

Tanya frowned.

"Not much content there. Though that's pretty typical for Ville, his emails were never much for literature either. Did you try to get more information from his mother?"

"Of course. Ville hadn't told her much more than that when he dropped by yesterday. According to Aune, Ville suspected he would be gone for a few months. To be honest, Aune seemed a bit worried herself."

"Well, that's odd, to say the least. I don't understand how they expect to find work with this kind of behavior. Interesting jobs in this field don't exactly grow on trees."

Eddie smirked and replied, "Neither do the people

who can do them, it seems."

"That's also true. We'll discuss it more with HR this afternoon. I assume you left a message with Aune for Ville?"

"Of course. I left both your and my contact details."

"Good. Now for something completely different. It's been a long time since I've been skydiving, and I just happened to be talking to an old skydiving buddy, Jonas. He mentioned that the jumping season is starting in Kainuu this weekend. Interested in coming along?"

"To Kainuu? Why there specifically? Isn't it still winter there?"

Tanya shrugged.

"Apparently, spring is far enough along. Accommodation and everything is arranged if we hop on a train tonight. We can come straight to work from the train station on Monday morning. Frankly, I could use a bit of a break, the last few months have been pretty hectic. And I've never been to a free city, so maybe it's time to see one."

Eddie thought for a moment.

"I've been reading an article that said life in the free cities has changed quite a bit from the original refugee camps. Let's do it, it'll be a new experience for me too."

"Okay. You're bringing your own rig, right?"

Eddie nodded.

Tanya wrote a text message to Jonas:

"Hey, Eddie and I are hopping on the train to check out the scene up north. Eddie has his own rig, I'll need to borrow one from the club. See you in the morning."

Chapter 5

Jacob stared at the screen, frozen. Someone had made an instant transfer of over 350 million euros from his account on the same day. The recipient was listed as an unknown company, Blue Sky Investments LTD. Jacob's paralysis soon broke, and he sprang into action. First, he needed to call Singapore, find out what this was about, and cancel the transfer. A transfer that large couldn't happen in the blink of an eye.

Jacob found the number for Morgan Sachs Singapore on his phone and called.

"Welcome to the Morgan Sachs Singapore phone service."

"For service in Malay, press one."

"For service in Chinese, press two."

"For service in English, press three."

Jacob pressed three.

"Our calls are recorded for quality monitoring and improvement."

"For inquiries about starting a new account, press one."

Jacob started to get angry. Mostly because he understood all too well what game was being played. He himself had instructed that customer service was a cost centre whose main task was to keep customers as far away from expensive service agents as possible by forcing them to talk to a paid automated answering service for as long as possible.

"For insurance matters, press two."

"For account matters, press three."

Jacob pressed three.

"Our office hours are from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays. Thank you for your call. *Beep. Beep.*"

Jacob looked at his phone, realised the time difference between Finland and Singapore, and threw his phone in the bin.

Then he remembered he had once received a business card from his client manager at Morgan Sachs Private Banking. Jacob dug it out, and yes, it had a mobile number. The mistreated phone seemed to still be working.

"Jack."

"Hi, Jacob Taggard from Finland."

"Good afternoon. How are you?"

"Sorry, but there's no time for small talk. 350 million euros have been transferred from my account to some company I've never heard of. I need to find out what happened, and quickly."

A long silence.

"Hello?"

"Could you repeat that? I'm not sure I understood correctly."

"Someone transferred 350 million from my account today, and I'd like to know what the fuck is going on."

Jack was silent for a moment.

"Are you talking about the 350 million transfer that you absolutely insisted be made as an instant transfer today?"

"Me? I never insisted on such a transfer."

Silence.

"Are you serious?"

Jacob was now shouting directly into the phone.

"As fucking serious as I can be."

"I'm sorry, I'm going back to the office, I can't continue this conversation on my mobile. I'll also call my supervisor. But I can tell you that someone used your banking credentials and your email to confirm that transfer and specifically demanded swift action. I tried to call you during the day to personally verify such a large transfer, but you hung up on me."

Jacob fell silent.

"*My* online banking credentials and *my* email?"

"Yes. I'll call you back shortly."

The call ended, and Jacob began to think furiously. The only thing he could come up with was that someone had somehow managed to hack his computer. He looked up Hannu's number on his phone. Jacob knew Hannu from the golf club. Hannu had founded the successful cybersecurity company G-Secure and was still its CEO.

"Hi Jacob. What's on your mind?"

"Are you somewhere you can speak confidentially?"

"I just left Ruoholahti by car for a round of golf at Sarfvik, so feel free to talk."

"Someone has apparently first changed the payment account for Fartum's dividends from my regular bank to one in Singapore, and immediately after the dividends arrived, transferred them onward. The bank in Singapore claims that my email and banking credentials confirmed the transfer. The way I see it, that's only possible if someone has hijacked my computer."

"Fartum's dividends? Weren't they quite large this year?"

"You could say that. 350 million. *My money.* Did I mention this is confidential?"

Hannu whistled softly.

"It's probably best if we examine your computer and phone. Turn off your computer, unplug all cables, and remove the battery immediately if it's removable. Also, turn off your phone and have your secretary get the dumbest possible phone from your IT department and transfer your SIM card to it. Then come to the main entrance with those devices. I'm skipping my round and will be at your main entrance in five minutes."

Jacob pressed a button. Saara opened the door almost immediately and looked at Jacob questioningly.

"I've got a bit of a situation here and no time to explain. Can you get a basic mobile phone from the IT department? Not a smartphone. It can be old, but I need it now."

Saara nodded, turned, and closed the door behind

her. She returned with a phone before Jacob had even managed to shut down his computer.

"My backup phone was charging on the shelf. Will this do?"

"Excellent. It will. Could you also transfer my SIM card to it?"

"Of course."

Saara took the phones and moved the SIM card to an old Nokia. Jacob put the computer and phone in a bag and went to the front door. At the same time, Hannu's dark blue BMW M5 pulled up. Jacob got into the front seat.

"Hi. No need for a phone store. I got an old faithful Nokia 3110 from Saara. Physical buttons and all."

Hannu grinned.

"It's unlikely to have been connected to your networks by anything other than the power cord, so it should be clean enough for now. Let's drive to our office. On my way here, I got a couple of our sharpest people on the line, and they promised to drop everything for a while."

Just then, the old Nokia started playing its classic ringtone. The screen showed an unfamiliar international number.

"Hello, this is Jonathan Smith from the legal department of Morgan Sachs Singapore. I understand that you believe unauthorised transfers have been made from your bank account. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Can you cancel the transfer?"

"I cannot comment on that. Before we can continue

our discussion, I need to verify your identity. Normally, this would be done with our banking credentials, but under these circumstances, we cannot rely on that. I will arrange for a conference room with a secure connection at our Helsinki office, where our staff can verify your identity. This should be possible within the next few hours. I will be your point of contact from our side going forward. How would you like to be notified when the conference room is ready?"

"Call me. I will try to get there immediately."

Jacob took Jack's phone number out of his pocket and called him.

"The number you have dialled is not currently reachable."

"What on earth does this mean," Jacob mused aloud, and continued, "My client manager has disappeared, and the bank's legal department has announced that they've taken over the case. With any luck, the legal department is cancelling the transfers right now. With bad luck, they've started gearing up for a fight."

"I don't know much about banking, but surely the legal department has nothing to do with money transfers?"

"It's probably best to bring my own lawyer into this mess. How much longer until we get there?"

"A few more minutes."

Jacob pulled out his phone only to realise it had no numbers saved. He dialled Directory Enquiries.

"Directory Enquiries, how can I help?"

"The law firm Rödby-Hammaren, attorney Niklas

Levander. Could you connect me and send the number as a text message, please."

"One moment. Found it. Thank you for calling."

Niklas answered the phone quickly.

"Hi, Nikke, I've got a bit of a situation right now, but clear your calendar and head over to the G-Secure office. I'll explain more when you arrive."

"Today's a bit difficult..."

"Not this difficult. Figure something out and get here immediately, or our partnership ends with this call."

"Hmm, alright. Maybe I can arrange it. I'll get back to you."

"The G-Secure office. Ask for Hannu Vaittinen at the door. Half an hour."

The BMW stopped on the pavement in front of G-Secure's main entrance. Hannu and Jacob walked in, and Hannu asked the receptionist to park the car somewhere better.

They stepped into the lift. Hannu swiped the fingerprint reader and pressed the button for the lowest basement floor.

The lift stopped, and the doors opened into a room where a man in a well-fitting suit and a woman in a neat trouser suit were waiting.

"Jacob, this is Nina and Matti. Nina and Matti, this is Jacob Taggard, who we need to help out a bit."

They shook hands, and Hannu continued, "Where's Toni?"

"Toni was at his desk this morning. He didn't go to lunch with us, so I tried calling him when you asked us to come down here, but he didn't answer his phone," Nina replied.

"His phone is probably on silent again and his mind is somewhere deep. Can you go get him?" Hannu asked.

Nina nodded and headed for the lift.

"Who's Toni?" Jacob asked.

"Toni and I originally founded this company together. I brought the initial capital, and Toni brought world-class cybersecurity expertise. I don't think I'm exaggerating if I say he's one of the sharpest security analysts in the world."

Matti interrupted. "A uniquely infuriating guy, in a positive way. After you've been banging your head against a wall with some problem for days and finally decide to ask Toni for help, he first asks for a written description of the problem and then a moment to think about it. And then, ten minutes after you've sent the email, Toni shows up at your desk for a casual chat with a cup of coffee and nonchalantly gives you the solution, which is usually at once very simple, obvious in hindsight, and completely outside the box. It's enough to make you tear your hair out."

Hannu nodded and continued, "The other side of the coin is that he has... let's say a bit of an attitude problem. If something doesn't interest him, then it doesn't interest him and it doesn't happen. And there are quite a few of those uninteresting things, especially from a management perspective, like respecting clients

and supervisors and adhering to the dress code. Guess how thrilled I was years ago when we were helping Microsoft. We had a meeting in Seattle with Microsoft's top management, and Toni walked in a bit late, wearing a T-shirt that said 'No Windows. No Problems' around a big Linux penguin. In general, things related to running the company and selling our services are a bit secondary to him, but fortunately, we agreed early on, in good understanding, that Toni would only do technical security analysis and the rest would be left to me."

Nina returned, shaking her head.

"Toni wasn't at his desk. Instead, he had left this note on his keyboard." Nina handed a sheet torn from a notebook to Hannu.

Hannu took the paper. After reading it, he looked at Nina and asked, "Are you kidding?"

"I'm not kidding about something like that."

"What does it say?" Jacob asked.

"According to this note, Toni has decided to quit his job effective immediately. By his own calculations, his overtime and unused vacation days are enough to cover his salary during the notice period about three times over. He apparently wants to spend more time playing Go."

Hannu sighed.

"Go is one of those things he *is* interested in. At the end, there's some strange hashtag, #whereisjonas. I don't know what it means."

Hannu pulled out his phone.

"Don't bother. I tried calling him, but his phone is ringing on his desk," Nina said.

"Damn it. This is not like Toni at all. I would have definitely wanted him on this, but we'll have to start with this team. I'll figure out what Toni is up to later."

"Wait, I'll check how long Niklas will be before we proceed."

The phone barely rang twice before Niklas answered.

"Are you much longer?"

"The satnav says 400 metres and two minutes."

"We'll wait for you so I only have to explain the situation once."

Jacob ended the call and said, "Niklas will be here in a couple of minutes."

Niklas soon stepped out of the lift and saw Jacob.

"Hi Jacob. There better be a good explanation for this. The representatives of our second-largest client did not seem pleased when I informed them of the meeting's cancellation as I was running past them in the hallway."

"There is an explanation. This doesn't leave these walls without my permission. I've had over 350 million euros stolen from me today."

A silence fell over the room, which Hannu broke.

"None of the rest of us have heard the whole story yet. Explain now, as detailed but concisely as possible, what exactly happened." Jacob explained the events in a few minutes. The others listened intently and silently. When Jacob finished, Niklas was the first to speak.

"It seems that Morgan Sachs is preparing for a lawsuit. If the transfer could have been cancelled, it would

have been. Instead, the conversation was moved to the lawyers. That also means they won't be helpful in any way, but will stick firmly to the line that everything was done according to instructions and agreements. Don't exchange another word with them without me present. Have you reported it to the police?"

Hannu interjected, "Before we go to the police, I suggest we examine the devices here. This is the best cybersecurity lab in the country."

Jacob thought for a moment before answering.

"I haven't reported it to the police. Speed is of the essence here. Besides, I would greatly appreciate it if this didn't spread to a wider audience, at least not at this stage. We can deal with the police later, if necessary."

Nina started asking Jacob questions.

"The bank said that the transfer was confirmed with your banking credentials and your email. Is it possible that you misunderstood, or can we consider this reliable information at this point?"

"I didn't misunderstand, I'm sure of that. Of course, it's always possible that the person on the other end of the line was mistaken."

"Okay. We already have your phone and computer, so that's a good start. It would also be useful to immediately get your email server logs, and best of all would be if we could get a copy of the entire email server hard drive. And if you have an IDS in use – "

Nina noticed the question mark on Jacob's face and quickly clarified, "An IDS is a system used to detect

network intruders. If you have such a system, we would need to examine its data."

"I don't know anything about any IDS. And I don't really think we can hand over the email server for investigation before we have NDAs and other agreements signed on both sides. I'm not even sure I want to involve the Fartum staff at this stage."

"Can you at least ask them to make copies of them now for later investigation?"

The conversation was interrupted when Jacob's pocket started playing the Nokia tune. Jacob answered the phone.

"Jonathan from Morgan Sachs here. A conference room at the Aleksanterinkatu office has now been booked for the rest of the day."

"Right. I'll be there with my lawyer within the hour."

"Okay. Goodbye."

Jacob rubbed his temples for a moment.

"What were you saying about the email servers and so on?"

"Can you ask them to make copies of the email server and IDS logs for later investigation?"

"Formulate an email for me with what needs to be saved, and I'll think about how to pass it on. Is it critical to get it quickly?"

"If you have a competent hacker on your network, it's probably already too late. If not, and you back up and store the copies properly, it's not super critical, but it will, of course, slow down that line of investigation. The biggest problem is if you don't keep the logs for

very long and they are deleted before copies are made."

"Okay. As I said, send me an email. What's next?"

Matti looked at his notes and asked the next question, "Do you have any idea who could have gotten their hands on the password list?"

Jacob thought.

"No one, in my opinion. I got it by hand from the Morgan Sachs office and took it straight to the safe in my office the same day. No one else has the code."

Matti continued, "Right. We'll start by investigating that machine immediately."

Jacob looked around.

"It seems like things here are as under control as they can be under the circumstances. Keep me updated 24/7. Hannu, prepare some kind of draft agreement, I'll cover your expenses, of course."

Next, Jacob nodded in Niklas's direction.

"Let's go to Aleksanterinkatu."

***

Jacob and Niklas arrived at the Morgan Sachs office. The receptionist's high heels clicked against the marble floor as she guided them to a conference room. She checked their IDs before dialing a number on the conference phone on the table.

"Jonathan Smith."

"Hi Jonathan. It's Kate from Helsinki. Jacob Taggard and Niklas Levander are here with me."

"Hi Jacob. Who is Niklas?"

"Niklas is my lawyer. He wanted to join the conversation."

"Right. Thanks, Kate, we'll take it from here."

"Okay. Goodbye."

Kate closed the door behind her. Jacob started the conversation impatiently.

"Well, what have you found out? How do I get my money back?"

A brief silence.

"I'll start by telling you our official position, and then I'll tell you what I can off the record."

"Morgan Sachs has executed the transfer in strict accordance with all internal bank guidelines and external agreements. In some instances, we have exercised even greater caution than our guidelines require. Unfortunately, we cannot assist in cancelling the transfer in any way."

"How the hell can you not?" Jacob shouted into the phone.

"Jacob, let me do the talking," Niklas said in Finnish. Jacob nodded.

"As I said, that is our official position. We will, of course, assist the authorities in official investigations as required by law. But unofficially, I can also say that those who took your money seem to be *very* good at what they do. Have you found out who owns the company to which the money was transferred?"

"No, why?"

"It's the personal investment company of the CEO of HBSC Singapore. We managed to hear that the

money had already shot from there through several other accounts out of Singapore. Apparently, there were some other suspicious transfers in that account as well. Our communication with HBSC was cut off very quickly, so we don't know more than that."

Jacob was about to open his mouth, but Niklas kicked his leg and spoke first, "I assume that's all you're willing to comment on?"

"Yes."

"Right. Thanks for the information, we'll consider our next steps."

Niklas hung up the phone.

"It's probably not wise to continue this conversation here. Let's go outside."

They walked past the reception, and Niklas thanked the receptionist. Jacob couldn't get a word out.

They sat in Niklas's car, but Niklas didn't start the engine yet. He asked, "Do you have a lawyer in Singapore, and have you thought about reporting this to the police?"

"No, I used Morgan Sachs' lawyers when I needed them. And I haven't given the police a single thought."

"Right. I have a couple of good contacts in Singapore. I'll check their availability and get a feel for how to proceed. It seems our thief has stepped on some pretty big toes there as well. I'm not sure at what point the Singapore police should be involved. My guess is the sooner, the better. What about the Finnish police?"

Jacob thought for a moment.

"Let's give G-Secure some room to work. I assume

that if anyone can, they'll be able to get on the trail. So, no Finnish police yet. And let's hold off on the Singapore police for a bit as well. I have a contact who might be able to get to the CEO of HBSC Singapore."

"Good. I'll drive you back to Keilaniemi and start moving things forward."

Niklas started the car, and Jacob called Directory Enquiries.

"Saara Virta, works at Fartum, please. Can I get the number as a text, and can you connect me right away?"

"Hi, Saara, can you dig up Daniel Petterson's contact information for me. He helped us with the Fartum ownership arrangements back in the day and has since moved to the executive board of HBSC."

"Of course. I'll call you back soon."

Jacob ended the call.

"What do you plan to ask if you get a hold of him?"

"I don't know. I'll tell him my situation and try to figure out if he's also a victim or a suspect."

Jacob's phone beeped to signal an incoming message. Saara had been efficient, and Daniel's phone number was in the message. Jacob called it immediately but got no answer. He sent a message to the number asking Daniel to call back regardless of the time when he got the message.

Chapter 6

When Tanya entered the dining car in the morning, she didn't see Eddie yet. She bought oatmeal and coffee for breakfast and sat by the window. Watching the forest scenery whiz by, she noticed her thoughts were already focused on the upcoming jump day. It felt surprisingly refreshing compared to the constant mulling over of work matters.

Tanya saw Eddie coming into the dining car and waved to him.

"Morning. Did you sleep well?" Eddie asked.

"The rattling of the train and the excitement of the first jump day kept me awake a bit, but all in all, okay. What about you?"

"I stayed up reading about the free cities. Interesting stuff. But I'll tell you more about it once I get some breakfast. What did you have?"

"The usual oatmeal and coffee. The sandwiches looked a bit pricey for what they were."

"I'll go see what they have."

Eddie soon returned with oatmeal and coffee.

"So what did you read?" Tanya asked.

"I read a bit on Wikipedia and Wikivoyage about what's been written about the free cities. How well do you know where we're actually going?"

"Weren't they originally just fenced and controlled refugee camps pushed by European xenophobic parties, where all asylum seekers were initially sent by force? But at some point, Westerners started moving there too."

"That's more or less how I understood it, and that's basically how it was. But it seems that when the free cities were founded, certain special rights were added to their founding charters, which have since turned out to be surprisingly significant."

"What kind of special rights?"

"First of all, the EU is committed to guaranteeing or buying a certain per capita amount of the free cities' bonds annually. The free cities, therefore, get to finance their operations cheaply with the backing of the entire EU. They use the funds from these bonds to build societal infrastructure, such as healthcare, law enforcement, social security, education, the judicial system, and the tax system. They have complete autonomy in organising these, as long as certain minimum human rights standards are maintained. What was the result? Since there were several free cities in Europe, different ones could experiment with different systems for providing these services. There is free movement of people between the free cities, so people gravitated towards the ones where they felt their lives were best. This created a certain

competitive environment between the free cities, and their institutions developed surprisingly quickly. As a result of all this, the free cities now spend their money very efficiently. Their basic services have rapidly risen to a world-class level, including university research and specialised medical care."

Tanya had been listening to Eddie's account so intently that she had forgotten to eat.

"Why isn't this bigger news in the media?" Tanya asked.

Eddie shrugged.

"Tell me about it. I have no idea. A more peculiar, but perhaps even more significant special right is that the free cities are designated as special economic zones. *No* international trade agreements bind the internal decision-making of the free cities, but their products still have free access to the EU's internal market, as long as they meet the requirements of EU directives."

"What's so significant about that?" Tanya asked.

Eddie smiled.

"Apparently, the EU thought the same way at the time, because the EU decision-makers were quite annoyed when some free cities announced, as their first act after signing the founding charter, that they would have neither patent nor copyright legislation."

"Ah," Tanya nodded. "Plenty of people must have been furious about that."

The conversation was interrupted by the conductor's announcement:

"We are arriving at the Kainuu Free City railway

station. The doors will open on the right-hand side in the direction of travel. Thank you for travelling with us and welcome again."

"Are we here already?" Eddie wondered.

They quickly finished their oatmeal and got off the train. They stepped from the train into the terminal building. The air smelled of fresh paint, and the terminal looked brand new. They walked with the crowd until they stopped to queue at a security checkpoint.

Tanya shook her head.

"A security check just to get off a train? What's the point of this?"

"Not to get off the train, but to get into the Free City," Eddie corrected.

"This is one of the consequences of the free cities' special zone status. People have free movement between the free cities, so they want to know quite precisely who is coming in from the outside. Possession of firearms is prohibited in the free cities. If you're caught with one, you get *persona non grata* status and are thrown out of the city. With strict entry checks, firearm offences have been practically reduced to zero in the free cities."

Tanya looked at Eddie and laughed.

"How late were you reading about this?"

Eddie smiled.

"It wasn't *that* much past midnight. And this is really interesting, that they've been able to build a society from a clean slate."

"Is there anything you *don't* find interesting? But that's a good thing; I can always count on you to know

everything about everything—or if you don't, you'll find out."

The seemingly long queue had moved quickly, and Tanya was called through the metal detector. A young woman performed a pat-down, and Tanya walked with her passport to a counter that read "First-time arrivals to the Free City." She handed her passport to the official.

"This won't take long, but we need to take your fingerprints and do an iris scan. What is the purpose of your visit?" the official asked.

"Vacation. We came for the weekend to visit an old friend who lives here now."

"Right. I'll register you as a tourist, not a permanent resident. Could you look into this device so we can scan your irises."

Tanya positioned her face in the scanner.

"Right, now the fingerprints. Place your palms on this surface as indicated by the patterns."

The surface flashed a green light.

"That's it. Welcome to the Kainuu Free City and have a good day."

"Thank you. Sorry, but I have to ask, how can this be so smooth compared to any other country?"

The official shrugged.

"This is a pretty easy way to earn some extra money. Many students and freelancers come here in the mornings for a while to work when the train arrives and it's busiest. Using these devices isn't that complicated, and any exceptional cases are directed to the full-time border guards anyway."

"Interesting. Thank you."

Eddie was already waiting for Tanya behind the counters, and they walked out of the security check.

Tanya recognised Jonas, who was waiting outside the door. This time, Jonas looked much more familiar. The curly hair, thick-framed glasses, and bespoke suit had been replaced with short blond hair, jeans, and an outdoor jacket.

Tanya put her bag down and gave Jonas a brief hug.

"Hi. Good to see you after such a long time. This is Eddie. Eddie is in charge of reactor core design in my team. And this is Jonas, an old friend from university."

"Am I right that neither of you has been here or in any other free cities before?" Jonas asked.

"We haven't, but Eddie read up on the history of the free cities all last night and already knows everything."

"I doubt Wikipedia had the full story," Eddie said.

Jonas laughed.

"No, it doesn't tell everything, but you get a good overview. Let's start walking, the airport is right next door. We only have airspace reserved for jumping until eleven to start with, so we have time for a couple of jumps before lunch. Over lunch, I could give you a quick tour of the city, and then we can get back to jumping."

They walked around the corner. Only then did Tanya realise that the train station and the airport terminal were the same building.

"Oh, it was *that* close? So you jump from a commercial airport?" she asked.

"In a way. Air traffic has been light so far, as there

are only flights to a couple of other free cities, and the Kainuu Free City hasn't grown very large yet. So it's been pretty easy to get airspace, but the city's growth rate is so fast that we won't be jumping here for many more years."

"Where will you jump after that?" Eddie asked.

Jonas laughed. "That's still so far away. Right now, my thoughts are on the next few days, a few weeks at most."

"What brought you here in the first place?" Eddie pressed.

Jonas glanced at Eddie and shrugged. "I don't really know how to answer that. I've been around here pretty much from the beginning."

"So you've obviously enjoyed it. What do you think is the best and worst thing about this place?"

"That's just Eddie," Tanya interrupted. "He wants to know everything about everything."

Jonas smiled. "That's good. But that's a difficult question. Give me a moment to formulate my answer."

They walked toward the gate leading to the airfield. A crow flew over their heads, cawing loudly: "Caw. Caw. Caw."

Jonas continued, "The best and worst thing here... It might be hard to understand, but in a way, they are one and the same. They've gone further here than anywhere else in removing uncertainty from people's lives. No one has to worry about basic healthcare or a basic income, and crime is very low. For people who want to move something forward, this kind of environment provides

an exceptional opportunity to focus only on what they want to do. The sharpest minds in science, culture, and sports have increasingly moved to the free cities, and the cycle is only getting stronger."

"What's so bad about that?"

"For most people, there's nothing bad about it, on the contrary: for many, this is better than anything. It probably sounds like the childish complaint of a privileged and well-off person, but I've noticed that a certain sterility and risk-free nature of life here gets under your skin after a while. It's somehow lacking... vitality."

Jonas grinned.

"But this jumping and the occasional adventurous visits to the 'real' world have so far been a good remedy for that."

They arrived at a plane next to the runway, from which a large man with dreadlocks and a red beard was just climbing out.

"Hi Ragnar," Jonas greeted. "This is Tanya and Eddie."

At the same moment, a crow landed on Ragnar's shoulder.

Tanya and Eddie were startled by the large bird, but Ragnar and Jonas seemed to pay it no mind.

"What's that?" Eddie asked.

"Oh, Raakku?" Ragnar laughed. "Raakku and I have a long history. I found him about five years ago at the base of a tree in my yard when he was just a little fledgling. I fed him for a few weeks until he learned to fly properly, and ever since, Raakku has kept an eye

on me. Just now, he told me that three people were coming to the field, so I knew to come out of the plane to see who was coming."

Tanya looked skeptical.

"Are you kidding?"

"No. Crows are among the most intelligent birds. They learn a lot and even remember faces. Raakku knows when I'm about to go jumping in the plane and flies to meet me. The coolest thing is when I'm flying a paraglider and Raakku follows me and sometimes seems to be laughing when I can't find the thermals, and he gets to show me where to go up."

Eddie also looked a bit skeptical.

"Did you say five years ago? Were you already living here then?"

Ragnar laughed.

"No. The move was quite an operation. Raakku won't get in a car, but leaving him behind didn't feel right either, so I cycled here. It took a week."

Eddie and Tanya looked at each other and then at Jonas, who chuckled, "No, Ragnar isn't pulling your leg. Sometimes that bird has made our lives so difficult that I've wondered how to get rid of it. But it's quite a creature."

Ragnar nodded and continued, "The plane is pretty much ready. Let's get going quickly, so we can get another round in before lunch. Are you ready?"

Tanya and Eddie glanced at each other and grinned.

"I think we are, but should we take our luggage on the plane?" Tanya asked.

"No need. I'll quickly drop them off at the club's cabin while you put on your rigs. The blue rig next to the plane is packed and ready for Tanya."

"Oh, right, are our prototype helmets somewhere?" Jonas asked Ragnar. "We could test them again."

"They're also at the cabin, I'll grab them."

Tanya raised her eyebrows. "Prototype helmets?"

"Even if you're close to someone during freefall, you can't really talk because of the wind noise. That's why we've been building a radio helmet so that jumpers can talk to each other during the jump."

"Does it actually work?"

"Our helmets don't offer any hi-fi sound quality, but you can make out what the other person is saying," Jonas replied.

They put on their parachute rigs and boarded the plane.

Jonas said to the pilot, "Let's take this flight a bit higher than usual, so our guests get more freefall time. Five and a half kilometres should be good. Are the oxygen systems in order?"

"Yep, checked them this morning."

Jonas sat back down in the cabin, and Ragnar climbed aboard with his gear. The plane started to taxi to the runway.

"It looks like only two of the radio helmets are in working order."

"Okay, then let's do it this way: Ragnar jumps first, then Eddie, then Tanya, and I'll go last. Tanya and I

will take the radio helmets so she can try out the new gear too."

Ragnar handed the helmets to Tanya and Jonas. They put them on, and Jonas checked that the power switch on Tanya's helmet radio was on.

"One, two, can you hear me?" Jonas's voice crackled inside Tanya's helmet.

"I can hear you," Tanya replied.

As the plane ascended, Tanya looked at the forest surrounding the field and the modern, dense city a little further away. There were many cranes, so growth was indeed continuing.

"Jonas, you said the Free City is growing fast. How many inhabitants are there now and how fast is it growing?" Tanya asked.

"There are just over half a million in Kainuu now, and at this rate, we'll pass a million within a couple of years."

"Is there room for them all?"

"Space won't be a problem for a long time. The area of the Free City is one and a half times that of Singapore, and Singapore has over 5 million inhabitants. The bigger challenge is building the infrastructure at this pace. But that's also well underway. The first trial by fire was right after the Kainuu Free City was founded, when Russia decided to test Europe's cooperation and sent over a hundred thousand asylum seekers to the border in a couple of months. Fortunately, Russia messed up the timing, so the asylum seekers arrived in the warm and bright summer. The only frantic rush was setting

up the temporary barracks. The electricity, sewage, and heating were managed a bit later, before autumn."

"I remember from the news back then that the Finnish government was in a bit of a panic."

Jonas laughed.

"I think they were. But negotiating was easy when they clutched at our proposals like drowning men at straws. Once we convinced the government at the time that we could handle the situation so that the asylum seekers would stay out of sight and no human rights treaties would be violated, all our other demands were met without much thought. Now, though, they've started to have second thoughts, and the old states are putting a lot of pressure on us to amend the free city agreement."

A red light came on in the front of the plane. Ragnar put on an oxygen mask and instructed the others to do the same.

A few minutes later, a green light came on.

"Jump run. We are slightly upwind of the field, and the landing area for jumpers is clear," the pilot announced over the speakers.

Ragnar was the first to the door, glanced back, winked, and jumped. Eddie followed quickly after.

Jonas glanced at Tanya and said, "Your turn."

Tanya stepped to the door and felt the airflow on her cheeks. She jumped out of the plane, felt the familiar sensation in the pit of her stomach, and smiled to herself. "Why did I give this up for so many years," Tanya thought as she did a somersault in the air.

She saw Jonas approaching quickly. The radio in her helmet crackled.

"Tanya, your parachute isn't working. I can fix it, but you have about 20 seconds to explain why you really got in touch and came here."

A word from the author

This free edition of *Atlas Kicks the Ball* is complete. The only difference from the paid edition is these additional nag pages, which appear a few times along the way.

You may share the book freely for non-commercial purposes (CC BY-NC 4.0). You can also build the book yourself, in any format, from the source at **git.brainpaingames.com/tommy/atlas-public**.

If you'd like to support me, you can buy the PDF and EPUB editions without these nag pages at **store.brainpaingames.com**.

Thank you. The story continues on the next page.

Chapter 7

"Hello," Jacob answered the phone groggily.

"Daniel here. Sorry to wake you, but you did ask me to call. What's going on?"

"Hang on, let me get my brain in gear."

Jacob sat on the edge of the bed and shook the last remnants of sleep from his head.

"Long story. I can't get into the details right now, but I need to get in touch with the CEO of HBSC Singapore. Can you help with that?"

"I can ask him to call you, but he left a meeting quite suddenly yesterday afternoon, and I haven't heard from him since."

"Thanks. Tell him I know something about yesterday's account transactions."

"You sound very cryptic."

"I am. I can tell you the whole story later, once this mess is sorted out."

"Alright. I'll pass the message on."

Jacob looked at the time on his phone. 3:20 AM. He tried to go back to sleep, but it was no use. After

tossing and turning for a couple of hours, he decided to get up and go for a walk. After walking for a while, he ended up in Kaivopuisto Park and headed for breakfast at Carusel restaurant. Jacob was eating a fresh croissant when the Nokia tune blared from his pocket. The old Nokia's screen displayed an unknown business number.

"Jacob."

"Nina from G-Secure, good morning. Sorry for the early hour, but I understood you wanted to hear about any findings as soon as possible."

"Exactly. What did you find?"

"How much do you understand about cybersecurity and data communication technology?"

"Give me the big picture. I won't understand the details anyway."

"We found malware that has full control of your computer. We caught it when it tried to take pictures with the computer's camera. It appears to be taking pictures every thirty seconds and sending them over the internet."

Jacob's croissant dropped onto his plate.

"For fuck's sake. Do you have any idea where it came from? And where did the pictures go? How long has it been taking them?"

"We don't know how long it's been active on your machine. But the strangest and most frightening thing is that we have a very precise idea of where it came from. This so-called malware is OpenSSH. It's the same program you use to create a secure connection to the Fartum internal network, and it's used on almost all

internet-connected servers," Nina explained.

"I'm not quite following. So is this OpenSSH malware or not?" Jacob asked.

Nina sighed.

"Until this morning, I thought OpenSSH was an essential part of the secure internet infrastructure. But it's been modified so that those in the know have been able to hijack almost any computer using it. That's why it took us a little extra time. We just couldn't comprehend that this particular software could be the malware we were looking for."

"You said you know where it came from. Who could have modified it then?"

"This is where it gets really weird. At first, we thought someone had managed to install a compromised version on your machine. It's open-source software, so we installed a new version from clean source code to analyse the differences between the installed programs. But there was no difference. So we started examining the source code and eventually found a vulnerability written into the code. Strangely, there had been no attempt to hide it. On the contrary, the comments include instructions on how to exploit the vulnerability. And since the source code is maintained on Codeberg, we were able to find out who made the commit and when. The vulnerability has been out there for almost three years, and it was made by the main maintainer of OpenSSH."

"Who is he and where is he?"

"We don't know his exact name. But we were able

to find the IP address from which he has been updating OpenSSH for the last six months. Through our contacts, we have found the exact address and flat number where the last activity actually took place about five hours ago. So the trail is hot."

"Where is this place?"

"In the Kainuu Free City. Speaking of which, the comments also included a strange sentence urging people to join the Church of Truth."

Jacob started.

"Did you say the Church of Truth?"

"You heard right. I did a quick search online and found out that their headquarters, the Cathedral of Truth, is also in the Kainuu Free City."

Jacob was lost in thought for a moment.

"Hello, are you still there?" Nina called out.

"I am, I am. Interesting, it sounds like we're heading to Kainuu. It should be less than an hour's flight from Helsinki-Vantaa Airport. I'll arrange a few things, get yourself to the airport within a couple of hours. And text me the exact address of the flat."

"But... there are no flights to the Free City these days?"

"We'll take the company jet. It flies when and where I say. So come to the private jet terminal, you can explain these things in more detail on the flight. I need to get the rest of the party together."

"Right. Should I ask Matti and Hannu to come as well?"

"If they want to, they can. I want someone along who understands what's happened."

"Okay. See you at the airport."

Jacob checked his notebook for the number of a security consultant he occasionally used. A sleepy voice answered the phone.

"Hello."

"Good morning, Juuso. I need to have a conversation with someone in the Kainuu Free City shortly. I assume he will disagree about the necessity of this conversation, so I need your help."

"Hang on, let me wake up. What time is it? Seven-thirty? Just a moment, let me go into the other room so my wife can sleep in peace... Alright. Did you say the Kainuu Free City? I have people on the ground there, but it's a bit of a peculiar place. Can you tell me more about this person and the nature of the conversation?"

Jacob remembered the recent conversation about how widespread the OpenSSH vulnerability might be.

"Are you in a room with no computers with cameras or microphones, including smartphones?"

"I am. The computers are downstairs, and I've always preferred a phone with a battery that lasts for days, even if I forget to charge it."

"Good. Money has been stolen from me by hacking my computer. G-Secure's experts found if not the culprit, at least a very strong lead on my machine. This guy I want to talk to is very good with computers, and I have his address, both the street address and an email address. That's all I know."

"I assume you want to meet him as soon as possible?" Juuso asked.

"After this call, I'll ask my secretary to get the plane ready for departure. We'll be on the runway in two hours at the latest."

"Right. Send me the address, and I'll arrange surveillance as quickly as possible. Is there room on the plane if I come along?"

"Of course, you're coming along. I trust you more than your employees."

Juuso laughed.

"My employees are trustworthy in the Captain Jack Sparrow sense. You can trust a dishonest man to be dishonest, but with honest people, you never know what stupid things they'll come up with. But you probably understand that we can't go in with guns blazing in the Free City for the simple reason that getting weapons in there is very difficult."

"I don't need weapons, as long as we can get the guy to talk. Come to the private jet terminal."

"Okay, see you there."

Next, Jacob called his secretary. The phone rang for a long time before Saara answered.

"Morning Saara, sorry to wake you, but it's a bit urgent. First, get the company jet ready for departure, destination Kainuu Free City, as soon as possible. Second, arrange a ride to the airport for me, I'm at Carusel in Kaivopuisto Park."

"Plane ready for departure and a ride to the airport from Carusel. Got it."

Jacob remained on the edge of the bed, pondering everything he had just heard. After a moment, he decided to call Frank as well.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"I'll explain in more detail later, but a significant amount of money has been stolen from me, and I suspect this might be a wider scheme. So I thought I'd check if any money has been taken from you or if you've noticed any other suspicious activity lately – electronically, that is?"

Frank thought for a moment.

"I can't think of anything other than my asset manager informing me yesterday that they are investigating some unauthorised stock trades. Apparently, I placed a trade to sell a rather large number of my shares. And there are some discrepancies with the proceeds of the trade, but I haven't received a more detailed explanation yet."

"I assume we're talking about significant sums, and you didn't authorise the trade?" Jacob confirmed.

"To a pauper, perhaps, any sum looks large. But yes, significant sums. And no, I certainly did not order any shares to be sold."

"That sounds familiar. Although in my case, the bank just informed me that everything was done correctly on their part, so they won't cancel the transfers or reimburse me. G-Secure managed to dig up some malware from my computer, which led them to the address of the program's author in the Kainuu Free City."

Jacob paused briefly.

"And the real reason for my call is that the malware contained hints that the Church of Truth might have something to do with it."

Frank snorted with laughter.

"Now you're on the wrong track. That bunch was annoying, sure, but they were idealistic amateurs who, in their naivety, imagined that it mattered in public discourse whether a story was true or not. What's relevant is how things are *perceived* and how they are presented. And that group fell silent and pretty much dropped off the map after getting their arses handed to them when the West Helsinki special economic zone was established."

"Idealistic and childish, yes, but you can't deny they were skilled at finding information. It's clear they were left with a grudge. Now we're talking about the theft of my money and possibly yours, and I think the rules of the game are a bit different to the media game. In any case, I'm now on my way to Kainuu to talk to the guy G-Secure managed to locate. Do you want to come along and ask if he happens to know anything about your case as well?"

"Right now? Are you coming back today?" Frank asked.

"That's the plan," Jacob replied.

"Maybe I can postpone my other appointments for today. Should I come to the General Aviation terminal?"

"As soon as you can."

Saara had texted him the taxi booking number. Jacob nodded in approval. A taxi was certainly faster

than waking his own driver and waiting for him to arrive.

A moment later, a minibus with its sign unlit pulled up in front of Carusel. A flicker of annoyance crossed Jacob's mind. He found minibuses decidedly plebeian. Normally, he would have requested another car, but now he swallowed his irritation, got into the back, and asked the driver to take him to the General Aviation terminal.

Traffic was light on the quiet Saturday morning. Just before the Tuusulanväylä motorway, Jacob's phone rang. The unfamiliar number started with the Singapore country code +65. Jacob put the phone to his ear. The caller did not greet him but went straight to the point.

"Good day. You said you knew something about the account transactions."

The person on the other end had a strong Chinese accent.

"Is that Jack Wu, the CEO of HBSC Singapore?" Jacob confirmed.

"Let's just talk about what you know."

"Right. As I understand it, someone has transferred my money to your account."

"And?"

"I'm very interested in where that money has gone, and I thought you could help me find out."

"Unfortunately, I can't help, at least not for now. I'll get back to you if there's anything to report."

The call ended. Jacob spent the rest of the journey pondering the conversation.

The receptionist at the General Aviation terminal greeted Jacob as he walked in.

"Good morning. Your friends are already waiting in the lounge."

Before Jacob could reach the others, the lounge door opened. Jacob recognised the newcomer as Eeva, their pilot. She hurried over to him.

"Hi Jacob. A slight delay came up while filing the flight plan. The Kainuu airport is reserved for skydiving operations today from 8 to 11 a.m. So we'll have to wait another half hour before departure."

"Skydiving operations? Half an hour?" Jacob snapped.

Eeva nodded.

"Never been held up by skydivers before. Let's leave as soon as it's ready. We'll talk to the Kainuu air traffic control when we're closer. How much longer will it be?" Jacob asked.

"Refueling will take a short while. But you can board the plane now, we should be ready to leave by nine-thirty at the latest, so in about 15 minutes."

Jacob glanced around.

"Good. I think almost all of us are here. Only Frank is missing, but he'll find his way, so let's get on the plane. Juuso, what's the situation in Kainuu?"

"The apartment should be under surveillance within half an hour. I'll get a message when the situation at the target is clear."

The plane was waiting just outside the private jet terminal. They moved to the plane. Frank arrived a couple of minutes later. He sat down opposite Jacob and looked around.

"It's cramped. What kind of plane is this? Can't Fartum afford a proper one?"

Jacob smirked.

"This is a Cessna Citation X. I admit it's not the most spacious, but that's secondary. It's the fastest private jet money can buy."

Juuso's phone rang from across the cabin.

"Hello... Right. I'll get back to you shortly, keep your eyes open," Juuso said into the phone.

Jacob looked at him.

"Well?"

"The apartment appears empty. No answer at the door, and no signs of life. All we can do is wait for the target to arrive. I suggest that when we get there, I'll go check on the stakeout team, and everyone else stays far away from the apartment. Once we're inside and the target is under control, I'll call you over."

"That's probably wisest," Jacob confirmed.

The plane started moving. Eeva's voice came over the speakers:

"We've got a departure slot in ten minutes. As things stand, we'll arrive in Kainuu at 10:20 a.m."

Chapter 8

Tanya yanked the deployment handle, then the reserve ripcord, but nothing happened.

She decided to be as honest as she could.

"I recognised you at the New Tower hotel the other day, when you were performing as John Galt. I'm on your side."

"On my side? Against whom? Why are you working at Fartum?"

"I don't like where Helsinki and the rest of the world are heading. I'm against all those self-important so-called successes you were mocking. But at Fartum, I have the opportunity to be involved in solving the biggest technical problems I know of."

Tanya looked down and swallowed. The ground seemed to be approaching at breakneck speed. Then she turned to look up at Jonas. The usual twinkle was completely gone from his eyes, and Tanya saw that he was thinking hard. Suddenly, Jonas moved towards her.

He grabbed her rig and yanked something, causing the parachute to deploy, and Tanya felt the familiar, re-

assuring jolt of the harness. She sighed in relief. Jonas's parachute opened a little lower down.

"Jonas... First of all, what the fuck? And second, who can hear this conversation?"

"No one can hear this. I switched these helmets to a non-standard frequency, and the signal is encrypted. I also set the transmission power so low that the range is only a few hundred metres at most. Ragnar knows what's happening up here, but he can't hear anything. As for your first question, that's a bit harder to answer briefly."

Tanya laughed.

"Try. Would you really have let me fall to the ground?"

There was a moment of silence on the radio. Tanya estimated she still had a few minutes before landing.

"Probably not. I don't really believe in violence. Mockery combined with truth is usually more effective. I'll speak as plainly as I can. Relations between the free cities and the old world have become quite tense lately, and since Fartum is known to have *very* warm relations with the old world's power elite, I needed to find out quickly whether you were just a pawn of that elite or not. And I knew you are hard to rattle, so I had to apply a bit more pressure than usual. I hope you understand that and can forgive me. And I hope you also understand that I still can't trust you completely."

Tanya laughed again.

"Well, that was quite a thrill. I can't say whether it would have been enough to make me confess any

potential conspiracies with my brother, but no, there are none."

"Good. But let's focus on landing now. Shall we agree not to talk about this adventure to anyone else?"

"Okay."

Tanya watched Eddie and Ragnar, who were landing in the drop zone a little below them. A dark bird seemed to be flying next to Ragnar's parachute, and Tanya smiled at the thought of Raakku. Strange bird. Tanya got lost in thought for a moment, pondering her conversation with Jonas. Suddenly, she realised she had drifted a bit too far from the drop zone and quickly turned towards it.

She didn't quite make it to the landing area but had to land on the edge of the field. Her foot caught in a rut, and her ankle twisted nastily. Tanya cried out in pain, fell onto her side, and was left panting.

Jonas saw what happened and was the first to run over.

"What happened?"

"I drifted off course, and my ankle got hurt on landing. I don't think it's just a sprain."

"Let me see."

Jonas gently took hold of Tanya's shoe, and she immediately winced in pain.

"Looks like a fracture. Do you need an ambulance, or can you limp to a car?" Jonas asked.

"I'll try myself, but I'll need help getting up. Do you have a car?"

"No, but we can sort one out quickly."

Jonas took his phone out of his pocket and tapped on it for a moment. He raised his head to say something when the phone beeped. He glanced at the phone and said, "Someone was apparently just driving by the airport. A car should be here in a couple of minutes."

"So you called a taxi?"

"Well, sort of, but not really. Let's just say we have a network where you can request help via a mobile app – like for rides, for instance."

"The network seems to work pretty well," Tanya noted.

Jonas nodded. Eddie and Ragnar ran over.

"What happened here?" Eddie asked.

"I carelessly drifted a bit off course and hit a dip on landing. I think my ankle is broken. But Jonas has already arranged for a car to take me to the hospital. You guys go on with the jumping," Tanya replied.

Jonas looked at Tanya and laughed.

"Let's get you to the hospital first and then think about continuing with the jumping."

"I have a lot of work to do today, and I wasn't planning on coming for a second load anyway. Will you three be okay?" Ragnar asked.

"Of course, let's talk this afternoon. But can you collect Tanya's parachute for me?" Jonas asked.

"Sure." Ragnar started gathering the parachute.

A newish electric car approached along the edge of the field. The driver got out, looked at Jonas for a moment, and asked, "How can I help the Minister of Finance?"

Tanya burst out laughing, moved her leg, and groaned in pain.

"Let's agree, no jokes. This leg is quite sore."

Jonas glanced at Tanya.

"Are you seriously telling me you don't know what I do here?"

Tanya's jaw dropped.

"Are *you* seriously telling me you're the Minister of Finance?"

"Yes. Now you probably understand why I'm interested in your sudden return to the scene after many years."

"My apologies, I probably should have done my homework. And this is your driver, then?"

Now it was Jonas's turn to laugh.

"No, this is just a random passerby, as I said. What was your name again?"

"Rick."

"Nice to meet you, Rick. The lady on the ground there is Tanya. She's injured her leg, and we need to get her to the hospital."

Tanya greeted him with a nod and winced in pain at the same time.

Eddie and Jonas carefully helped Tanya up and into the front seat of the car.

Jonas got into the back seat with Eddie, pulled the door shut, and said, "We're in."

The car started moving.

"Jonas, explain in more detail how this help network of yours works," Tanya requested.

"It's actually quite simple. It works through an app called Letsgo. I posted that I need a ride from the airport to the hospital. I also included a note that it's a minor emergency, which makes the request visible to all nearby Letsgo users, even if they haven't subscribed to ride requests. Rick was the first to accept the request."

"What else can you request besides rides?" Eddie asked.

"It started with rides. But then people started using the app to request and offer all sorts of help that people can generally provide for each other. Borrowing tools, picking up milk forgotten on a shopping trip, a missing player for a casual football game, fast food, walking companions, someone to talk to, and so on. A whole diverse economy is starting to form around Letsgo."

"So if I join this network, I can just start asking for favours from other people? I'm sure you have to pay something for it?" Eddie wondered.

"Of course you pay. That's why we created a money-like entity called Freecoin."

"Like Bitcoin?" Tanya asked.

Jonas laughed.

"That's what everyone thinks. Actually, we started with a Bitcoin-type virtual currency, but we quickly realised it wasn't suitable for this at all. If you needed a ride but had no bitcoins, you couldn't get one and had to walk. So the value was never created. A fixed money supply has many other problems, so we developed a currency that anyone can create."

Both Eddie and Tanya burst out laughing. Tanya

groaned in pain, and Eddie scoffed, "That can't possibly work. How can money have value if anyone can create it?"

Jonas shrugged.

"Well, banks create money too, and it still has value."

"But that's restricted in some way, so that banks can only lend out the same money ten times or something like that. I've never really understood or bothered to figure it out. Economics doesn't quite make sense to a mind wired for the natural sciences," Eddie said.

Jonas frowned.

"That's simply a misconception. People often talk about something like that, but it misrepresents both how banks create money and what limits its creation."

"So how does it really work, can you explain?" Eddie asked.

Jonas thought for a moment, then took a coin from his pocket and gave it to Eddie.

"Let's start with you having one coin. Let's call the currency unit a kopek. How many kopeks do we have in total at this point?" Jonas asked.

Eddie looked at the coin, puzzled.

"One kopek?"

"Exactly. Now I'm the bank, and you make a deposit."

Jonas took the coin from Eddie.

"So you now have one kopek in your account."

Eddie nodded.

"Then I'll do a little magic trick. Tanya in the front seat wants to borrow money." Jonas gave the coin to

Tanya.

"Tanya, you're buying an apple from Eddie. Could you give the kopek to him?" Jonas asked.

Eddie took the coin from Tanya.

"And one last trick. Could you deposit that coin back in the bank?"

Jonas took the coin from Eddie.

"How much money do we have in the system *now*?"

Eddie scratched his head.

"I have two kopeks in my account, but..."

"Exactly. This is what is meant when they say a bank can lend the same money multiple times. But the bank has to get it back before it can lend it out again. The flaw in this story is that it has very little to do with how banks actually create money today."

Eddie scratched his head again.

"Well, how does it happen then?"

"Let's take two pieces of paper. On one, we'll write my bank's liabilities, and on the other, its assets. Let's start with the assets. I have one coin, and Tanya has promised to pay me a hefty 100 percent interest, so two kopeks. The bank's assets are, in simple terms, a total of three kopeks. The bank's liabilities, on the other hand, are two kopeks to you. The rest of the assets, one kopek, is then left as equity, to be distributed to the bank's owners if necessary. The total on both papers is the same, three kopeks."

Eddie nodded, and Jonas continued, "To create money, the bank doesn't need to do anything other than increase its debt to you. So if I just announce that

I owe you two and a half kopeks instead of two, the amount of money has increased, and the bank owners' wealth has decreased by half a kopek."

"Why on earth would a bank do that?" Eddie asked.

"It usually doesn't. If a bank puts money in your account, it's most often because you've taken out a loan, meaning the other side of the bank's balance sheet has also grown. But sometimes a bank does just put money in your account. For example, when it pays interest or pays a salary to an employee's account."

"But that's still a far cry from anyone being able to create their own money. So how does Freecoin work?" Tanya asked.

Jonas smiled.

"Well, we had to think about it for a while. The way it works is that when I offer you, Eddie, dinner, if you have some Freecoins you've acquired, you can pay with one. If not, you can create one and give it to me. The result is you have food, and I have a Freecoin. Your Letsgo account still has no Freecoins, but it shows that you have issued one Freecoin."

"What's to stop me from issuing a million Freecoins whenever I want something from someone?" Eddie pressed.

"These Freecoins are not eternal. They are destroyed if more than six months pass since the issuer last earned a Freecoin by selling something to someone. On the other hand, if I get a Freecoin and don't use it within six months, it is returned to its issuer."

"Aha. So if I get one Freecoin, I have to use it within

six months, or it loses its value. But this still doesn't stop me from creating as many Freecoins as I want, right?"

"Not directly, of course, but if you want to keep the Freecoins you've created alive, you can't issue more than you manage to sell in services over six months."

"I get that, but why would I care if the Freecoins I created are destroyed?" Eddie asked.

"It might not concern you directly. However, it will certainly concern all those you imagine will accept the Freecoins you issue. Most Letsgo protocol wallet programs calculate a sort of 'reputation score' for Freecoins, based on which 'bad' Freecoins are not accepted as payment by default. And most of those algorithms heavily penalise coins that have been allowed to die. You gain credit, for example, for the issuer making transactions in both directions roughly equally. Minus points, on the other hand, are typically given for things like the Freecoins not being widely distributed but remaining within a small circle."

"This sounds really interesting. What happens when the issuer dies? Doesn't that make the issued coins worthless, since everyone knows that in six months at the latest, the coin will become worthless?"

Jonas nodded.

"It depends. According to the protocol, the coins of the deceased or otherwise permanently departed are netted. That is, when the issuer dies, the coins they issued become worthless. On the other hand, the coins owned by the deceased are distributed to those who

owned the coins issued by the deceased. So if the deceased's account was more or less in balance, no losses are incurred. In practice, the problem has been small."

"And can I join this system, and does it work outside of here?" Eddie wanted to know.

"Of course. You can easily get the app on your smartphone. I bet you'd be surprised how many people use it in Helsinki too. Not as widely as here, of course, but you can easily find a decent place to stay, food, and rides in Helsinki with it. Renovation help, on the other hand, is harder to find, I understand. But remember, it's not just about you getting services, you also have to provide them. That seems to be less feared here than in the 'old' Finland," Jonas explained.

Eddie took his phone out of his pocket and started looking for the app in the app store.

They arrived in a more densely built-up urban area, and Tanya looked at the city environment with interest.

"I thought this place was mainly populated by people from Africa and the Middle East. But based on the street scene, most people seem to be Finns and Europeans. How did that happen?" Tanya wondered.

"Initially, it was indeed mostly asylum seekers and some European workers," Jonas replied and continued, "But this free city concept had surprisingly rapid dynamic effects on migration. The first significant thing was that the entire business logic of people smugglers suddenly disappeared. Clients no longer had to pay smugglers to get to a safe society guaranteed by Western countries. A significant portion of the asylum seekers

were simply victims of the questionable marketing orchestrated by smugglers, and when the smugglers' market dried up, so did the marketing. This, in turn, led to a situation where despots panicked when their subjects were suddenly offered a safe way to leave their country. It hasn't been much talked about in the Finnish media, but in many undemocratically governed countries, there have been serious democratic reforms and other measures to improve people's lives since the establishment of the free cities. And so people's desire to leave for Europe has dramatically decreased, since most people prefer to stay in their own homes, after all. The most ironic thing is that most of the refugees sent by Russia have already returned to Russia from our border crossing, and a considerable number of Russia's liberal intelligentsia have come in their place. There are even the first signs that Russia is starting to change its tune."

"Could one characterise it in a way as pressure created by market forces, that people are offered genuine alternatives to choose their country of residence if their own country is not to their liking?" Eddie pondered.

"Exactly. The free cities also compete with each other. That has been absolutely key in our ability to find working solutions quickly. The free cities have tried different things, and the ones that have proven successful have then been copied in other cities."

"You said that the Kainuu Free City is growing fast, though. If asylum seekers are no longer coming here, where is that growth coming from?" Tanya asked.

Jonas shrugged.

"Many are tired of the current right-wing, hard-line, business-driven politics and want a better society. When the Kainuu Free City was founded, a rather free economic-political autonomy was demanded. It was a stroke of luck that has made it possible to seek new kinds of solutions. There are completely different opportunities to realise oneself here, and economic growth is significantly faster than in the mother country. That has then started to attract people here."

They arrived at the hospital's emergency room. Rick continued on his way, and Jonas and Eddie helped Tanya through the door to the hospital reception. A doctor saw Tanya after only a few minutes' wait and sent her for an X-ray.

Tanya felt hungry as they waited to be called for the X-ray.

"Can we get some food around here? With my metabolism, it feels like lunchtime already," she said.

"I can go get Doylent shakes from the vending machine in the lobby, if they're okay. They're not exactly gourmet food, but a reasonably healthy and balanced meal nonetheless," Jonas said.

Tanya and Eddie glanced at each other and shrugged.

Eddie grinned and said, "If it's a local specialty, let's give it a try."

Jonas disappeared around the corner and soon returned with three paper cups.

"How much do we owe you?" Tanya asked.

Jonas laughed.

"Listen, these are practically a perk of the city, so

you don't owe me anything."

"A ministerial perk?" Eddie asked.

"No, a resident's perk. To be precise, they're not entirely free, but they only cost a few Thalers per serving. And since you can pay for it from your social security account, it's not much different from a fringe benefit," Jonas explained.

Tanya looked at the paper cup, puzzled.

"So you don't have to pay for food here? Where does the money in the social security account come from, then?"

"Funds accumulate there from two main sources. Firstly, 15% of income is deducted as a mandatory contribution to the social security account until the account balance reaches one hundred thousand Thalers or the person turns 70. After that, you no longer have to pay, you can just draw a basic pension for the rest of your life. Secondly, many taxes on negative externalities – like emission fees, property taxes, and sugar taxes – are generally unpopular. We've made them more palatable by distributing their revenues as so-called citizen dividends directly to people's social security accounts," Jonas replied.

"What all can you pay for from that account?" Tanya asked.

"You can pay for healthcare and education-related expenses from the account with practically no limits. You can also pay for these affordable ready-made meals – pretty much all a healthy person can eat. It also covers rent for the most basic apartments. These are all basic

rights in the free city. No one goes hungry, everyone has a roof over their head, you can educate yourself as much as you want, and your health is taken care of."

Eddie frowned.

"Sounds smart. What about earnings-related unemployment benefits and pensions?"

"Those aren't state-mandated. There is a 7% contribution to a common pension fund, though you can opt out if you file the necessary paperwork. But it's a pretty popular way to save for retirement, it's supported a bit by taxation, and the funds have so far been managed productively. Earnings-related unemployment benefit is not part of the social security provided by society here. Some insurance companies do offer unemployment insurance, though," Jonas replied.

"How are other public expenses – like administration and the police – financed?" Eddie asked.

"Those are relatively small expenses. We have a progressive income tax, the threshold of which is tied to the median income – as are, in fact, the salaries of the state leadership. So if the state leadership wants a higher salary, the only way is to raise the median income of the people. In addition, our voluntary inheritance tax has gained popularity, but its effects will only become apparent later."

"Voluntary inheritance tax?" Eddie wondered.

"You can choose not to pay a portion of your income taxes here, but they will be deducted from your estate when you die. This was a politically easy way to make the inheritance tax more popular. Then we have corpor-

ate taxation, which differs quite a bit from traditional tax models. In fact, we not only cover the expenses you mentioned with these taxes, but we've also been able to pay back the EU-guaranteed loans we took out to fast-track our launch," Jonas said proudly.

"I promise this is the last question for now, but how does your corporate tax differ from Finland's?" Eddie wanted to know.

"Here, a limited company doesn't actually pay tax on its income. Instead, once a year, it issues new shares to the state at no cost, giving up a little over one percent of its shares. As long as the state is a minority shareholder in the company, it does not participate in the company's decision-making, and the company has the right to negotiate with the state about the price at which it can buy back its shares. Our pension fund participates in these negotiations and also has the right to make purchase offers for the company's shares. In practice, the state sells to the highest bidder. We generally assume that a growing and functioning company will eventually be listed on the stock exchange, at which point the state cashes out."

"Another difference is that in Finland, a company can deduct the costs of debt financing in taxation, but here you can't. On the contrary, you have to pay an extra one percent tax on the use of debt financing. This steers companies toward a more robust capital structure. A small exception is made for banks, where customer deposits are tax-free up to 20,000 Thalers. However, the situation with banks is good in that they prefer to

finance their operations primarily with equity, because we've made equity financing cheaper than debt financing on a risk-adjusted basis. This keeps the banks' balance sheets naturally strong, and the regulators don't have to constantly badger them about capital adequacy."

A nurse called Tanya for her X-ray. The doctor found a small fracture in her ankle and put it in a cast. The doctor advised Tanya to have the ankle X-rayed again in three weeks. They went to the cashier to pay.

"That'll be 800 Thalers. Oh, sorry, you don't have a local social security account. Do you have travel insurance?" the cashier asked.

"I have an annual travel insurance policy with Kaukovakuutus."

"In that case, it'll be 8,000 Thalers. Will you be paying by credit card, or shall we request a letter of guarantee from your insurer?"

"8,000? Where did the extra zero come from?"

Jonas interrupted, "I'll explain later. Can you cover this for now? We'd have to wait an hour or two for the guarantee to come through."

"I can, but this feels a bit like a scam."

Tanya paid the bill with her Fartum credit card and decided to sort out the mess later. As they walked out, Jonas asked, "Shall we head to the airport then? Your things were left at the cabin, and we could figure out what to do next."

The others nodded, and Jonas ordered a car with Letsgo.

"So, tell me now, what was this 8,000 Thaler thing

all about," Tanya asked.

"Healthcare is a lot cheaper here than in the old world, and technically, anyone can come here for any reason. The old world's insurance companies, of course, figured this out and started sending their clients here for treatment. At the same time, our travel insurance premiums were ridiculously expensive because healthcare elsewhere costs a fortune. We proposed a reciprocity agreement, that our residents would get some kind of discount on necessary treatment elsewhere, since people from elsewhere get affordable treatment here. However, it fell on deaf ears, so we decided that outside insurance companies would pay a bit of a premium. That premium is then used to subsidise our travel insurance policies."

Jonas laughed and continued, "A few insurance company CEOs from Helsinki made some rather angry phone calls after that decision, but now the situation is pretty good. Other free cities have started to adopt the same practice."

A car pulled up in front of the hospital. They got in and headed for the airport.

Chapter 9

"Good news. I just got word from air traffic control that the skydiving operations have ended earlier than anticipated, so we can land in Kainuu earlier than planned," Eeva announced over the plane's speakers.

Jacob looked out the window as the plane descended. The airport was small, with only one runway. The terminal building wasn't very large either, but it looked new, and a railway station had been integrated into one end of the building. The actual city seemed to be a bit further away, behind a large forest area.

As the plane taxied towards the terminal, Juuso's phone beeped.

"Any new information?" Jacob asked.

"No movement yet," Juuso replied.

They disembarked and went into the terminal. It was almost empty, so they got through security quickly. Outside, a minibus arranged by Juuso was waiting. The driver got out of the car.

"Hi Juuso, it's been a while," he greeted.

Juuso hugged the man.

"Viktor, it's good to see you after such a long time."

Juuso released Viktor and turned to the others.

"This is Viktor, an old acquaintance of mine. He's agreed to be our driver."

"Only as a driver," Viktor emphasised. "I see nothing, hear nothing, and certainly do nothing else. I enjoy it here far too much these days."

Juuso looked at Jacob.

"What do you want to do? I don't think it's wise to wait right next to the target."

Jacob thought for a moment.

"No, it certainly isn't. Viktor, do you know where the Cathedral of Truth is?"

"The Cathedral of Truth? Never heard of it. What is it?"

"The headquarters of some cult or other shady group."

"Ah, there is room for all sorts of religions and little cults here. They spring up like mushrooms after rain when they're not actively suppressed. But I've never heard of that one."

"Is it a good idea to go there?" Frank interrupted. "Someone might recognise us."

"We don't have time to waste. Juuso will come with me, the rest of you stay outside and watch. If anyone starts running away when they see me, stop them. Nina, did you have the address of that cathedral?"

Nina took her smartphone out of her handbag and scrolled for a moment. "Metsätie 5."

Viktor nodded.

"I know the street. It's near the university. Shall we go now?"

"Let's take a quick look at what kind of place it is. After that, we could get something to eat. Can we book a table for a long lunch at a good restaurant or hotel nearby? I read somewhere that there are surprisingly good restaurants here," Jacob mused.

"Viktor, any ideas?" Juuso asked.

"On that Metsätie, there's a place called Frima, which is advertised as the best new restaurant in the city. It opened a few months ago. The restaurant is run by the former head chef of the Noma restaurant in Copenhagen. I understand they also have private dining rooms," Viktor replied.

"Did you say Noma? It closed down a year ago when the main owners apparently got tired of it and disappeared from the public eye. It was one of my favorite restaurants," Jacob recalled.

Viktor shrugged.

"I don't know about its history, but I can certainly call and ask about the situation."

"Let me call. What's the phone number?" Jacob took his phone out of his pocket.

Viktor scrolled on his phone for a moment and showed the restaurant's contact information to Jacob, who dialed the number.

The call was answered quickly.

"Hi, I'm looking for a lunch spot on rather short notice for a larger group. There would be about seven or eight of us, and we would be there in an hour at the

latest," Jacob explained.

"We're quite full. If you don't mind us setting a table a bit to the side instead of in the main dining room, we can certainly arrange a booking," the waiter replied.

"That would be great," Jacob said. He put his phone in his pocket and nodded to Viktor.

"Thanks for the tip, that was easy. Let's hope the food is good. Next, let's go see that Cathedral of Truth."

After driving for a few kilometers, they reached the city area. Frank looked out the window and mused aloud, "This is... civilised. I imagined we were coming to a refugee camp."

"That's what almost everyone thinks. I feel like more people are moving here from Finland now than from anywhere else," Viktor laughed. "But we're almost there. We'll turn right at the next intersection, and we'll be on Metsätie."

Metsätie 5 was a small, black-painted house between larger buildings.

"Just stop here, Viktor. Wait a moment, Juuso and I will go take a look at what that place is."

Juuso and Jacob walked to the gate, which read "Welcome to the Church of Truth." They opened the gate and walked across a small yard to the house's door.

Jacob knocked and carefully opened it.

The interior didn't exactly look like a traditional church but rather a classroom. On the side wall was a large blackboard and in front of it a lecturer's desk. The rest of the room was filled with lecture chairs with

attached writing desks.

On the other side wall were two large portraits. In one, an old man pressed a hand to his temple as if in thought. Jacob walked over to the painting and read below it that it depicted Karl Popper. In the other painting was a man in a top hat with a strange white collar around his neck. This painting depicted Sir Francis Bacon. Between the paintings was a smaller plaque that read:

The Three Commandments of the Church of Truth:

1. Truth is unattainable, but strive for it nonetheless.

2. Do not intentionally misrepresent.

3. Do not make claims that cannot be falsified in any way.

"Takes all kinds," Juuso commented.

A bearded man dressed in black had entered the room from the back door.

"Good day, and welcome to the Church of Truth," the man said.

"Thank you. An interesting place," Jacob replied.

"We don't often see uninvited visitors here, so may I ask what brought you?"

"We came to see the Free City, and the church just happened to be on our way," Jacob said and continued, "I can't say I've ever heard of a church like this. Is this some Christian sect or Islam or something else?"

The man in black laughed.

"No, this is its own church, but not really a religion of God. It started somewhat ironically a few years ago

on anonymous internet forums, so I don't even know all the early members by name."

"Of course," Jacob huffed.

"What do you mean?" the man in black asked.

"Nothing special. Just tell me more about how this church came to be," Jacob urged. "That does interest me."

The man sat down in the lecturer's chair.

"Well, a loose group formed in internet discussions, who didn't really believe in anything supernatural but were of the opinion that the church and religion have traditionally had many important roles in society. There's the practical role of organizing celebrations for life's significant events, and on the other hand, religion has defined and spread moral values and offered some kind of philosophical, ultimate truth, even if that truth hasn't always been entirely true."

"What do you mean by that last part?" Jacob wondered.

"Most people seem to have a profound need to believe in some ultimate truth that doesn't need to be questioned and can be experienced as certain. Take, for example, the idea that a god created the heavens and the earth, or the opposite extreme: that no god exists at all."

"Where on that spectrum does this church fall?" Jacob asked.

"It depends on your point of view. Either in the middle or not on that spectrum at all. In our view, both of those extremes are so bizarre that believing in them seems almost childish. That there's a gray-bearded,

merciful old man in the sky, whose mercy, however, vanishes if you happen to worship him in slightly the wrong way. In that case, that old man will cast you into the eternal fires of hell. It just doesn't sound like a very plausible story. Or then the idea that this three-dimensional spacetime we perceive is all that exists. That doesn't seem very likely either. Besides, both of those are claims whose truthfulness cannot be verified by any known tool, and therefore they violate the third commandment of our church. And we cannot make such claims."

Jacob laughed.

"That third commandment is a bit strange. If something is true, surely it can't be proven false?"

The man in black smirked.

"It is indeed counterintuitive. New members of our congregation usually struggle with it for a while before they see the light. Let's take a simple example. If you ask how far the nearest shop is, I can answer in two ways: that it's just a short distance away or that it's two hundred metres away. The first is a claim that cannot be falsified. Even if the shop were a thousand kilometres away, I could always say that it's a short distance compared to the distance to the moon. On the other hand, the latter answer is *absolutely* wrong. The more precise distance might be, for example, 201.78653 metres, which is different from 200 metres. The significant difference lies in the fact that someone can measure that distance and show that the number I gave is wrong. Then we have both the opportunity and the means to

get *closer* to the truth. It is important that the claims made are falsifiable, because the fact that they can be proven wrong is the only possible way to get closer to the truth. Unfalsifiable claims halt that process and are therefore a sin."

The man fell silent for a moment as if to give them time to digest what they had heard.

"If you're interested, we have a discussion session for new members at nine tomorrow morning, where these and other questions are explored in more depth."

Jacob laughed.

"Thanks for the invitation, but unfortunately, we'll be moving on tomorrow. But let's get back to how this church came to be. That sounded interesting."

"Right. Our founding members felt that a new organization was needed for these important tasks of the church and religion, one that would approach matters of faith a little differently. There was a long discussion about what would be a suitable, not-so-supernatural phenomenon that would be as unattainable and worthy of worship as the gods and commandments of religions are. Truth was deemed the most suitable candidate – an unattainable moral virtue, much like the concept of a sinless life in many religions. History, of course, easily provided some figures to carry the roles of saints and prophets, most notably Sir Francis Bacon, Galileo Galilei, and Karl Popper. One of our church's most important annual celebrations is the anniversary of Galileo Galilei's verdict, June 22nd."

"Interesting. How large is this congregation at the

moment?"

"It's not very large. There are a few dozen active members and perhaps a hundred more sporadic ones."

Jacob scratched his head for a moment, looking thoughtful, and then slapped his forehead almost theatrically.

"Now I remember! I had a feeling I recognised this church from somewhere. A few years ago, the Church of Truth was very active on social media and did a lot of fact-checking related to, for example, the establishment of the West Helsinki special economic zone. Is this the same group?"

The bearded man sighed deeply.

"That was in the very early days of our church. Back then, the whole thing was probably still some kind of student humor for many, a way to fight against the misinformation spreading on the internet. I think they jokingly referred to it as missionary work. In those days, it became painfully clear to us that mere truth does not stand a chance against actively spread lies on social media. A large part of the then-active members gave up and disappeared from the scene, but a small part decided to proclaim the gospel of truth to their followers even more strongly. And then we decided to also establish a real meeting place for this community here in the Kainuu Free City."

Jacob sighed in disappointment.

"Thank you. This was a very interesting conversation, but I think we'll be on our way now."

Jacob and Juuso stepped out of the church door.

Juuso laughed.

"Takes all kinds. Did you notice anything special?"

"No. I'm pretty sure this church was a dead end. I don't think our thief was one of these sermon-givers, but let's see who we find at the apartment. Let's go eat."

They arrived at the car.

"Viktor, is Frima close enough that you can leave the car here and we can walk?"

"Let's leave it here. It's very close."

"Hey, let's do this: you guys go to the restaurant, and I'll go with Viktor to check out the target," Juuso suggested.

Jacob nodded.

"Let's do that. But Nina, I have a little puzzle for you to solve after lunch," Jacob said.

"Tell me more," Nina replied.

The others got out of the car and started walking towards the restaurant.

"The guy we met in the church said that the Church of Truth started on some anonymous internet forum. Can you try to find those discussions and identify the participants?" Jacob asked.

"Of course. I'll do some preliminary research this afternoon, but don't get your hopes up too high. If it really was an anonymous forum, identifying the participants from a few years back is no trivial task. On the other hand, you never know, people always leave some traces unless they've been very careful."

"Good."

The street was lined with three- to five-storey buildings of varying appearance. A narrow alley seemed to lead deeper into the city between some of the houses. They arrived at an old wrought-iron sign that read Frima. In the display window was an old motorcycle, perhaps from the 60s, and next to it a slightly younger-looking jukebox.

They stepped into the restaurant. Jacob wrinkled his nose as he looked around.

"This doesn't exactly look like a regular fine dining restaurant. I hope no one starts banging on that pinball machine. And why on earth is there an old fuel pump in that corner? The tables and chairs also look like they've been randomly collected from past decades."

A waiter approached.

"Hi, do you have a reservation?"

"Yes, under the name Jacob Taggard. We were promised a back room of some sort."

"A larger group just left, so a private space has become available for you. I hope that's alright, as our main dining room is full."

"A private space is better," Jacob replied.

The waiter led them to a room with a table set for ten. The walls were adorned with surrealist art.

"Have you been to Frima before? Are you familiar with our concept?" the waiter asked.

"No, we're not. This is our first time here. I heard that the old chefs from Noma run this place. Noma was one of my favorite restaurants, so we decided to give it a try. I must say, though, that the decor in the main

dining room is a bit different from what I expected," Jacob replied.

The waiter laughed.

"Our decor is indeed a bit different. In the beginning, it was quite empty here, but we've gradually collected all sorts of fun objects, either by buying or trading. In fact, our decor rarely stays the same for more than a week. For example, we got that pinball machine a couple of days ago when a customer wanted to trade it for a vinyl record player and record collection we had here. The pinball machine is in its original condition and works with one-markka coins. Of course, no one has those anymore, so if you want to play, just ask for game coins at the counter."

"Thanks, but I think we'll manage without," Jacob said.

Frank had been circling the room, mesmerised by the artworks.

"Absolutely stunning pieces. I don't recognise the artist, but I'd like to buy some of these. How much do they cost?" Frank asked the waiter.

The corners of the waiter's mouth twitched.

"They are stunning indeed. Actually, they're not the work of any particular artist but of a neural network. This neural network is a kind of artificial intelligence that was first trained on the art of well-known surrealists and then created these works. If you still want to buy them, I can ask our owners for the prices."

Frank blushed. "Horrible pseudo-artistic crap," he muttered as he sat down.

"Let's get back to our food concept," the waiter suggested.

"Our specialty is that most of the meat dishes on our menu can be ordered with either regular meat from a slaughtered animal or with lab-grown meat. As recently as the beginning of this year, the lab-grown meat was more expensive and, frankly, not nearly as good as the traditional kind. It was sold more as an experimental experience. But nowadays, I personally recommend the lab-grown meat for all dishes. It's both cheaper and at least as tasty as the best regular meat."

Jacob wrinkled his nose.

"Lab-grown meat? I don't think I'd like that. What kind of real meat do you have?"

"For lunch, we have a three-course menu. Today's main course is a choice of chicken or reindeer, and as I mentioned, you can choose either slaughtered or lab-grown meat for the dishes. In addition, we have the lab dish of the day, which our chefs and lab team have made from artificial alligator meat. We don't have a natural version of that. If you choose slaughtered meat, you'll get a small taste of lab-grown meat for comparison. The vegetarian option is ginger curry."

"Okay, I'll have the chicken. From a chicken coop, not a lab. And mineral water to drink," Jacob ordered.

The waiter sighed.

"Right. Our legislation requires a statement about the living conditions of the production animals when selling animal products. I must admit, I had already grown a bit attached to our Marja the chicken. She

scratches for worms in the backyard, and some of our child customers occasionally hold her. And Marja lays a breakfast egg for some lucky person almost every morning. But the meat is locally sourced and guaranteed to be fresh. It's cooked before rigor mortis can set in, which results in an exceptionally tasty dish."

Jacob's face fell.

"That wasn't exactly a sales pitch. Maybe I'll have the ginger curry after all. I don't think I want to hear where your reindeer meat comes from."

The waiter smiled.

"Thank you, so a vegetarian version for you."

The waiter turned to Nina.

"And for you?"

"I could try the lab chicken. Let Marja lay eggs tomorrow too."

The others ordered in turn. No one ordered real meat, and the waiter left to take the orders to the kitchen.

A word from the author

This free edition of *Atlas Kicks the Ball* is complete. The only difference from the paid edition is these additional nag pages, which appear a few times along the way.

You may share the book freely for non-commercial purposes (CC BY-NC 4.0). You can also build the book yourself, in any format, from the source at **git.brainpaingames.com/tommy/atlas-public**.

If you'd like to support me, you can buy the PDF and EPUB editions without these nag pages at **store.brainpaingames.com**.

Thank you. The story continues on the next page.

Chapter 10

As they arrived at the airport, Tanya noticed an airplane in familiar colors.

"Why on earth is the Fartum private jet here? And I think that's the one Jacob said was for his exclusive use," Tanya wondered.

"Call and ask if you can get a ride back, so you don't have to suffer on the train with that ankle," Eddie suggested.

Tanya nodded and called Jacob.

"I'm just waiting for lunch, is it something urgent?" Jacob snapped into the phone.

"I'm here at the Kainuu Free City, and your plane seems to be at the airport."

"So?"

"I had a little accident this morning. I was just wondering if the plane is heading back to Helsinki anytime soon? If I could catch a ride, I wouldn't have to suffer through the train ride with a broken leg."

"So you're at the Kainuu Free City airport now?" Jacob asked.

"Yes."

"Okay. We're at Restaurant Frima. Come here, and we'll talk. I'll call if we have to leave, my schedule is a bit uncertain."

"There are probably three or four of us, will there be room?" Tanya checked.

"There's plenty of room at the table," Jacob replied.

"Okay, see you soon," Tanya said and ended the call.

"Restaurant Frima, do you know where it is? Jacob is having lunch there, and I could pop over to talk about a ride back," Tanya explained to Jonas.

"Of course I know, it's one of the best restaurants in the city. They have a rather fun experimental menu where top chefs create dishes from various novel ingredients."

"What do you mean by novel ingredients?" Eddie inquired.

"Lab-grown meat and other cultured foods," Jonas replied.

"Sounds interesting," Eddie commented.

Ragnar was at the cabin doing paperwork when they arrived. Raakku was perched on a nearby pine branch and announced their arrival with a loud caw.

"What was the verdict?" Ragnar asked when he saw Tanya coming in with crutches.

"A small fracture in the ankle, three weeks in a cast, and then new X-rays. They said the leg should be back in action in a couple of months. It was pretty stupid of me," Tanya replied.

Ragnar shrugged.

"It happens. Minor bumps and bruises are part of the game."

"Tell me about it. But we should get going to sort out my ride back. What about you, Eddie?" Tanya asked.

"Let's sort out your ride back to Helsinki first. I'll think about what I'll do after that," Eddie replied.

Ragnar looked at his papers and said, "You go sort out Tanya's ride. I still have a few papers to fill out before I can go home. We'll definitely jump tomorrow, if you're interested. Jonas, shall we catch up later?"

"Sure thing," Jonas replied.

***

Tanya limped through the door of Frima first. The waiter looked somewhat surprised to see the Minister of Finance and led them to the private room reserved for Jacob's party.

Jacob looked at the cast and frowned in a way that told Tanya exactly how the next few minutes of conversation would go.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Why do you insist on trying to kill yourself? Are you ever going to grow up?" Jacob demanded.

Tanya sighed.

"Can I sit down before I answer? This leg is a bit sore."

"You don't have to answer. I know you're just going to give me your opinion on how I don't know how to

live my life properly and how life is only worth living if you're risking it."

Tanya sat down, looked at Jacob for a moment, and sighed again.

"I suppose so. I guess I've said something along those lines now and then. Maybe I have to admit that it's been unnecessarily harsh."

Jacob burst out laughing.

"Tanya admitting she's wrong. I'll have to mark the date."

"Well, I think I have far fewer of those marks in my calendar for you. But seriously, I've been thinking about this. Remember when we were kids, you were always the one dancing with joy, punching the wall until your knuckles bled, crying bitterly when the cat died? You couldn't get me angry no matter what. And I don't really remember ever dancing with joy."

"So?"

"Even if you don't seek physical thrills in your life, I can't say you don't experience things intensely. On the contrary, I'm the one who has trouble experiencing strong emotions and thrills. I have to jump out of a plane to get a glimpse of the kind of excitement you – to exaggerate a little – get when you wonder if you'll manage to boil an egg to the perfect consistency in the morning. Just stop and think for a moment. If you were prevented from experiencing all the joy, sorrow, and anger you feel every day, what would happen?"

Jacob thought for a moment and nodded.

"There wouldn't be much point in life."

"Exactly. Do you think someone, not necessarily you, might start to find their life so meaningless that they might consider suicide? I mean, if that suppression of emotions continued month after month, year after year," Tanya continued.

Jacob was silent again for a moment.

"I suppose it's possible. What are you getting at?"

"I'm getting at the fact that that's my life. You and others are trying to deny me the very things that make me live and feel. So can we agree that I won't criticise your life as meaningless, and you won't mock and try to limit my pursuit of experiences?"

"Let's agree on that. Our lunch is already well underway, but I'm sure they'll serve you too. At least the ginger curry was better than any I've had in ages. On the other hand, I don't recommend ordering the regular meat dishes. You'll get a sob story about how the waiter has to kill his pet with his own hands. Some incomprehensible local law forces them to give you the life story of the animal on your plate."

Tanya laughed.

"Were you surprised that the meat you eat was once a living animal?"

"No, but I don't need it rubbed in my face when I'm ordering food," Jacob grumbled.

Tanya laughed.

"Well, I was told about this place's lab-grown meats, so I'll probably try them. Hey, Jonas and Eddie, join us at the table. You don't have to be scared of our family drama."

Only now did Jacob notice Eddie and Jonas standing by the door.

"Oh, right, you said you had others with you. I know Eddie, of course, but I don't believe we've met. Jacob Taggard." Jacob stood up to shake Jonas's hand.

"Jonas Gault."

Jacob fell silent for a moment, bewildered, and studied Jonas more closely.

"Gault? The Minister of Finance?"

Jonas nodded.

"Nice to meet you. I've heard of you, but I didn't expect us to meet under these circumstances," Jacob said, looking at Tanya.

"Interesting company you keep."

Jonas looked at the table company.

"Likewise, nice to meet you. Allow me to welcome you to the Kainuu Free City. May I ask what brings you here?"

"Of course. This is a combined business and leisure trip. Negotiations have been heating up lately, so we decided to come and see what's really happening here. In addition, a busy associate of mine will be free for a meeting later today. So we might have to leave on short notice," Jacob replied.

"Well, I'd be happy to fill you in on local customs and what's happening here. As Jacob mentioned, I am the Minister of Finance of the Kainuu Free City. And indeed, since Finland wanted to change some details of the free city agreement, I've been quite actively involved in the negotiations between the governments lately,"

Jonas said.

The waiter arrived and turned to Jonas.

"The others are well into their meal, but what can I get for you?"

"If possible, we'll have the tasting menu – all of today's lab and vegetarian delicacies – for three. If that's okay with you?" Jonas checked with Eddie and Tanya.

Tanya and Eddie glanced at each other and nodded.

The waiter thanked them for the order and went to the kitchen.

"Jonas, I'd like to ask a couple of things I've been wondering about lately. Firstly, how on earth do you justify the Thaler's strongly negative interest rates? And secondly, the entire Kainuu Free City is supposedly extremely tolerant and progressive, but at the same time, the attitude towards the more conservative population is at best intolerant and contemptuous. Isn't that a contradiction?" Jacob asked.

Jonas laughed.

"There are pretty simple answers to those, although I doubt they'll necessarily sink in. Negative interest rates are about the fact that keeping the zero interest rate as a lower bound is a completely artificial price constraint on the market. One of the first things taught in economics is that restricting market prices leads to welfare losses. As for intolerance, tolerance, in my opinion, does not mean tolerating everything possible, but not tolerating intolerance. And the conservative moral view is simply on the side of evil in the battle between good and evil."

Jacob looked shocked.

"On the side of evil? What on earth do you mean?"

"I can't really find a milder phrasing. Jonathan Haidt has modeled the moral views of conservatives and liberals suggesting that a progressive relies on three foundations for their morality: Care, Fairness, and Liberty. The moral foundation of a conservative includes, in addition to the above, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity."

Jacob smiled.

"According to that, conservative morality is more diverse than liberal. Isn't it therefore better?"

Jonas looked at Jacob for a long time.

"Let's continue with that logic. Let's *diversify* that conservative moral foundation by adding, say, selfishness and child abuse as moral virtues. Is this new, more diverse moral foundation now better?"

Jacob was silent, so Jonas continued, "It's not about Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity not being in themselves good and desirable things. It's about how to choose in situations where some of these moral foundations are in conflict with each other. A progressive understands and accepts that sometimes individual freedom must be compromised to avoid causing too much harm, or sometimes harm must be caused to someone to achieve a fair outcome. If this thinking is extended to the moral foundations of conservatives, one is faced with questions such as whether loyalty can be demanded even when it causes harm, whether an unfair outcome can be justified simply by respect for authority, or whether individual

freedoms can be restricted just because something is sacred. If you have ever read a book or watched a movie where good fights against evil, it is always the evil side that believes that all of that can be justified, while the good side fights against it."

"But society can't stand on a liberal value base alone. Without conservative values, society weakens; it either disintegrates from internal conflict or falls to an external attacker," Jacob insisted, his voice becoming more strained.

"Karl Popper stated in his manifesto that a tolerant and open society must be prepared to, if necessary, defeat intolerant features in society even by force. And do you really think it's the progressives who attack a neighboring country or break up a progressive society from within? No, they are certainly die-hard conservatives, so the fact that those conservatives want to break up a progressive society is not, in my opinion, a very strong argument for why conservative morality would be somehow more correct," Jonas stated.

Jacob was startled to hear Popper's name.

"I think this is something we'll just have to disagree on. What about the negative interest rates? You said something about welfare losses, but I didn't quite understand it."

"First, you have to understand that when we talk about interest, we're talking about the price of delayed real consumption. That is, if I want or agree to postpone my consumption by a year, how much benefit or cost should I incur from that postponement," Jonas

explained.

"I'm lost already. Even a child knows that if you have to wait until tomorrow for a sweet, you should get a second one if the alternative is to get one immediately. That's a fundamental economic fact, and negative interest rates are against all rational behavior," Jacob insisted.

"Are they really?" Jonas asked.

"It's self-evident. If you can present me with a choice situation where I would rather consume less in the future than now, I'll pay for this lunch," Jacob promised.

Jonas smiled.

"That was an easy lunch to earn. Let's assume that in my left hand, I have an envelope with ten movie tickets that only you can use by tomorrow at the latest. You can use them if you sit in the cinema for the rest of today and tomorrow. In my right hand, on the other hand, I have an envelope with only nine movie tickets. You can use them until the end of next year. Which do you choose?"

Tanya recognised the annoyed expression on Jacob's face as he had to swallow his defeat.

"Alright. But that example is rather theoretical and far from real-life situations."

"Not really. People have a significant need to shift their consumption both forwards and backwards in time. In the short term, consumption is shifted forward in time, for example, because you can't buy food for the whole month on payday, as it would spoil. And on the other hand, in the long term, people need to shift some

of their consumption to their retirement years."

"Regardless, it's a fundamental truth: if I lend you money, you must pay back more, otherwise I wouldn't agree to lend it at all."

Jonas shrugged.

"Well, you have a right to that opinion, and no one is forcing you to lend Thalers to anyone at a negative interest rate. You can always spend them when you get them."

"That feels fundamentally *wrong*. Why on earth would anyone want the interest rate to be negative?"

"As I said a moment ago, under certain circumstances, welfare losses arise if the price of money is artificially restricted to be too high."

"What do you mean by welfare losses?"

Jonas thought for a moment.

"Okay, let's try this. If you were paid 100% overnight interest on your money, meaning your money would double overnight, how much would you consume today?"

"Probably nothing," Jacob replied.

"And what if you had to pay -50% interest overnight, meaning half of your purchasing power would disappear if you waited until tomorrow to make your purchases?" Jonas continued.

"I would spend almost everything. Where are you going with this?"

"It will become clear soon. So we agree that the interest rate affects how much goods and services are consumed in society in the short term."

Jacob nodded.

"And what about the potential supply of goods and services? To what extent does the interest rate affect how much electricity you can transmit tomorrow? Or how many newspapers can come out of the press, if there are enough buyers?"

Jacob thought for a moment.

"The interest rate doesn't seem to affect that. I still don't understand where you are going with this."

"Patience, my friend. So now we agree that in the short term, the demand for goods and services can be influenced by interest rate policy, but the supply cannot. What do you think happens if we set the interest rate so low that demand is higher than supply?"

Tanya was the first to answer.

"Inflation?"

Jonas nodded.

"Exactly. There is more demand than supply, so suppliers start to raise their prices, which leads to inflation. And what if we set the interest rate so high that demand is lower than supply?"

"Goods go unsold?" Jacob asked.

"Unemployment?" Tanya suggested.

Jonas nodded.

"Yes. The production capacity of goods and services is underutilised, and that means unemployment and lower returns on capital. I think we could call this a welfare loss caused by an excessively high interest rate, don't you?"

"I suppose so," Jacob admitted.

"Good. We're finally getting to the point. If the zero interest rate is too high in this sense, doesn't that mean that the zero interest rate causes welfare losses?"

"But a negative interest rate is *stealing* my money. I have a right to keep my money and be compensated if I postpone my consumption. The entire economy is based on that," Jacob replied, visibly annoyed.

"Ultimately, this is of course a matter of values. The financial system can be and has almost always been built in such a way that your right is realised. But the price of that is, from time to time, mass unemployment and large welfare losses. The financial system of the Free City, on the other hand, has been built to minimise welfare losses. The price of that, in turn, is that from time to time, the compensation for postponing consumption becomes negative for those who want to postpone their consumption," Jonas explained, then frowned.

"There is one thing I find a bit strange. According to your fundamental worldview, the individual is primarily responsible for their own actions, and receiving help from society's institutions is contemptible. But in a situation where you yourselves cannot find a party willing to pay the price you want for the money you lend, you cry out for society to guarantee your investments a better return than you would get yourselves. That sounds exactly like me demanding that the state arrange things so that I could buy a new sports car for a thousand – in other words, like socialism or communism," Jonas concluded with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"That's completely different. And your model doesn't

even work. You assume that consumer demand increases when interest rates fall, but in reality, the money just goes into real estate and stocks and raises their prices."

Jonas laughed.

"Hold on, did I hear that right? It's almost as if you just said that the market isn't always right in setting prices. But you're partly right, of course. Some of the price increase is a genuine increase in wealth. If interest rates fall, the value of stocks should rise. The increase in real estate values, in particular, is much more questionable in its justification, so in this case, interest rate policy and property taxation must be in sync. In the Kainuu Free City, we are committed to adjusting the property tax so that in the long run, the market price of land remains more or less the same in real terms. That curbs the formation of bubbles quite a bit."

Jacob huffed. "But that's pure communism, and it's bound to lead to a misallocation of resources. It's basic economics that prices are set correctly in the market, as long as the state doesn't interfere. Rational expectations and efficient markets – surely no one seriously argues against *those*?"

Jonas sighed.

"Okay, let's continue. Let's take a box with exactly one hundred euros worth of coins in it. The market participants don't know that and have to estimate the value of the coins. The rational expectations hypothesis says that if you take a large group of people, some will overestimate and some will underestimate the sum, but when you take the average of the estimates, it's not

systematically biased in one direction or the other."

Jacob nodded, and Jonas continued, "Different markets can be created around this box. Let's first take a betting market. Participants simply bet on whether the sum of the coins is greater or less than the sum specified in the betting contract. According to rational expectations, half will estimate high and the other half low, so the betting market will balance around the correct value."

Jacob continued to nod.

"We don't disagree on that."

"But betting markets aren't typical for things like housing. So let's tweak the analogy: instead of betting on the sum, we trade ownership of the box itself. Let's say we have, in accordance with rational expectations, three people who estimate that there are 110 euros in the box, and another three who think there are 90 euros. Let's also throw in three people who estimate the sum exactly correctly. Now tell me, where does the price settle when these people are allowed to trade that box?"

Jacob frowned.

"It's bound to settle near 110 euros. But..." Jonas waited for a moment, in case Jacob would continue his thought, but Jacob was left speechless.

"Yes. In such a market, either rational expectations or efficient markets must give way. So we can't trust that the market will allocate resources correctly. Of course, it must be admitted that even in such markets, authorities and dictators can allocate resources *even* worse, so one must be very careful about how to tamper

with markets to have a positive effect."

Jacob shook his head in disbelief.

"That simply makes no sense. The freer the market, the better things go. Everyone knows that."

Jonas shrugged.

"As I suspected, I couldn't convince you. Nevertheless, this is what we believe here in the free cities, and our so-called oddities are based on such thinking." Just then, Jacob's phone blared the Nokia tune, and he put it to his ear.

"Great. We'll be right out," he said and put the phone in his pocket.

"We have to go now. Please finish your lunch, I'll pay for it. And I'll let you know when we're heading back, you can certainly get a ride on the plane," Jacob promised Tanya.

Jacob and his friends left the table, and Jonas, Tanya, and Eddie were left.

"Excuse me, I'll go wash my hands while the others are leaving," Jonas said and got up from the table.

Eddie looked thoughtful.

"You look lost in thought."

"I'm thinking about Ragnar."

"What about him?" Tanya wondered.

"There was a guy at university back in the day, a real IT guru. He was originally involved in developing OpenSSH and later maintained it. But something happened, and the guy disappeared and abandoned all his projects. He was a bit older than me, and I wasn't really in contact with him – we just ran into each other

in the hallway sometimes. Still, I could swear it was Ragnar."

Chapter 11

Viktor was already waiting in front of the restaurant. Nina and Matti climbed into the back of the minibus, while Jacob, Hannu, and Frank stayed in the front. They drove for about five minutes and stopped in front of a tall apartment building. Jacob saw Juuso waiting at the building's entrance.

"Just drop us off here and find a parking spot a bit further away," Jacob told Viktor.

"Nice place, right on the top floor," Juuso commented as they arrived at the entrance.

"Of course. Let's go and see," Jacob replied.

The elevator doors opened onto the eighteenth floor. The apartment door was closed. Juuso knocked sharply twice on the door, and it opened immediately.

They walked through the door and an open hallway into a bright, minimally decorated, rather large living room. The air was a strange mix of cheap aftershave and a more sophisticated cologne. Jacob fixed his gaze on the men in the room and asked, "Who lives here?"

A slender, metrosexual-looking man sitting on the sofa between two burly men spoke up:

"I do. Who do you think you are, barging in..."

"I ask the questions. You answer," Jacob snapped. One of the men sitting next to the metrosexual nudged him in the ribs as a sign that he should listen.

"I'll get straight to the point. I have reason to believe that significant financial crimes have been committed from this apartment over computer networks. I would be very interested in hearing the details."

The metrosexual's expression brightened for a moment, but quickly turned to concern.

"Are you the police?"

"I ask, you answer."

"I guess this is what the landlord meant," the man muttered.

"What do you mean?" Jacob asked.

"This apartment had a pretty cheap rent, but the landlord had a strange condition. There's a computer in that study. I had to make sure it stayed on. And in case anyone asked anything, I was advised not to worry but to tell them everything I know," the man explained, shrugging. "Which is not much more than that there are instructions in the computer desk drawer on how to contact the computer's administrator. I don't know anything about any crimes, and I don't understand a thing about computers. I'm a bartender, just a regular bartender."

Jacob narrowed his eyes. "I wonder if I should believe that. Hannu, you, Nina, and Matti, take a look at those

instructions. Juuso, find out this guy's background and connections to cybersecurity circles and criminals. And you," he pointed at the slender man on the sofa, "show me the computer."

The metrosexual man got up and opened the study door. In the corner of the room was a desk with a small computer, a blank screen, and a keyboard.

"I haven't even opened that drawer, but the instructions should be in there."

Hannu went to the desk and opened the drawer. At the bottom was a single piece of paper with simply a username and password on it.

"Hmm. What do we do with this?" Hannu asked Matti and Nina.

Matti spoke first. "There are only two options, really. Either we try to log in directly with those credentials, or we start by copying the hard drive. If the instruction was to keep the machine on, it can apparently withstand being turned off for a while, so copying the hard drive should be possible."

"You have the tools with you?" Hannu confirmed.

"Of course."

Hannu stepped aside, and Matti began to examine the machine more closely. He took a screwdriver from his briefcase and was about to use it when he stopped and stood up.

"On the other hand, this guy or these guys are pretty sharp. That case could have all sorts of sensors telling them that the case has been opened. After that, they might destroy all the information inside. Maybe it would

be wiser to try to log in with the credentials first, and if it looks like some data is being destroyed, we pull the plug. We can still get a lot off the hard drive in the lab, even if someone has tried to delete some data. If there's some physical self-destruct mechanism, then we've lost all chance of making contact."

Hannu and Jacob glanced at each other.

"Maybe there's some sense in that. Let's not touch the case yet, let's try to log in," Hannu said.

Matti turned on the monitor and tapped the keyboard a few times. The screen came to life, and a green cursor appeared blinking in the upper left corner on a black background. The screen prompted for a username.

"Looks like they took inspiration from The Matrix," Matti smirked and entered the username and password.

The screen went dark for a moment, and then text appeared in the upper left corner:

```
<apt3>has joined #channel
```

The cursor moved to blink at the bottom of the screen.

"Looks like some kind of IRC program."

Matti tried a few key combinations.

"But it doesn't seem to be possible to get anywhere else, at least not with the usual commands. Shall we try sending a message?"

Before anyone could say anything, new text appeared on the screen.

```
<ho1>has joined #channel
<ho1>Marc, did curiosity get the better of you?
Didn't we agree not to touch this?
```

"Who's Marc?" Jacob asked.

The metrosexual's voice came from the living room. "I'm Marc. Why?"

"I see. Matti, can I write messages to that guy now?" Jacob asked.

Matti nodded.

"Write whatever you want, and when you press enter, the line will apparently appear on both screens."

Jacob moved to the keyboard.

```
<apt3>This isn't Marc.  Who are you?
<ho1>How about we start with who _you_ are and
what you're doing in Marc's apartment?
```

Jacob huffed and thought for a moment.

```
<apt3>I need to talk to you.  How can I reach
you?
<ho1>Well, we're talking already.  Now tell
me, with whom do I have the honour of speaking?
<apt3>No, face-to-face.
<ho1>Well, then you can't have anything very
important to say.
<apt3>It's precisely because I have something
important to say that we need to talk face-to-face.
<ho1>Maybe in your opinion.  This is perfectly
fine for me, and this doesn't even seem very important.
On the contrary, this seems like a waste of time
since you refuse to answer my simple questions.
I have other things to do, so are you going to
tell me who you are and why you're in Marc's apartment,
or shall we end this here?  I don't particularly
```

need to talk to you, but you apparently do, so I set the rules, don't I?

"This guy is starting to get on my nerves," Jacob muttered.

<apt3>I'm investigating a crime, and I have reason to suspect that this machine is involved. Is that reason enough?

There was a moment of silence on the screen.

<ho1>Ah. Mr. Taggard. Isn't modern image recognition technology wonderful?

Jacob was startled. "Damn it. There's a hidden camera somewhere."

<ho1>There's one right above the monitor. It has a microphone too. In addition, the apartment's doors and windows are now locked. And now that I've got the cameras on, it looks like quite a group of you have broken in there. Tell me a bit more about what crime you were talking about.

A silence fell over the room.

<ho1>Ah. An awkward silence. My favourite sound.

<apt3>Who the fuck do you think you are?

<ho1>Jacob, my dear, with that attitude, this conversation won't last very long. I'll just call the police and let them find out why you've broken into Marc's apartment.

Juuso walked in. "We tried to go outside, but the door was somehow stuck, and we couldn't get it open. And the phones have no signal."

"No fucking kidding. And someone is having a good laugh at our expense right now," Jacob snapped.

"Jacob, you're getting emotional. May I take the keyboard? If you want to tell me something you don't want that person to hear, write it on paper and show it to me," Niklas instructed.

Jacob nodded and moved away from the keyboard.

<ho1>Well now, maybe we can make some progress. What did you have in mind, Niklas?

Niklas was startled when he saw his name on the screen.

<apt3>We have strong reasons to suspect that this computer has been used for significant financial crimes. We wanted to talk to the computer's holder about information that would enable the return of the property.

<ho1>ROTFL. And so you decided to take a page out of Ocean's Eleven and assemble a crack team of a few millionaires, a cybersecurity expert, a career criminal, and a lawyer. What's wrong with the police? Besides the fact that the financial crime investigators in Helsinki have had their funding cut, so they probably wouldn't have the resources and expertise.

<apt3>We believed that this approach would allow us to proceed with the matter more swiftly and with less difficulty, as we quickly obtained clear leads.

<ho1>What are these leads and strong reasons to suspect?

Niklas turned to the others. "What do we say to that?" Jacob shrugged. "Tell them what we know. It's hardly going to be news to them. Nina, can you explain, since you understand it best?" Nina nodded and took the keyboard.

<apt3>There is a clearly commented vulnerability in the source code of OpenSSH. According to Codeberg, it was written with a user ID that was active in this apartment just a few hours ago.

<ho1>Oh, that... So it took three years for someone to find it.

Niklas took the keyboard back.

<apt3>What do you mean? Did you write that vulnerability?

<ho1>No. You should probably understand that there are several people behind this user ID. It is extremely unlikely that any of us will ever have to discuss this matter any further. Even if that were to happen, none of us would admit to either writing that vulnerability or exploiting it. And as has been stated, it has been wide open for three years, so anyone could have found it, not just us.

<apt3>Why? Why would you write an open vulnerability into the internet's core infrastructure?

<ho1>I can answer that easily enough, if you're interested.

<apt3>Yes, I am interested.

<ho1>A few years ago, there were several open-source projects that are part of the internet's core infrastructure,

OpenSSH among them, that were in tight financial straits. There weren't enough developers, and not enough money to pay a decent salary even to the few we had. At the same time, these software packages were widely used by both wealthy and less wealthy companies, and it was particularly these wealthy companies that did little more than complain about problems and demand new features. For some reason, however, both subtle hints and direct requests for funding fell on deaf ears.

<apt3>So you decided to take the law into your own hands and steal money from the evil capitalist swine. Just because they dared to use free software that you had provided for free?

<ho1>That sounds like how you would have acted. You simply don't seem to understand the mindset of these developers.

<ho1>This isn't done for money or fame or glory. Well, maybe a little. The primary motivation, however, is solving interesting problems and doing things properly.

<apt3>That still doesn't answer why you had to break the core infrastructure and steal other people's property.

<ho1>Patience. Things have to be explained slowly to you. The problem wasn't that we were starving. We had jobs and at least a sufficient income from other sources. The problem was, and is, that because your economic system confuses value and price, it does not allocate resources

correctly. We created a massive amount of value by developing the internet's core infrastructure, but because we distributed it for free, it is worthless in your system.

<apt3>So you do want money and recognition after all...

<ho1>This is apparently a difficult concept for you to grasp, but the issue is not our financial well-being or envy or anything like that. It's the simple observation that your economic system and theory are based on the efficient allocation of scarce resources. But in today's world, scarce resources are a dying breed (pun intended), and more and more resources are abundant. And that is what you do not understand. When your economists are given the problem of how to incentivise people to create things that are naturally infinitely divisible and abundant, the only solution they have come up with is to make those resources artificially scarce through copyrights and patents. Which is, of course, completely absurd.

"Fucking hell, some kind of left-wing terrorists," Jacob spat.

<ho1>Not very left-wing, at least not in the traditional sense, as we do respect individual freedoms. And terrorist is a bit of an exaggeration, if terrorism is understood as intimidating people through violence. But it must be admitted that yes, our goal is the dismantling of your economic system to make way for a better one. There has

been a great deal of discussion about how actively that dismantling should be pursued. Some believe that your current system will collapse under its own impossibility, while others are of the opinion that it needs a little help.

<apt3>And so you've put holes in the internet's core infrastructure, which you also use yourselves?

<ho1>Yes. For obvious reasons, I am a bit selective about how I share and use my own data on the internet. But you don't need to be too concerned about our security; in practice, there is a secure alternative for everything.

<apt3>And why did you tell me all this?

<ho1>You still don't understand? You lost. Both the money and your worldview. You are wasting your time looking for the money. You will not get it back. Go on with your lives and try to figure out what went wrong. I don't think I have anything more to say. Leave Marc a reasonable compensation for his trouble, and I will open the doors so you can leave. And knowing your kind, just take the machine with you and analyse it to your heart's content. You won't find anything on it but a proxy using the Tor network that talks to Codeberg and this communication program, which also uses the Tor network. Or wait. I'll try to explain it one more way. It might ring a bell. If you were to see Atlas, the giant who holds the world on his shoulders, if you saw the blood running down his chest, his knees buckling, his arms trembling

`but still trying to hold the world aloft with the last of his strength, and the greater his effort the heavier the world bore down upon him - what would you tell him?`

"To shrug." Jacob recognised the quote from Ayn Rand's book and couldn't stop himself from saying the answer out loud.

`<ho1>I would say drop the ball, bounce it a couple of times, and then kick it into orbit. Goodbye.`

`<ho1>has left #channel`

"Fuck," Jacob snarled. "Take that machine with you and tear it to shreds in your lab. He's not so smart that he didn't make a single mistake."

Jacob pulled his wallet from his pocket, took out a hundred-euro note, and slapped it onto the table. He looked around as if searching for cameras and snapped:

"Open fucking sesame!"

Juuso's associate understood the hint and went to the front door.

"It's not opening," came the voice from the door.

Jacob looked around and pulled the rest of the bills from his wallet onto the table.

"How about now?" he asked, and then he heard the front door click open.

"Juuso, call Viktor. Let's get the fuck out of here."

Chapter 12

The chocolate assortment served for dessert made Tanya close her eyes and sigh.

"This is unbelievably good. I've never eaten anything like it."

"I've heard this restaurant is spoken of as one of the best without a Michelin star yet. But it's likely just a matter of time before the Michelin inspectors find their way here. And there are several former Michelin-starred chefs in that kitchen, so it's no wonder it tastes good," Jonas remarked.

Eddie nodded his head as well.

"I could eat this even on a full stomach," he sighed. "But what's next? Tanya's not going to be jumping anymore, so what else is there to see or do in the Free City?"

Jonas thought for a moment.

"Perhaps I could show you some highlights of the city. In fact, one of the most interesting places is right behind this wall. We could start there."

"Sounds good," Eddie said.

Jonas called the waiter over.

"Thank you, the food was excellent as always. Is it true that our friend who left earlier settled the whole bill?" Jonas asked.

"Glad to hear you enjoyed the food. And yes, the payment has already been taken care of. So thank you, and see you next time."

Tanya and Eddie followed Jonas from the table and out the door.

"This first stop is close enough to walk to, even with Tanya's leg," Jonas said. He opened an adjacent door, on which was written John's Place. Tanya didn't immediately understand where they had stepped into. The space seemed to be some kind of café or pub. To the right was an open door, above which was written The Library of Peculiar Books. At the back of the space, a large glass wall revealed an exercise area where some kind of circus practice was underway. With a quick glance, Tanya saw at least juggling, tightrope walking, and trampoline jumping. To her left, an open door was labeled HackSpace. Someone inside appeared to be working with a soldering iron. Behind the café counter, stairs led up to a second floor.

"What is this place?" Tanya wondered.

"Hang on, let's sit down first. There seems to be a free table by the window. Go there, I'll go to the counter and buy us a round. What would you like?" Jonas asked.

Eddie was first.

"Just a standard lager, maybe a Heineken. In a

bottle."

"Something a bit tastier for me. An IPA, perhaps," Tanya requested.

"They don't sell Heineken here, but I'm sure I can find a basic lager."

Tanya and Eddie sat down to wait as Jonas went to the counter and greeted the bartender like an old friend. Soon, Jonas returned to the table carrying two identical brown bottles and a glass of sparkling water.

"I'm not much for beer, but here you go: Green Dutch for Eddie, and Lynx IPA for Tanya."

Tanya glanced at the bottles. The names of the beers were printed on the labels in Times New Roman.

"What's the deal with the bottles being identical and the font being the same? Is this some local brewery?"

Jonas sat down before answering.

"Not at all. Green Dutch is a bulk lager, imported stuff. Lynx IPA, on the other hand, is from a local brewery. Our drug and alcohol laws are, in some ways, more permissive than what you're used to; for example, cannabis is legal and taxed just like alcohol. But regarding advertising, we're stricter. In fact, advertising alcohol is completely prohibited."

"I don't quite get it. Surely you don't *need* to advertise Heineken to sell it here?" Eddie mused.

"The advertising ban is global, universal. If a product is advertised somewhere, anywhere, it cannot be sold here," Jonas explained.

"Whoa, that's pretty strict. If you find one yellowed Budweiser server's apron somewhere in the backwoods of

Argentina, is it banned here, even if all other advertising has stopped?" Eddie wondered.

"The breweries puzzled over that at first. We tried to tell them that as long as producers understand the spirit of the regulation – that products are not to be advertised – we won't go searching for yellowed server's aprons in the backwoods of Argentina. If, on the other hand, producers start selling "Karjalan" beer that comes from the same production line as the Karjala beer that sponsors the Finnish national ice hockey team, with logos that can only be told apart with a microscope, the interpretations might tighten up quickly. The packaging – colouring, design, and labeling – is also deemed to be advertising. That's why it's been quite easy for producers to ditch their old brands here and come up with new names for their products. We'll go to a grocery store later, and you'll notice a few other interesting differences."

"I see. But what is this place where we're sitting now?" Tanya asked.

"This is one of my favorite places in the Free City. It's hard to describe briefly, but let's call it a Freecoin Bazaar. All the services you can get here can be paid for with Freecoins. In fact, John's Place is a kind of chain. There are also locations outside the free cities. They are all a bit different. Each has its own focus, but almost all of them have a hackspace like that."

Jonas pointed to the room where the person with the soldering iron had put down the tool and was now examining a circuit board with a magnifying glass.

"There are tools and other necessities for various craft projects. 3D printers, label makers, sewing machines, welding equipment, and everything in between – but most importantly, people who know how to use them."

Jonas nodded towards the Library of Peculiar Books.

"Every John's Place also has a small library of peculiar books."

"Why are they peculiar books?" Tanya wanted to know.

"It's a bit of an inside joke. The target audience for these places is, in a way, a bit of a special crowd, people who are interested in something far more than people generally are. And the books in the library are peculiar because they generally don't interest the average person. The focus is on non-fiction books that explain their subject exceptionally well, but there are also some unique works of fiction mixed in. The shelves are not categorised traditionally by subject but by the book's importance. The first section holds books that everyone – regardless of their field, really – should read at some point in their lives. The second section features landmark works in their respective fields, and the books in the third section go, so to speak, deep into a particular subject. The fourth and final section is a locked cabinet. The works in there are dangerous books, which are only allowed to be read under supervision."

"Dangerous books," Eddie wondered, "what are they?"

"The reason they shouldn't be read is not because they contain any significant insights or are otherwise high-quality literature. Quite the opposite. They con-

tain ideas that are more or less foolish, but for some reason, these books have managed to spread them to a wide audience. That's precisely why they are dangerous. However, these books must be studied so that we can understand why people have gotten those foolish ideas into their heads."

"What books are in there then?"

"If I remember correctly, there's at least Hitler's Mein Kampf, Marx's Das Kapital, the Bible, the Quran, and of course, Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged."

Tanya laughed.

"Of course."

Jonas continued his tour of the place.

"Of course, you can also get food at John's Place. This particular place is a bit special with the Michelin-starred chefs in the kitchen, but in most, the restaurant is just a regular, affordable eatery. Some form of accommodation is also available if needed. And often, these places have some sort of physical activity component. Here it's circus acrobatics, but for example, in the Alps, there's a John's Place where various climbing activities play a central role. On the coast of Morocco, there's a John's Place where you'll find some pretty high-level surfers in the winter. When you go to a John's Place, you know that you can get world-class instruction and company for your hobby if you want. That's actually a kind of trademark. Everything can be paid for with Freecoins, so when a top acrobat from here wants to test their limits in alpine climbing, with Freecoins they can get a top-level guide who would be quite expensive

with regular money."

Jonas glanced towards the training hall.

"It would have been fun to try some acrobatics, but with Tanya's leg in this state, I don't think we'll be doing that today."

Tanya laughed, though she looked a bit disappointed.

"But there's one more feature typical of these places: escape rooms. They have the usual one-hour puzzle rooms designed for everyone, but above all, there is a unique sub-genre here where no clues are given. If you don't get out, you can try again. The problems in them are also often of a different nature than in traditional escape rooms, where the problem is easy to solve once you've figured out what to do. Here, you usually know what you should do, but doing it is difficult and requires practice, thought, or understanding."

Eddie glanced at Tanya.

"Sounds like fun. I'd be interested in trying if we just have the time."

"Let's ask if there's any availability," Jonas said and called out to the bartender behind the counter.

"How are the escape rooms looking for today?"

"There's room. What difficulty level would you like?"

Jonas looked at Eddie questioningly.

"The hardest possible, of course," Eddie replied.

The bartender smiled a little.

"I take it you haven't been here before? We don't admit people to the highest level – category ten – without a special interview and a demonstration of certain safety skills. In fact, you can't even get into a category nine

room until you've passed the same room at difficulty level eight."

Eddie looked a bit disappointed.

"But the scale here is a bit different. Passing a level ten means a world-class performance in many different tasks. No one has passed our most demanding room in its level ten version yet, even though it's been open for six months. Passing a level nine is unlikely without strong professionals from many different fields in the group. Even level eight requires quite a bit of dedication. If you pass it on your first try, you'll get a gift certificate for level nine. No one has managed that yet, either. I would probably recommend starting with something easier, but if you like a challenge, then why not."

"I guess level eight will have to do then," Eddie sighed.

Jonas laughed.

"Tanya, can Eddie handle disappointment? I can almost guarantee we won't get through it."

Tanya grinned.

"Eddie can handle disappointment. I'm more worried about how I'll get him back to work before we've passed it," she replied.

"Hey, I'm not that stubborn," Eddie protested, shaking a finger at them.

The bartender looked at the booking situation on the computer.

"It seems to be ready, so would you like to start right away?" he asked.

They walked up the stairs to the second floor, and the bartender led them to a small room.

"The outer door can be opened with the emergency release if needed. Your task is to find the code that opens this numerical lock. The door will open automatically after one hour. There are no clues for these harder rooms, so you're on your own," the bartender explained and then left the room, closing the door behind him.

Tanya looked around. They were in a small, sparse room. On one wall was a desk with two computer screens, a keyboard, a mouse, and a device that looked like a virtual reality headset with its controllers. Next to the desk was an office chair and a set of drawers underneath. On one wall was a door with no visible handle, while the door on the adjacent wall was secured by a padlock and a keypad combination lock. There was also a small window in the door. Tanya walked over to the chair and sat down.

"I guess this is my spot. Let's see how Eddie figures out a way forward."

Eddie first went to the door to peer through the window.

"It looks like a mad scientist's lab. There's a bookshelf packed with books and a desk cluttered with an assortment of gear – everything from test tubes to a microscope and a soldering iron."

Jonas moved the computer mouse, and the screens came to life. One screen displayed a password prompt, and the other a screensaver with a changing image of a chessboard in various positions.

Jonas started examining the desk drawers. The top ones were empty, but the bottom one contained five soft beanbags.

"Hey, there's another screen on that wall. The number seven appeared on it when you opened the drawer," Tanya noticed.

Jonas examined the beanbags.

"These look just like they are made for juggling."

He experimentally tossed one into the air.

"Hey, the number changed to six! No, wait, now it's back to seven."

"Do you think you have to juggle all five at once? Can anyone actually do that?" Jonas asked.

"Five? Are you serious?" Tanya wondered.

"I tried to learn back in high school. It looks like the balls have to stay in the air for seven seconds, which feels like a really long time. But they did say this was hard," Eddie muttered. "Let me try."

He took all five beanbags in his hands and started tossing them quickly into the air one after another. The number on the wall first changed to six and then to five, but then Eddie dropped two beanbags, and the number on the wall changed back to seven.

After a few attempts, Eddie's juggling started to get a bit better, and the clock even reached four seconds before the balls thudded to the ground.

"You keep at it, we'll see if we can find anything else."

Tanya and Jonas went through the desk and drawers carefully, but found nothing new. The virtual reality

headset showed nothing. Suddenly, a buzzer sounded, the clock on the wall showed zero, and Eddie exclaimed, "Yes! I did it."

At the same time, the other door opened, revealing a large space behind it. But the floor ended abruptly just past the doorway, dropping away more than three meters into a sea of foam blocks. A two-inch-wide strap ran across the foam sea, and on the other side was a small platform with a red handle hanging above it.

"Ugh," Tanya huffed.

"What now?"

"This would be easy if my leg were okay. I hope one of you has done some slacklining?"

Eddie and Jonas glanced at each other.

"I've tried," Eddie said, "but I never really got rid of that uncontrollable leg wobble. And that looks pretty long."

"Same here, I've only tried it. How do you get out of there if you fall?" Jonas asked.

Eddie leaned over to look over the edge.

"By climbing, there seems to be a rope. Rock, paper, scissors for who goes first?"

Jonas nodded.

"One, two, three."

Jonas's rock lost to Eddie's paper, so he positioned himself near the edge of the floor and carefully put his weight on the strap.

"This is really loose. Last time I tried this, the line was much tighter."

Jonas managed to take three quick steps before losing his balance and falling into the foam sea. He scrambled to the rope and climbed, out of breath, back onto the floor.

"Alright, your turn."

Eddie hesitated for a moment.

"That looked really loose. Maybe I'll try a different technique."

Eddie sat down on the edge, swung himself beneath the line, and started pulling himself hand-over-hand toward the other side.

Jonas snorted.

"Going where the fence is lowest, as the Finnish saying goes."

Tanya laughed.

"I think that's a stupid idiom. If you have to get over a fence, isn't it just smart to cross at the lowest point?"

Jonas snorted again. On the other side of the space, Eddie stood up and looked around.

"There's nothing here but this handle."

"Try pulling it," Jonas suggested.

Eddie did as he was told. A faint sound came from above, and a small box on a thin string dropped down to the middle of the slackline, a couple of meters above it.

They looked at each other for a moment, and Jonas burst out laughing.

"Where the fence is lowest, was it?"

Eddie looked at the box in frustration.

"I guess I have to try walking back."

"You guys continue with this, I'll go see if I can figure something out with that computer," Tanya said.

Tanya sat down at the computer and examined it more closely. She noticed a small counter running next to the chessboard, and every time the counter hit zero, the arrangement of the pieces on the board changed. She studied the positions on the board more closely.

Tanya had played chess competitively as a child, and she soon realised that the pieces were not in random configurations. They were possible endgame situations where checkmate was just one move away. In the next position, the white queen had to be moved from a3 to a7. Tanya tried entering the password a3a7 and managed to log into the computer.

Cursing could be heard from the next room as one of them fell once again into the foam sea.

"Hey, I got into the computer!" Tanya shouted.

Jonas hurried back in.

"Climbing up from the foam pit is getting exhausting."

"Are you even close?"

"Not really. The first couple of steps go fine, but once you get a bit further, the line starts to wobble more and more, and it's almost impossible to stay on."

"We'll come back when I'm recovered, I can handle that part," Tanya said.

"We're not giving up yet. How did you get into the computer?"

"The chessboard wasn't just a screensaver, you had

to find the move that leads to checkmate. That move was the password."

"And what's on the computer?"

"I haven't had a chance to look yet."

Eddie came over, looking exhausted.

"I don't know how many more times I can try. That line is starting to get on my nerves."

"Well, we'll add slackline training to the program, it's not that hard."

"We'll see... Show me what's on that computer."

They gathered around the machine. The desktop wallpaper featured a stylised dragon on a black background.

"Ah. Kali Linux," Jonas said.

"What's that?" Tanya asked.

"An operating system designed for penetration testing. Let's see what we can find. We likely have to breach a machine on the local network."

Jonas sat down at the keyboard, opened a terminal, and entered a few commands. Characters scrolled across the screen.

Jonas sighed.

"What now?"

"This machine is on an internal network with hundreds of computers. We need a clue as to which server to start with."

Eddie was fiddling with the virtual reality headset.

"This seems to have come to life when we logged into the computer," he said and started to put the headset on.

"I think I see what's happening. The headset is showing a room, and there's a scale on the display where some of the bars move as I turn my head in different directions. Hand me those controllers, let's see if I can get anything out of them," Eddie said.

Jonas handed the controllers to Eddie. Eddie pressed buttons and moved them around, continuing to look around.

"This is super cool!" he exclaimed.

"What is?" Tanya asked.

"This is a four-dimensional labyrinth."

"Four-dimensional?" Tanya wondered.

"Yes. I managed to bring up the user manual. Start a program called 4devlab on the computer, and you'll see what I see."

Jonas found the program, and soon the view of an empty room appeared on the computer screen. As Eddie turned his head, the image on the screen moved in sync.

"Now we see the room," Tanya said.

"Good. Now I'm going to move in the fourth dimension."

At first, nothing happened, but then a small, triangular object appeared in the middle of the room. It grew for a while until Eddie stopped the movement.

"Next, I'll turn in the fourth dimension," Eddie announced.

The triangular object began to distort in a strange way. At the same time, an opening appeared in the wall in front of them, revealing another room.

"Do you see?" Eddie asked.

"Yes. I once heard in a coffee break conversation that a couple of the younger Hacklab members had started planning something like this, but I didn't know they were this far along. Pretty cool! Can I try too?" Jonas asked.

"Of course." Eddie unfastened the chin strap and handed the headset to Jonas.

Jonas moved around the room and found another opening.

"Impressive. You can get the hang of navigating in the fourth dimension pretty quickly, in a way, but you have to concentrate a lot. There's a plaque in that other room. I'll go see what it says."

The image on the computer screen moved to the other room, and Jonas positioned himself so they could read the text on the plaque:

There are 16 four-dimensional rooms in this house. Find the wall that is furthest in four dimensions from the starting point and read the text on that wall. Jonas turned to look at the other walls in the room. Each wall had a single word on it. He took off the headset and looked at the others.

"I think the names of the servers on the local network are written on the walls. So we could find out which server to break into from here. But how do we find the furthest wall?"

"How much time do we have left?" Eddie asked.

Tanya glanced at the clock.

"A little over twenty minutes."

"And we have two problems on our hands, the slack-

line and the four-dimensional labyrinth. I'm not going to try the slackline again. And as for the four-dimensional labyrinth, my head is spinning. I need to sit down and think this through in peace. I suggest we give up for now and come back later, unless you have any bright ideas on how to proceed," Eddie concluded.

Jonas and Tanya glanced at each other and shook their heads.

"I don't think we're getting any further today. Let's just head out," Tanya said.

A word from the author

This free edition of *Atlas Kicks the Ball* is complete. The only difference from the paid edition is these additional nag pages, which appear a few times along the way.

You may share the book freely for non-commercial purposes (CC BY-NC 4.0). You can also build the book yourself, in any format, from the source at **git.brainpaingames.com/tommy/atlas-public**.

If you'd like to support me, you can buy the PDF and EPUB editions without these nag pages at **store.brainpaingames.com**.

Thank you. The story continues on the next page.

Chapter 13

"Was it difficult enough?" the waiter asked as they descended to the first floor.

"I'll have to practice a bit before the next attempt. It's quite different from any other escape rooms I've been to," Eddie admitted.

The waiter just nodded and smiled.

Jonas nodded towards the door. "There's a grocery store across the street. Let's go there next."

They crossed the street and entered the store.

"This looks just like a regular store," Eddie noted.

"It is, but I think you'll notice a couple of small things as we walk through."

"Luckily, this is a small store and not some hypermarket," Tanya muttered as she hobbled through the door.

"That beer shelf looks odd; all the bottles look identical. Why are there two price tags, one in Thalers and one in Euros, even though the prices are practically the same?" Eddie asked.

"In Europe, the Euro is the only legal tender, but we didn't see the need for such restrictions. Although the prices of the products are quite close in both currencies, transactions in different currencies are recorded separately. That's why most stores also price their products directly in both Euros and Thalers," Jonas replied.

They continued walking until Eddie burst out laughing at the dairy aisle.

"What on earth? What advertising agency came up with this? A yogurt pot says in large letters in the same font '0% fat' and right next to it 'contains added sugar'?" Eddie wondered.

Jonas smirked.

"That's one thing people notice. It's not an ad agency's idea but regulated marketing. If a food is marketed as being low in a certain ingredient, but it contains fat, sugar, or additives, those must be mentioned in at least as large and visible a font."

Tanya glanced at a carton of eggs and exclaimed, "Yuck. Why is there a picture of chickens in a cramped cage covering half the carton?"

"That's also marketing regulation. Animal products must have a picture of the animals' production conditions. A producer can certify themselves to a certain level and then get the right to use images of that level. If they don't certify, they have to use images of the worst level. This is a fairly new thing, but based on what I've seen on the shelves, animal welfare has improved quite rapidly lately. If you notice, this carton you're looking at is in the clearance bin. The egg cartons on the actual

shelves show chickens happily scratching around in the grass," Jonas replied.

"Doesn't that get terribly expensive?" Tanya asked.

"It is a bit more expensive, but I suppose you don't have to eat eggs every single day? You can eat vegetarian food sometimes. Meat, egg, and dairy consumption has dropped as a result, but I doubt that's an insurmountable problem," Jonas noted.

They arrived at the checkout.

"Did you find anything you needed, or shall we grab a car and continue our journey?" Jonas asked.

Eddie and Tanya glanced at each other.

"Let's just go. What's next on the agenda?" Tanya wanted to know.

"Let's go and see how this city is being built. Literally."

Jonas took out his phone, ordered a car with the Letsgo app, and typed a text message.

"I warned my friend at the component warehouse that we'd be stopping by for a short tour," he said.

They drove to the outskirts of the city and arrived in front of a massive building. There was a large roll-up door in the wall, with a few trucks queuing to get in. They got out of the car and walked around the corner to an office door. Jonas opened it and went in first.

"Hi Kalle, how are things here?" he greeted.

A man in high-visibility clothing, who had passed middle age, was standing by the office coffee machine.

"Things are ticking along pretty well. No major problems lately."

"Good to hear. There were enough of those in the beginning," Jonas remarked and introduced them to each other, "These are my friends from Helsinki, Tanya and Eddie. They're literally nuclear physicists, so you don't need to dumb it down. This is Kalle. Kalle was an invaluable help when we were trying to get roofs over people's heads quickly in the early days."

"Oh, come on, I didn't do that much alone. It was teamwork."

"Don't be so modest."

"I'd be interested to hear how you managed to house almost a hundred thousand people in houses that could withstand the Finnish winter in a single summer. I still don't quite get it," Eddie said.

Kalle glanced at Jonas and laughed.

"It wasn't easy. I think I might have let a few curse words slip. It was a stressful time."

"Initially, we got tents as humanitarian aid, but everyone realised that wouldn't get us far. We would have been in deep trouble once winter set in. I got in touch with Kalle pretty quickly because he had been involved in Wikihouse projects. And then we discussed how to quickly build a large number of habitable buildings," Jonas said.

"What's Wikihouse?" Eddie asked. "Never heard of it."

"Wikihouse has developed various building concepts on an open-source basis. Mainly so that the components can be cut from sheets with CNC cutters," Kalle replied. Jonas continued, "As a result of that discussion, Kalle

designed what you might call a basic set of components for a Lego set for adults. From simple blocks, we can build very different-looking buildings. The most significant result was that we created a small, self-supporting building from these basic components, which could be built practically without foundations and in stages, so that insulation, electricity, and utilities could be easily installed afterward. A handful of people could erect the basic version of the house in a single day, once the component package was unloaded from a truck onto the plot."

"Once the shell was up, a dry toilet, a gas stove, and a refillable water tank were carried in, and a wastewater tank was installed next to the house. So you could move in the same day. As the utilities were completed, the dry toilets, gas stoves, and water tanks were moved to newer, just-erected buildings. At the same time, the first gasification plant was built. Most of the human waste went and still goes into a bioreactor and from there to electricity and heat production. This way, construction got off to a quick start. Developing the urban layout was also easy, as the basic components of the buildings were reusable. The same components that were used to build the first self-supporting buildings could be used to build larger buildings, up to small apartment blocks," Kalle explained.

"Interesting. But why did you get involved in the whole thing in the first place? It doesn't sound like a stress-free way to spend your time," Eddie remarked.

Jonas and Kalle looked at each other and sighed.

"A battle for the future of the European welfare state has been brewing under the surface for a long time. In simple terms, it's a conflict between a progressive welfare society and a conservative mindset. Depending on the thinker, the conservatives aim for either completely free markets or clinging to the old, patriarchal industrial society with state aid. Most often, they want free markets for others and state-guaranteed monopolies for themselves."

Jonas paused for a moment before continuing.

"We have been advocating for a progressive European welfare state for a long time, but in practice, we had to admit defeat. The dynamics of recent years, or even decades, have been very difficult to reverse, as there is a vicious, self-reinforcing cycle. One of the main reasons is that the so-called serious societal debate is primarily conducted with economics at the forefront, but economics as a science seems to have gotten stuck in the Middle Ages – at least regarding the philosophy of science," Jonas explained.

"How so?" Eddie asked.

"Modern philosophy of science starts from the premise that scientific theories are falsifiable. Economics is rife with such unfalsifiable theories, but one of the worst is the assumption that people somehow maximise their own well-being."

Eddie pondered this for a moment.

"I understand that that can't be falsified, but isn't it in some way a justified axiomatic starting point? Surely people mostly act in their own self-interest and don't

do completely irrational things?"

Jonas sighed, looked around, and took three mugs from a shelf.

"The first problem is philosophical. You can't do good science with unfalsifiable axioms. The second, much more practical problem is that it only holds true in the most trivial of choice situations. You are literally a nuclear physicist, so you're not exactly at the shallow end of the gene pool. Let's see if I can get you to act against your own interest. Look away for a moment," Jonas requested.

Eddie shrugged and turned his gaze away. Jonas placed the mugs upside down on the table. Under one of the mugs, he slipped an eraser that was on the table.

"Okay, turn back. Let's play a little game. I'm not cheating in any way, on the contrary, I'll explain the rules of the game completely explicitly as we go along. Ask if you don't understand. There is an eraser under one of these mugs. Your task is to guess which one. If you guess correctly, I'll pay you 10 Thalers. After you've guessed, I'll lift one of the other mugs – one that does *not* cover the eraser – and then we'll discuss whether you want to change your guess. Understood?"

Eddie nodded, thought for a moment, and placed his finger on the middle mug. Jonas overturned the left-hand mug, under which there was nothing.

"Alright. I'll make you an offer, only for you my friend: if you still want to change your choice, you can do so if you pay me one Thaler."

Eddie looked bewildered.

"Of course I don't want to pay for that."

"Are you absolutely sure you don't want to take my offer? How much would you be willing to pay to change your choice then?"

"It makes no sense to pay. It's equally likely to be in either. I'm not paying anything. You pay me a Thaler, and I'll switch."

"As you wish." Jonas overturned the mugs. The mug Eddie had chosen was empty.

"Actually, the probability of the other mug being the right one was 66%, so the value of your mug is 3.33 euros and the value of this other mug is 6.66 euros. You should have been willing to pay, in expected value terms, over three Thalers to switch mugs."

Eddie frowned.

"That can't be right. Why?"

"When you choose the first mug, the probability of it being the right one is 33%. Right?"

Eddie nodded.

"And the probability of the eraser being in the other two is 66%, right?"

Eddie nodded again.

"That 66% doesn't change, even though I overturn one of the mugs and reveal that there's no eraser there. This is basically simple conditional probability, but it's a bit counterintuitive in practice."

Eddie still didn't look entirely convinced.

"It took me a couple of days to understand this when it was first presented to me, so I don't think we should get into a detailed debate about it now. If you

want to find more justifications for it, it's known as the Monty Hall Problem. In any case, the main point is that even in such a simple case, most people don't know how to act in their own best interest, even after their own best interest has been explained to them. This is a case where the probabilities are fully known, and there are no unknown uncertainties. As I said: people are only capable of making rational decisions in the most trivial of questions," Jonas emphasised and continued, "Another perspective on this is that people are manipulable. Even in the most trivial matters, where a person is theoretically capable of making the right choice, in practice they are often at the mercy of their environment. Either they are just victims of marketing, or alternatively, they do what others around them do due to social pressure. The strangest thing is that even in these cases, people often imagine that they are making choices of their own free will. And these are by no means insignificant side issues but are at the very core of how society functions. As I said a moment ago, as long as this is not understood in 'science' and they start from an unfalsifiable assumption of rationality, the discussion is not very fruitful. Now we get to the core of why Kalle and I got into this. It seemed to us strongly that people were being manipulated into voting against their own interests. Either through cynically conscious means or more likely, as a result of a lack of understanding, a cycle was created that proved impossible to break."

"What do you mean by a cycle?" Tanya asked.

"Fear and a weak personal financial situation are

significant – though certainly not the only – factors that feed populist conservatism. To increase their own support, a conservative politician only needs to scare people and make them poorer. Both are much easier than making people wealthier and increasing their sense of security. And which headline do you think sells better in the media: the one that reports on crimes that have occurred, or the one that reports on how few crimes there have been? The media thus helps in this cycle," Jonas said and paused for a moment.

"But when you try to discuss this with even the most clear-headed economists and members of parliament, you are told that the criticism of the rational choice model in economic theory is justified, but in the big picture, it's just splitting hairs."

Jonas's face tensed as he continued, "Splitting hairs, for fuck's sake. These people who have a religious devotion to rationality and individual freedom have destroyed the Nordic welfare state, incited European nationalists to bring Europe to the brink of collapse, built the world's most expensive insurance-based healthcare system with at best mediocre results, and duped countless disadvantaged people into squandering their meager funds on useless junk using predatory marketing. The world's largest companies hire the world's sharpest minds to figure out how to get people to click on ads more often. And this is then splitting hairs."

"If one cannot trust an individual's decision-making ability in their own affairs, and the Soviet Union showed how poorly collective decision-making works, what is

left?" Eddie asked.

Jonas smiled.

"Actually, the search for a solution to that very question is what got us started on this. We didn't so much want the state to allocate resources. We wanted to offer people a society where they are presented with choice situations where they can make decisions based on as unbiased information as possible. The refugee crisis gave us the opportunity to create a new societal model and at the same time break the winning streak of the conservatives of recent years."

"That's a lot to digest," Tanya said and glanced at the clock.

"Funny. I haven't heard from Jacob. I should probably check where he is," she continued and called Jacob, who answered quickly.

"Damn it. Sorry, in all the chaos, I completely forgot about you. My apologies. I'm on my way home from the airport right now," Jacob said.

Tanya laughed.

"I should have known. It's no big deal, I can get home by train tomorrow. Let's talk on Monday." Tanya hung up and looked at the others.

"I guess we'll need that accommodation after all. My dear brother forgot about the ride he promised."

Chapter 14

Even by Monday, Jacob still hadn't slept properly. He had come to work early and was sitting at his desk, massaging his temples. Everything had gone wrong over the weekend, and all leads to finding the money seemed to be dead ends. On top of everything, he had forgotten the lift back he had promised Tanya. Perhaps that was a small enough mess to sort out first.

Tanya answered the phone surprisingly quickly.

"Morning. Do you know it's only six-thirty?"

"Sorry, I didn't realise... I slept poorly and I've been at the office for almost two hours. Did I wake you?" Jacob asked.

"No. I just arrived in Helsinki on the night train from Kainuu and I'm on the metro on my way to the office. Any other morning, you would have."

"Aren't you on sick leave because of your leg?" Jacob wondered.

"I don't know, and frankly, I don't care. In case you've forgotten, we've literally had people vanish lately, so I can't take any major time off. And this broken

ankle doesn't really affect my ability to think or type," Tanya replied.

"I'm sorry I forgot you in Kainuu. I owe you an explanation. Will you come by my office when you get here?"

"Okay. I'll be there soon."

Less than ten minutes later, Tanya hobbled in on her crutches.

"How's the leg?" Jacob asked.

"It hurts surprisingly little. Either that or they gave me some really long-lasting painkillers at the hospital."

"You don't seem very angry, even though I left you in Kainuu."

Tanya laughed.

"Didn't we just talk about this? I don't do grand emotions."

"I would have been furious."

"Yes, you would have. I had a good time in Kainuu yesterday too, so it's not a big deal. But you said you owe me an explanation."

Jacob briefly explained the events of the past few days.

"350 million? Can you explain again how you ended up a major shareholder in Fartum? I never quite understood that," Tanya asked.

"Let's save that for another time," Jacob said, dodging the question.

"Did you ever find out how your computer was hacked?"

"They explained something about vulnerabilities in OpenSSH. The same guy who developed that was supposed to be in the Free City. But he wasn't."

Tanya was startled.

"OpenSSH? Are you sure?"

"Something like that. Does it matter? We can call G-Secure and check if you have any information about it," Jacob suggested.

"No need. It just reminded me of a conversation from the weekend. I should probably check my own computer."

Jacob's phone blared the Nokia tune. The caller was Frank.

"Hang on a second," Jacob said to Frank and turned back to Tanya.

"Thanks for listening, Tanya. I have to get back to other things. Let's talk later."

"I thought we were supposed to discuss those recruitments."

"Damn, I forgot about those. I'll call you later today."

Tanya left, and Jacob continued his conversation with Frank.

"Alright, what's new?" Jacob asked.

"Regarding those irregular stock trades of mine that you asked about over the weekend. I had to threaten my broker with an army of lawyers before he would tell me more about what happened. The bottom line seems to be that I've supposedly lost over 50 million euros on stock trades last week. No one has done anything

wrong; apparently, I ordered those trades myself. But since I didn't, they're now investigating and shitting themselves," Frank explained.

"Someone has started messing with the wrong people and is going to pay for it with interest one day," Jacob threatened.

"I agree. But as incredible as it sounds, this is the least of my headaches right now. Did you hear what those damn communist hippies in the Free City went and did now?"

"All I know is that according to the morning news, they finally signed the updated free city agreement, where they agree to respect European patents and copyrights. Isn't that good news?"

"Yes, after a long battle. I had a bottle of champagne chilling for it. But an hour later, those bastards passed a law where they start taxing patents and copyrights."

"How much?"

"For the first two years, there's a nominal registration fee. After that, the tax doubles every year, so that in twenty years, we're talking about billions a year. If you don't pay, the copyright ceases to be valid, and the works and patents enter the public domain."

"That sounds pretty outrageous. Surely the agreement can't allow that?"

"That's what I said, but my lawyers just looked at each other and their shoes as they tried to stammer out that yes, it does. They didn't even realise they should fight it because it was just phrased in the agreement somehow that local laws must be followed. If this spreads

to other countries, my business has no future."

Just then, Vesa, Fartum's CFO, burst into the room without knocking, out of breath.

"Hey Frank, hang on a moment," Jacob said into the phone.

"What now?" he asked Vesa.

"Jacob, check the news. The Kainuu Free City has revalued the Thaler."

"So what?" Jacob asked.

"Our bonds are in Thalers, and we sold the Thalers last week."

Slowly, Jacob realised what was happening. He felt a cold knot in his stomach.

"How much?"

The CFO was silent for a moment, avoiding Jacob's gaze. Then he managed to say, "100%. Before, one Thaler was pegged to one Euro. Now, you need 2 Euros to buy one Thaler."

The shock seemed to cut off Jacob's breath.

"For God's sake. 100%, that's not possible, is it? So our debt just doubled? If that's true, we're immediately bankrupt."

Jacob barely heard Vesa's reply.

"That's right."

"Where's Ben, or whatever the new head of the legal department's name is?" Jacob asked.

"I sent my assistant to get him and told her to say all hell has broken loose," Vesa replied.

Just then, Ben walked in.

"What is it now? We were in the middle of an important meeting," he began.

"How do we get rid of these new Thaler bonds?" Jacob asked.

"What do you mean, get rid of?" Ben asked.

"I mean our debt in Euros has just doubled, and if we don't get rid of them, we're bankrupt," Jacob snapped.

"How has it doubled?" Ben asked, bewildered.

"Because yesterday we owed 20 billion Thalers, and the value of those Thalers was 20 billion Euros. Today, the central bank of the Kainuu Free City has revalued the Thaler's exchange rate, so now the value of those Thalers is 40 billion Euros. We have to find that from somewhere if we want to pay off the debts when they mature in a couple of years," Vesa said.

The general counsel's eyes widened.

"But... that wasn't supposed to be possible."

"No, it wasn't. But now we have to find a way out. How do we proceed?" Jacob asked.

"There is no way out of this. We have to talk to the bondholders. At best, we can get some time to arrange a share issue to get our balance sheet in order. Who are our biggest creditors?" Ben asked.

"I don't know. Is that the next thing to find out?" Jacob asked.

"Yes, who we'll be negotiating with," Ben confirmed.

"Okay, the investors are of course behind Euroclear, and we won't get any information from there. But I'll call the bank that arranged the issue, maybe they can

tell me who the bonds went to." Vesa immediately took out his phone and found the number on speed dial.

"Hi Björn, you probably heard that the Thaler was revalued, and we have a bit of a situation here. Do you have any idea who bought our bonds?" Vesa asked.

Jacob tried to hear the answer from the other end of the phone but couldn't make it out.

"Are you serious?" Vesa exclaimed into the phone.

"Okay, thanks. Let's talk later." He hung up and was silent for a moment before looking at Jacob with a strange expression on his face.

"Björn had already started looking into it. The three largest investors had sold their bonds directly to the central bank of the Kainuu Free City. They had just been fronts."

A silence fell over the room until Jacob broke it.

"For God's sake! Let me get this straight. The Free City's central bank controls the Thaler-Euro exchange rate. The same Free City central bank owns billions of our bonds. And the same Free City central bank has just doubled their value in Euros, which drives us to bankruptcy and into the hands of our creditors – that is, the Free City's central bank?"

"It seems that way," Vesa sighed.

Jacob noticed that his phone was still on the table and the line was open. He picked it up.

"Hey Frank, are you still there?" Jacob asked.

"I am."

"If you heard that last conversation, can we agree that you didn't?"

"I heard. And we can agree that I didn't. Still, it seems to me that we need to form some kind of joint trade delegation with Wes and go back to Kainuu for a serious discussion. This just can't work this way, with one party completely disregarding all agreements," Frank said.

"That sounds like a plan. I guess that's what we have to do. I'll call Wes and start arranging the practical details. Let's leave as soon as possible. I think we could be ready to go at the private jet terminal within a couple of hours."

Chapter 15

Tanya found the nearest empty conference room and called Jonas.

"Hi," Jonas answered, "did you get back home alright?"

"I did. And I've been putting two and two together."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a bit confused. I've always thought of you as an honest guy, but now I'm pretty convinced that what you're up to isn't exactly above board."

"Sorry to repeat myself, but what on earth do you mean?"

"You have animosity towards my brother, and you have friends who are deep in the development of OpenSSH. A significant amount of money has been stolen from my brother using vulnerabilities in OpenSSH, and some of the leads point towards the Kainuu Free City. The probability that you're not involved in this is vanishingly small."

Tanya's voice began to rise.

"I like many of your ideas, and I'm not at all sure that my brother has earned all his money honestly, but damn it, I don't approve of you living a comfortable life on stolen money."

There was silence on the phone.

"Hello, can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," Jonas muttered, "I was just thinking. First, I'm not living on stolen money, period. Second, as far as I know, none of my friends are either. And third, I don't know anything about any thefts. I do know, however, that Ragnar's been up to some mischief – but I'm not in on the details. Give him a call, I'll text you his number."

"Okay. We'll talk later."

Tanya soon received a message and immediately called Ragnar.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's Tanya. Thanks for the weekend."

"No problem. How's the leg?"

"It's there. Listen, I'll get straight to the point. Money has been stolen from my brother, and I have reason to suspect you might know something about it."

"Sorry, I didn't quite catch that. It's a bad line."

"Money has been stolen from my brother, and I have reason to suspect you might know something about it," Tanya repeated.

"I really can't make out more than a word here and there, something about your brother. Hey, if you can hear me, can we talk later? I'm a bit busy right now. It'd be nice to see you here again sometime."

"Okay, I'll be in touch."

Tanya frowned skeptically and decided to go tell Jacob her news. She saw the new head of the legal department run into Jacob's office and heard raised voices as the door opened. So she sent Jacob a message instead and went to her workstation to start the work week.

Jacob came to her workstation a moment later.

"Explain what you found out, in detail," Jacob demanded.

"Eddie told me that he was pretty sure he recognised someone in the Free City from his university days. This person had been actively developing OpenSSH back then but had since disappeared. I managed to get in touch with this person on the phone, but he clearly didn't want to talk about anything over the phone and just welcomed me back to the Free City."

"Damn it, that too. They're really starting to get on my nerves. You're coming with me. They've started to screw with us so badly in so many different ways that we have to go there and sort things out. The car is waiting downstairs."

"But we were supposed to talk about the recruitments today..."

"Right now, recruitment is the least of this company's worries. We're going to Kainuu," Jacob interrupted.

Tanya sighed.

"Alright, let's go then."

"Good. When we get there, I'll be meeting with representatives from the Free City. Let me know imme-

diately if you find anything out. Do you need a security detail?"

"No. These people are not violent."

"How do you know that?"

"If they were violent, I'd already be dead. My parachute was tampered with, and Jonas wouldn't fix it mid-air until I'd explained why I'd come to the Free City. That's why I lost focus on landing and broke my ankle."

"For God's sake. Then we're going to the police as well."

"Don't be ridiculous. It was just a bit of fun, in the end."

"Fun? Playing with someone's life?"

"You just don't get it."

"No, I certainly don't."

A word from the author

This free edition of *Atlas Kicks the Ball* is complete. The only difference from the paid edition is these additional nag pages, which appear a few times along the way.

You may share the book freely for non-commercial purposes (CC BY-NC 4.0). You can also build the book yourself, in any format, from the source at **git.brainpaingames.com/tommy/atlas-public**.

If you'd like to support me, you can buy the PDF and EPUB editions without these nag pages at **store.brainpaingames.com**.

Thank you. The story continues on the next page.

Chapter 16

The Fartum jet landed at the Kainuu Free City airport. As always, the border formalities were quick. Soon, Tanya, Jacob, Wes, and Frank were standing outside the terminal.

"Ragnar said he'd be at the club cabin at the airport. It's only a couple of hundred metres away, so I'll walk there," Tanya announced.

"Okay. Text me if you find anything out," Jacob said.

Tanya started walking, and the others waited for a taxi. They drove to the city and arrived in front of a modern-looking civic centre made of wood and glass. Inside, they were escorted to a conference room to wait and were told that Minister of Finance Gault would arrive shortly.

A text message from Tanya arrived before Jonas appeared.

"That was fast. I found out where the money went. Where can we meet so I can explain?"

Jacob quickly typed a reply.

"Come to the civic centre and ask for your friend Jonas. You can explain it to him at the same time."

Soon, Jonas came in without knocking.

"Hello. You weren't down south for long, were you?"

"Let's skip the small talk and get to the point. What do you people really want?" Wes demanded.

Jonas burst out laughing.

"What do we want? We don't want anything. The new free city agreement is now a few hours old, and we're still relatively satisfied with it. The question is not what we want – that's clearly stated in the agreement – but what the hell do *you* want?"

Jacob looked at Jonas.

"What do we want? A level playing field and for criminals to be held accountable. You don't adhere to the spirit of our agreements, you manipulate currency exchange rates, and on top of everything, you steal our money. No need to play the boy scout. And don't try to claim that we're the aggressors in this conflict."

"Quite a list of accusations. That we don't adhere to the spirit of the agreements? What might you be referring to?"

Frank couldn't keep quiet.

"You can't claim to respect our copyrights if you immediately slap such taxes on them that no one is willing to pay. In practice, you're forcing copyright holders to relinquish their copyrights. That's not respecting copyrights."

"I'm sorry, but that makes no more sense than expecting the state to pay your taxes for you. If we have

to allocate public administration resources to the management and enforcement of copyrights, isn't it quite natural and reasonable that the copyright holders pay for that service? Not to mention that if the government grants someone monopoly rights in the market, isn't it perfectly reasonable to give a portion of the profits from this monopoly back to society as some kind of externality tax?"

"No. The purpose of intellectual property rights is precisely to guarantee an income for the copyright holder. If you eliminate that income with these tax tricks, where on earth will the inventor or artist get their income?" Frank asked.

Jonas sighed.

"You seem to have a rather sketchy grasp of why intellectual property rights exist in the first place. They are not to guarantee anyone's income. They were created so that enough intellectual property would be created for society's needs. The income of intellectual property holders is merely a means to that end."

"Whatever. If there's no income, there are no innovations or works of art. Basic stuff. I don't understand how you don't get that," Frank huffed.

Jonas smiled a little condescendingly.

"Ah. We don't understand? If you had familiarised yourself a bit more with our new tax, you might have noticed that the tax rate on works is mostly nominal in the first few years after they are released. Most of a work's lifetime profit is usually made in those first few years," Jonas explained. "Furthermore, we have made a

genuine effort to find solid evidence for the claim that stronger intellectual property rights somehow lead to more and better innovation or more and better works of art. However, we ran into a small problem: there is hardly any such evidence. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that intellectual property rights in many ways slow down their creation. Why do you think the sharpest minds in both culture and many fields of innovation have moved to the free cities? At the same time, the old world has been left with the stagnant cultural elite and innovators whose work doesn't really advance anything but who get their income from existing institutions."

Jonas rubbed his temple.

"I am willing to admit that our previous thinking about the harmfulness of intellectual property rights was a bit naive. That's precisely why we were willing to compromise on this issue and recognise those rights. But not for free, of course."

Frank looked even more frustrated.

"But if this spreads elsewhere, my entire business is at risk."

"On that, I agree. Perhaps that's why you should consider how your business needs to be adapted. Complete dependence on the profits from intellectual property monopolies does not sound like a very sensible long-term strategy to me. So I see no reason to reopen this agreement just a few hours after it was signed," Jonas stated. "But I have other things to do than entertain gentlemen disappointed with a fresh agreement, so

shall we move on to the next matter?"

Jacob, Wes, and Frank looked at each other in silence. Before they could get a word out, Jonas continued, "You mentioned something about stolen money. I've heard some vague rumours lately that you suspect something of the sort. Frankly, I know nothing about it. The Free City has no role in such crimes, official or unofficial, so I don't really see why it's even being discussed in this context. If a resident of the Free City breaks Finnish laws, we will, of course, consider extraditing the individuals for trial. Naturally, we require stronger evidence than hearsay before we even begin to process such a matter."

Jacob could no longer stay silent and blurted out, "Tanya has found the money and is on her way here to tell us where it is."

Jonas looked surprised.

"Interesting. I'd be happy to hear what Tanya has to say. As I said, we are prepared to take legal action if there is cause. While we wait for Tanya, we could return to the currency manipulation you mentioned. I assume you are referring to the fact that we were forced to let the Thaler float over the weekend. Unfortunately, our central bank no longer had any effective means to combat the strengthening of the Thaler."

"Don't give me that crap. You acquired all of Fartum's bonds and, by changing the exchange rate, drove Fartum to the brink of bankruptcy," Jacob snapped.

Jonas was silent for a moment.

"Okay, let's stop the bullshit. We were planning to call a meeting with you later to discuss the future of

Fartum, but we can discuss it now – especially since there are other relevant stakeholders present."

Jonas glanced at Wes and considered for a moment before continuing.

"We are playing by the exact same rules you profess to believe in. Economic actors are rational and make decisions that are optimal from their own perspective. Nothing is hidden. According to completely public rules and laws, our central bank has the right to conduct whatever monetary policy it wants and the right to buy whatever securities it wants. The central bank also has the full right to change its policy without prior warning. All of this has been public knowledge, you cannot claim otherwise. It is not my problem if you do not understand how to hedge against currency risk and do not monitor who owns your bonds. On the contrary, it creates an opportunity for me to exploit the situation rationally and according to the rules."

"If I'm not mistaken, you once said that it's immoral to let fools keep their money. In my role as Fartum's largest creditor, I will offer the shareholders and other stakeholders two options: either the Kainuu Free City becomes the owner of Fartum and the old shareholders are wiped out, or Fartum is split in two, the old owners keep the power grid business, and the nuclear lifecycle business is transferred to the ownership of the Free City. In that case, the planned repositories and the Sorsakivi nuclear power plant will also be annexed to the Kainuu Free City under the terms of the current free city agreement."

A silence fell over the room until Jacob replied a moment later, "In my book, that is outrageous extortion. I will not comment further until we have had time to weigh our options carefully."

"That's fine, but try to weigh them quickly. In my opinion, we should move forward with this matter in the next few days."

There was a knock on the door. The guard asked if Tanya Taggard was expected. Jonas nodded.

"Yes, we've been waiting for a while."

Tanya entered and sat in a vacant chair. Before she could say anything, Jacob asked, "Well, where is the money, and who took it?"

Tanya looked around.

"Are you sure you want all these people to hear?"

"Go ahead, the situation has already been discussed."

"Alright. Ragnar didn't know anything, but he promised to ask some other developers. He was messaging with someone on the computer and managed to get in touch with a guy who confessed to knowing about it."

"Who was it?" Jacob asked.

"That's the first little complication. Ragnar won't admit to knowing who it is, and I don't know either. The conversation took place over the Tor network. All Ragnar could say was that this person has contributed to the development of OpenSSH, but he has no idea who this person is or even what continent he lives on," Tanya replied.

"But you said you know who took the money," Jacob pointed out.

"No, I said I know where the money went. The guy on the other end of the connection said he had forwarded all the stolen funds as anonymous voluntary taxes to the Finnish state."

"What?" Jacob exclaimed.

"Yes. He went on to estimate that since the voluntary tax payment was introduced, he has paid over 98% of these taxes. Then he wondered – in rather cruder terms – how anyone could be so stupid as to believe anyone would pay taxes voluntarily. He also announced that he was ending his tax collection here and that if anyone wanted, he could provide a data package in the next few days detailing how much he had collected and from whom," Tanya explained.

Jacob laughed.

"Well then, that's easy. We get the proof, and the state pays back the ill-gotten money."

Wes looked at Jacob with a pained expression.

"That's not really possible."

"Why on earth not?" Jacob wondered.

"The taxes collected over recent years are long gone. They've already been spent. Besides, the voluntary taxes are already an essential part of the state's budget plans for the coming years because they have developed so steadily. Losing them alone would create a completely unsustainable gap in state revenues and cause a huge crisis in the state finances. If, on top of that, the state had to pay back the voluntary taxes from past years, we'd be talking about economic problems of such a magnitude that I have no idea how we could even begin

to solve them – other than through a sovereign default or by inflating the debt away. So I simply can't imagine where the state could get such sums of money."

"I'm not quite finished," Tanya interrupted. "This guy also said that if that document is delivered, it will be distributed to the media as a single package. It will also contain detailed information about the basis on which he has collected those taxes. The main principle, apparently, has been to collect taxes matching whatever the targets had earned through illegal or otherwise unmerited means – either by evading taxes or by appropriating public funds."

Jonas burst out laughing.

"Brilliant. Absolutely, unspeakably brilliant. I wish I had thought of that," he said, wiping tears from his eyes.

Chapter 17

Tanya and Jonas walked along the fence of the Sorsakivi repository. The area's fencing had been reinforced and border controls introduced just days after Sorsakivi had officially come under the control of the Free City. Jonas was speaking English on his phone, and Tanya was looking at the scenery, lost in thought, until Jonas finished his call.

"Interesting. The transfer of the world's largest deep geological repository to the control of the Free City seems to be generating great interest among the armed forces of the United States, Russia, and China."

"What kind of interest?"

"The kind where they are all extremely interested in bringing their own troops to guarantee the site's security and are even willing to cooperate openly with each other. And they are still willing to pay a good price for the repository services. It seems that no one really wants any kind of unrest here."

"It's good that there's still a shred of sense left in this world in some matters. But what's next, now that

this project seems to be finished?" Tanya asked Jonas.

Jonas was silent.

"You're not going to claim you haven't thought about it, are you?" Tanya continued.

Jonas laughed.

"No, I was just wondering how you expect this to continue for me. That I would retire and travel around, jumping out of planes, having adventures in the mountains, and sailing the world's seas?"

"Would that be so wrong?" Tanya asked.

"Answer me this first: would you want such a future for yourself?" Jonas asked.

Tanya thought for a moment before answering.

"Not yet. There's still too much work to be done to make the world a better place."

"Exactly. In a way, it's a nice thought, but it's not time for that yet. Besides, this project is far from over. This was closer to a starting pistol than a finish line."

Tanya looked at Jonas, a bit puzzled.

"How so?"

"Have you heard the story about the people in a restaurant who pay the bill according to their wealth, so the rich pay more and the poor less? And then when a discount is given, they can't agree on how to split it, and in the end, the rich man is beaten up and starts to isolate himself."

"Several times, and it's a really stupid story."

"It is, but it has one important lesson. Which is that if the rich want to live in a free society, they must use part of their wealth to keep the poor content."

Tanya smiled.

"That's exactly what I said the last time one of Jacob's friends started enthusiastically explaining that story to me."

Jonas nodded.

"Yes. What's happening now, and fast, is that the free cities are pulling ahead of the old world. It's not yet very visible in everyday life, but the signs are clear. The brightest, most educated people are flocking to the free cities, and the development of culture and technology is already clearly overrepresented in the free cities. We can still keep the leaders of the old world in check relatively easily – whether by fair means or foul – but the part of the population that either cannot or does not want to move to a free city, or for some other reason finds the ideology of the free cities repulsive, will cause problems."

"How so?" Tanya asked.

"Before long, the standard of living gap between the free cities and the old world will become unbearable. The people in the old countries will become increasingly dissatisfied and will vote even more radical conservative populists into power, whose policies will further impoverish the population. Breaking that cycle is practically impossible. So if we want to avoid conflicts, we must ensure that people have reasonable conditions in the old countries as well – and, of course, in such a way that they don't realise that we are the ones behind their well-being."

Jonas looked at Tanya thoughtfully before continuing.

"Perhaps I should tell you about other future plans as well. Those retirement adventures in the mountains and elsewhere in nature would be much more pleasant if the environment hadn't been destroyed and it wasn't crowded. Although many environmental problems are heading in a better direction, there's no getting around the fact that the population on this planet is out of control and needs to be much smaller for everyone to enjoy a good life."

Tanya looked at Jonas, stunned.

"What? Are you planning a genocide?"

Jonas laughed.

"No. I thought for a long time that economic growth and improving the status of women were the few truly effective ways to limit population growth. All sorts of plagues and world wars have proven to be very poor means of limiting population growth. Instead, when a child changes from a retirement insurance policy into an expensive hobby, birth rates have almost invariably plummeted. The only problem is that it's very slow, so I tried to come up with a faster solution. And even if I believed some kind of mass destruction was possible, my ethics wouldn't allow me to carry it out," Jonas explained.

"What's your solution, then?" Tanya wondered.

Jonas shrugged.

"Send people to space. Establish colonies there."

Tanya started to laugh.

"First of all, you'd have to launch billions of people into space if you want a significant change in the popula-

tion. That requires so much energy that other environmental problems would be pretty minor in comparison. Secondly, do you really imagine that billions of people would want to move to space, even if it were possible?"

"It doesn't require that much energy. Even without factoring in future technological advancements, current rockets can carry a kilogram of payload into low Earth orbit with much less than 10 kilograms of fuel. If a person with their personal effects and a lightweight spacesuit weighed a hundred kilograms, lifting them into orbit would require under 1000 kilograms of fuel. That's the same amount of fuel an average American burns just driving their pickup truck for a few months, not years. In reality, of course, a bit more material is needed to transport people than goods, but it wouldn't be impossible. And the space base itself would, of course, have to be built mainly from materials mined from the moon or asteroids."

"So you're serious about starting to haul people into space? In that case, we're not even at the beginning yet," Tanya stated.

Jonas was silent for a moment.

"Do you ever wonder why we wanted Fartum under the control of the Kainuu Free City?"

"Not really. For the money and ego?"

"Money and ego were nice bonuses, of course. It also didn't hurt that the development of modular reactors could be secured. In the short term, a significant reason is, of course, security policy, as the previous phone call showed. But this is still small potatoes. Soon, your

new owner will make a modest request to establish a research department to solve certain energy production problems – namely, those that might arise when creating a permanent, habitable space base."

"I still find it hard to believe you're serious. I admit that technically it sounds very interesting. But just so you know, a mere modest request from the owner is not enough. We already have serious resource problems with our current tasks, what with people seemingly disappearing every now and then..."

Tanya suddenly remembered the end of the messages and turned towards Jonas.

"Tell me, what does the hashtag #whereisjonas mean to you these days?"

Jonas smiled mischievously.

"Are you referring to Antti, Eveliina, and Ville?"

Tanya was startled.

"What do you know about that?"

"One of our small side projects has been to cause a little trouble for the companies tied to the old state's power structures. We've been recruiting their best, clear-headed experts for more important tasks. Antti, Eveliina, and Ville are surely willing to return and form the core of this research department. You might hear from them in the next few days."

"I think you owe me quite a few more explanations. But before you explain further, tell me how on earth you imagine you'll get people to move to space," Tanya requested.

Jonas laughed.

"That's the easiest part. By the time we're ready, the economic situation in the areas outside the free cities will take a surprising turn for the worse. You remember that we've been keeping them afloat. At the same time, we'll put the word out that the free cities are full, but if anyone wants to move to space, there's a cheap one-way ticket, and jobs, income, and excellent artificially grown food are available there. One of the main goals of this free city exercise was to get a society to function from a clean slate. Besides, people went to America back in the day despite all the risks."

Jonas's phone rang, and he answered it. Tanya couldn't hear what was said on the other end, but Jonas burst out laughing.

"Are they really that clueless about their situation?"

"Okay. Prepare for the first countermeasures. We'll monitor how the situation develops."

Jonas hung up and shook his head.

"Your brother's friends in the Finnish government have decided to stage a military exercise on the outskirts of the Free City."

Then he laughed again.

"If you go back down south, I would avoid the better residential areas for a while. I predict there will be unexpected power outages. There might also be traffic disturbances when some people suddenly lose control of their cars right at the speed cameras and blast through them well over the limit."