

The Talented Gamers

Part 6 – Underbelly of the New System

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Mike's wrist display buzzed; the marketplace was open and actively seeking applications for a host of top billets. He turned to George to tell him he needed to go, but George evidently had received a notification as well.

"N-Hour. I've gotta get back to the headquarters." George's usual cheerful demeanor was gone as he collected his wallet and keys. "Seems real; sounds like we're alerting the entire division. What's it looking like on your end?"

"Marketplace is red hot," Mike replied, trying his best to sound calm and collected. In truth, he was ecstatic. "I've already uploaded my application. Should know the answer by the time I get back to my hotel; I'm betting I'll need to extend my reservation."

They shook hands. Almost off-handedly, just as George was about to step outside, Mike clapped him on the shoulder. "I hope you stay safe, George."

George whirled around, flashing his usual grin. "Yeah, and I know you're going to stay safe, Junger. Just see to it that you stay decent." He started again for the exit, and again turned around. "You know, it's funny. #freetaiwan? C'mon. No sticking power in that. They should at least say #liberatetaiwan," George offered with another chuckle and a grin.

Mike forced a laugh. "Liberation? Rather grandiloquent, even and especially for you, George. Reeks of socialism."

George gave a hearty guffaw. "Yeah, I guess. The youth have gotten to me, buddy." He bear-hugged Mike, and then, without another word, the two men parted ways, George heading for his car and Mike walking toward his hotel.

Mike fumbled around while trying to get his room door open, and after he succeeded, he was greeted with the smell of unwashed socks. Walking deliberately to avoid seeing his unmade bed, he settled himself down at the room's desk and turned his attention to the three screens he'd brought with him.

One display showed his personal army of cryptocurrency miners; they'd succeeded in nudging the stock future prices of 3-D printing inputs toward an inflated ceiling. The wealth he'd obtained through his services in the DCF was relatively marginal—but laundered through the right markets via an AI intermediary he himself had designed, that wealth was a potent geopolitical tool. He would never in his lifetime be able to buy an ink production facility, but he certainly could convince the Chinese that they should buy several.

If everyone else seemed to think 3-D

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ink was important, and if the Chinese had just lost a conflict because of the availability of 3-D ink, then it was in their interest to leverage their Belt and Road interest rates to obtain production facilities and lock out competitors. This activity would, in turn, register on American AI systems as a direct threat to American

#liberatetaiwan; George's recommendation was solid. Swiveling toward the third display, he next released packets of disinformation about his most prominent rivals into the digital commons: "Col. Jones was a philanderer who could not be trusted"; "Lt. Col. Reed was a racist; click this link to see proof!" "Maj. Bill

“ If everyone else seemed to think 3-D ink was important, and if the Chinese had just lost a conflict because of the availability of 3-D ink, then it was in their interest to leverage their Belt and Road interest rates to obtain production facilities and lock out competitors. ”

military supremacy in the Indo-Pacific region and ensure future contracts in the DCF.

The second display showed the lines of effort of his various botnets. The actual accounts he controlled were in the hundreds of thousands, but he'd written distributed and fractal protocols that allowed all of them to work along three lines of effort distinctively. Over the past twenty-four hours, Mike's bots had drawn their audiences toward supporting #freetaiwan, #downwiththeparty, and counterintuitively, #thaimonarchyforever.

The first two were obvious: the bots, whose AI protocols made them largely indistinguishable from humans, had amplified messages emphasizing Taiwanese autonomy and denigrating Chinese authority within the ideologically homogenous 10 percent of the American workforce who still showed up to vote in elections. Amplifying the importance of the Thai monarchy, meanwhile, further increased the stock value of Thai 3-D ink production assets.

The third display was a comprehensive scrape of the social media accounts of the other fourteen individuals who had, along with Mike, commanded converged battalions in the Strait of Malacca. All fourteen of them had put in bids for command in the marketplace; so too had Bill Atchinson, his former XO, and a handful of others. There were a total of three hundred open command slots: 250 battalion jobs, thirty brigade jobs, twenty special operations jobs.

Mike sat down and directed his attention to the second display. He injected commands for his accounts amplifying #freetaiwan to change their language to

Atchinson was incompetent and wasted materiel in the final campaign in Indonesia.”

Like all good disinformation, they were mostly true ... with some very slight embellishments along the way.

His work complete, Mike stood up and made his way to the minibar. His wrist display buzzed midway through a liberal pour of Jack Daniels. He activated the hologram and saw Jasmine Smith's glowing smile.

“Good hunting, Mike?”

“Depends, Jasmine. You got something for me?”

“Ha! No, Mike, I think you should revise that. What do you have for me?”

Mike had anticipated this line of questioning. Still, he decided that it was in his best interest to remain taciturn. “I have my knowledge, skills, and attributes, boss. Ready to perform my duty for the homeland,” he said without so much as a smirk.

“Miiiike. Please, do not condescend. I know you're the guy who's been doxxing a bunch of your peers; that's fine. If they were so sloppy as to not anticipate someone, somewhere, doing this to them, well ... they're not the talent we're looking for. Which means ... I have a conundrum. See, I can't figure out if I should slot you for command of a special operations unit, or one of our brigades.”

“Then you should pay closer attention, Jasmine. I'm not interested in either of those.”

He'd expected Jasmine to panic, to see her eyes widen in apprehension of the fate she'd just been assigned. He'd expected her to realize that he was fully prepared and capable of doing to her that which he had just done to Bill Atchinson. The last thing he expected was to

see her laugh. She chortled for a full ten seconds before regaining her composure and again addressing him.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mike, but that was rich. I do have to say, well done. You made a very cute effort. But honestly? You think even the best AI protocols could amplify your measly savings to such an effect as to get the Chinese’s attention? Seriously, who do you think got them to go in hook, line, and sinker on buying Thai facilities? Who do you think actually convinced them that there was a large enough threat brewing that they should send forces to the Korean border? Who do you think deliberately stalled our ink production to make sure the DCF could later grab more resources and authorities from the other services? And finally, and this is really rich: did you really think your blackmail files on me were, well, confidential? That you alone somehow had a system that couldn’t be hacked?”

Mike blinked—tried not to blink—and then, involuntarily, let out a laugh. It was so obvious; he was ashamed to have not considered it himself: of course he

had kindred spirits in the upper echelons of the DCF. His mistake had been in conflating the competition at his level with the competition at the level he aspired to. Stupid.

“I’ll be honest with you, Mike,” Jasmine was saying. “You’re a conniving ass. Thing is, so am I. And the future belongs to us. I’ll be willing to overlook this miscalculation on your part, in exchange for your absolute loyalty.” She paused and leveled her eyes with his.

“I don’t want to be DCF chairman for the rest of my life, and I’m sure you aspire to more than measly command in yours.”

Mike was speechless. Who would have thought this woman capable of such inspiring duplicity? Speaking with the gravest certainty to not be misunderstood, Mike intoned, “Just give the word, boss.”

Jasmine let a silence pass between them, just for a few seconds, before saying, simply, “It is given.” Mike saluted, turned off the hologram, sat down again at the monitors, and got to work. ■