

I don't think what Corcoran wrote should be criminal, but it's certainly stupid, ill-advised, and, frankly, immoral. Corcoran calls himself an anarcho-capitalist. Which is fine, I guess.

-- Radley Balko, former Huffington Post senior writer

The Powers of the Earth

Chapter 10

2064: HKL district, Aristillus, Lunar Nearside

Mike maneuvered his motorcycle out of the construction tunnel, past the orange traffic cones, then rode for a few hundred meters to the nearest ramp stack. He took the ramp up several tiers to level 2, then exited into the tunnel. He slowed his motorcycle and looked around, taking it all in.

The place had changed, a lot. He'd bored these tunnels years before with an old A series machine, and sold this space to some guy with a plan for office space - what was his name? Mike shook his head - he couldn't remember. The tunnel sure wasn't office space now. He'd been vaguely aware that the cubic had been sold, auctioned off, sold again, and subdivided, but he hadn't visited it in years.

The first time he'd seen this space it had been the bare tunnel, freshly bored. The second time it had been a storage yard. And now? It was packed from road deck to ceiling with the newest batch of refugees fresh off the boat from Heilongjiang.

Mike edged his bike forward through the mess of foot traffic, pedal cabs, and idling trucks as he scanned the signs that projected out over the sidewalk.

Where the hell WAS this restaurant? He checked the near side of the tunnel, and then looked left, catching glimpses of awnings and placards between the cargo vehicles and jitneys.

People were packed TIGHT here: the tunnel walls were hidden by the clutter of

habitation that climbed the curve. House was stacked upon house, apartment atop workshop atop restaurant - a mad pile of 1 TEU cargo containers, glued-together plastic-panel huts, pipes welded together into tessellated frames draped with tarps, and more. Overhead fiber-optic cables, power lines, extension cords, and PVC water pipes crisscrossed the street, as did the occasional pedestrian bridge connecting a second or third floor apartment on one side of the road with a restaurant, poker club, or single-room poultry farm on the other. Cooking smells filled the air and the blare of Nigerian rap, Chinese shouted word, and a dozen other soundtracks fought for his attention.

Mike shook his head. He was glad for the Chinese immigration - the revolution was going to need the manpower - but he DEFINITELY preferred his own corners of Aristillus. When it came to noise and excitement, the Conveyor Belt district was about as much as he could handle. He grinned and recalled something Darcy had said to him recently. She was right - he WAS getting old.

Mike saw the restaurant - and a spot in front. He pulled in, climbed off his bike, and swiped his card through the parking meter. He pushed through the dense flow of pedestrians and vendors.

Mike scanned the crowd.

"Hey!"

Mike whirled. Kevin was behind him, standing under a glowing sign of an Asian-style dragon splashing in a river.

"Mike, what did you want to see me about?"

"Let's get food first."

They pushed through the double doors and got into the cafeteria line behind several young laborers and an older man, all speaking Chinese. Mike looked around the place, and raised an eyebrow at Kevin. "Is the food good enough to justify the trip?"

"If it's not, I'll buy lunch."

"You're buying either way."

Kevin shrugged. "OK."

Mike clapped him on the back. "I'm joking. I'm the one asking you for a favor. I'm buying. Don't be a pushover." He took two plates from the end of the steam table and handed one to Kevin. "Here."

"So that favor - what is it? Why so urgent?"

Mike looked around and leaned in. "A tunnel of mine broke through into a tunnel owned by that douche-bag Leroy. I registered the claim with you months ago, but now his errand-boy Aaronson's registry is showing that he's got an earlier claim." Mike loaded his plate with noodles.

Kevin looked confused. "You're saying, what? That Aaronson and Leroy are conspiring to frame you? That's doesn't make any sense - why would they do that?"

"Uh, because they're assholes."

"No, hang on... That doesn't make sense. You know the incentives behind the land registries - even if a registrar can make a quick profit screwing one guy, he'll make a bigger long term profit by being honest." He shook his head. "No, this story doesn't - "

"Well check your logs - you'll believe me then! I registered that space with you six months ago, and now Aaronson's records show that Fournier registered it with him before that. Either you and I BOTH missed the fact that Fournier had already claimed that rock, or they've edited their logs."

Kevin looked doubtful but put his plate down on the edge of the steam table, took out his slate and checked. A moment later his eyebrows went up. "I'll be damned." He looked up from the screen. "Why?"

Mike shrugged. "Money, probably. I had a contract for this tunnel - Veleka Water wants space right below their existing facilities and beneath the docks, so they can drain the seawater from incoming tankers. I've put the word out that I need information, and it turns out that there are rumors that Leroy is talking to Bilge Demir at Veleka, saying that he should break the contract with me and buy the tunnel from him." Mike used tongs to put some pieces of chicken on his plate.

Kevin shook his head. "A conspiracy? No - this has got to be a data problem. If Leroy actually did what you claim, that's - that's insane behavior. By both Leroy and Neil Aaronson. Who's going to do business with Cartesian once people know that their registry book is for sale to the highest bidder?"

An old Chinese man in front of them reached past Mike to take a pair of chopsticks, looked up, and locked eyes with Mike. He looked puzzled, and then turned away and pulled out his phone.

Mike picked up the tongs and took two dumplings. "Maybe -"

The older man looked up from his phone. "Mike Martin! You Mike Martin!"

Mike looked up and smiled, hoping the expression hid his weariness with the whole ordeal. "Yes. Hi."

The older man laughed excitedly, then said something to his companions, all of whom turned and looked at Mike before pressing close, hands extended. Mike transferred his plate to his left hand and grinned like an idiot as the men took turns jabbering at him in some Chinese dialect and pumping his hand. "Yes, yes. Thank you. Thanks." He flashed an almost panicked look at Kevin.

Kevin put up his hands and said, "Not my problem."

Mike scowled and went back to shaking hands.

Finally he extricated himself and turned back to Kevin, who was grinning.

"I see you're enjoying the whole Mike Martin celebrity thing as much as always."

Mike grimaced. "Screw you." He put some beef on his almost overflowing plate, judged it for a second and then walked to the cashier.

Kevin walked beside him. "So do you have a reason that Leroy would risk his reputation in defiance of all economic theory?"

"I do, actually."

"Let me guess - the high immigration rate means that a hit to his reputation will

be erased by another hundred thous-"

Make shook his head. "No." He paused and looked Kevin in the eye. "Reputation only matters if the system continues."

Kevin sighed. "Not your 'war's a comin" rant again?"

"It's not a rant, damn it! I'm the only one who-"

"Mike, I know. I hear you."

"Then why aren't people getting ready? We've only got five years -"

"What do you want them to do? Leadership requires leaders, Mike. Not everything self-organizes. If you want people to get ready you've got to talk to the other CEOs, arrange-"

"You know me - I'm no good at political bullshit."

"You're famous here, Mike." Mike scowled but Kevin pushed on. "People would follow-"

"Nothing gets done by committee. If other people won't act, then I'll prepare us for the war single-handedly."

Kevin shook his head sadly. "This is an old topic. Let's get back to today. How are you going to handle Leroy? Arbitration?" He put his plate down at the cashier's station and reached for his wallet but Mike held a hand up to stop him.

Mike pulled out his own wallet. "I talked to Peter Benjamin. He says I'm screwed. Even if Fournier didn't drag it out forever, what happens? I walk in with the registration documents from you, and Fournier walks in with documents from Aaronson - and HIS documents are dated months earlier. Says I should 'pick my battles.'"

Kevin walked to an open table, next to the four Chinese men from the buffet line. Mike shook his head subtly and pointed to another table. The two sat. "What's the problem with the first table - too close to your fanboys?" Mike rolled his eyes.

A moment later a large black man in a stained jumpsuit sat at the next table. Mike looked at the jumpsuit for a second - and then looked again. Something was weird. The patch said "Bells Piping." Hadn't they shut down? Why was a guy wearing -

Kevin leaned in, tilted his head at the new neighbor, and grinned. "Better hope he doesn't want your autograph too."

"Screw you."

Kevin sat back, still smiling. "So your lawyer tells you to pick your battles. I don't understand why you're paying him to tell you what I could tell you for free...But he's right." He picked up a piece of chicken and popped it in his mouth, and then spoke around it. "So how am I involved in this?"

Mike shook his head. "I don't know. I wanted to talk about how the registries works. It's some crypto thing, right? Maybe we can prove that Cartesian is lying -"

"I use an old cypherpunk system - I digitally sign and datestamp all tunneling registrations and then I publish them. The verification key is public. So anyone can verify the claims I issue. Neil Aaronson doesn't bother with that." He pursed his lips. "I thought my digital verification was going to be a value-add feature, but no one really cares."

"So if Aaronson doesn't sign the registrations -"

"All we've got is his own internal timestamps on his data. He can fake that, and there's no public record. No way to prove that he forged the deed."

"So, let me get this straight. I'm Fournier, you're Aaronson. I come to you and I say 'I want you to backdate MY claim to before his. And I'll pay you.' What now?"

"So you're asking me to lie? To corrupt the registry logs?"

"Yeah."

Kevin shrugged. "The way the registry is formatted - yeah, there's no reason I can't do that. So I log in, change the date on the cubic for Veleka waterworks,

and we're done."

"As easy as that?"

"As easy as that."

Mike exhaled. "Shit"

"So, are you going to follow your lawyer's advice and let it go?"

"No, I've got another plan."

Kevin looked Mike intently. "Please tell me you're not going to do something idiotic."

Chapter 11

2064: Morlock Engineering Office, Aristillus, Lunar Nearside

Wam peered around the wall and saw Mike with his feet up on his desk, a big mug of horchata in one hand and a foil-wrapped quesadilla in the other.

"Not interrupting work on the Veleka Water project, am I?"

Mike scowled. "Fuck, don't remind me. No, Leroy's got that stalled. I've got a meeting with Bao tomorrow about it, but until then, nothing."

"Bao? What's he -"

Mike waved the question away. "What's up?"

Wam rounded the corner and leaned against a wall. "You remember Trang?"

Mike put his burrito down, wiped his hand on his pants, and pulled his feet off the desk. "Yeah, sure. Great crew chief. It was a shame to lose him."

"He's in the suit rental business."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, I know. Red Stripe. Why? Some holdup in suit deliveries?"

Wam sighed. "That's not all the business you do with him. Steve in Liability escalated this to me. Apparently at one point you floated Trang a loan - some convertible debt -"

Mike put down his horchata down next to the quesadilla. "Yeah. And?"

"And through a long chain of bullshit and - frankly - what looks to me to be stupid decisions, we ended up putting Red Stripe on our insurance."

Mike sighed. "Let me guess, some idiot in a rented Red Stripe suit lost a hand, and they're demanding a payout - and Trang wants me to ante up."

Wam raised an eyebrow. "Close. Someone in a suit did screw up."

Mike shrugged. "Fuck it. If it's a legitimate claim, let our insurance cover it. And if it's not, bounce it to Benjamin and Associates." He picked his horchata back up and took a long sip.

"It's not that simple."

"Sure, it -"

"Hang on, you want to hear this. The idiot who screwed up was a college kid who wanted to do something really 'extreme', so he went mountain climbing on the surface while his friends watched."

Mike coughed on the beverage. "Mountain climbing? On the surface? That's impossi-"

"Not impossible. Just stupid. So stupid that the idiot is dead now."

"Ahh, crap." Mike put the drink back down. "And since you're not letting me bounce this to Peter, I'm going to take a wild stab and say that this kid and his friends aren't refugees from one of the Chinese free states, right? They're telegenic young Americans?"

"Worse."

"Worse? How could it worse?"

"The dead one was a prep school trust-fund kid, and both his parents are prominent lawyers in Massachusetts."

Mike theatrically slapped his forehead with the heel of one hand. "Shit."

"And his best friend, who was with him when he was climbing, is Hugh Haig, from Bethesda -"

Mike pulled his palm away from his forehead and straightened, suddenly entirely serious. "Oh, fuck, no. Wam, don't -"

"- from Bethesda, son of -"

"Fuck."

"Senator Linda Haig"

Mike slid down in his chair and covered his eyes. He paused for a long moment, and then bellowed "Fuck! Me!"

Chapter 12

2064: Senator Linda Haig's Office, Tester Senate Building

The office was "DC posh" - impressive enough to convey solidity, seriousness and power to visitors, but without anything that overtly said "wealth" or "privilege." Tone was important.

Jim Allabend watched Senator Haig, who was leaned back in her chair behind her desk, and waited for her to break the silence.

She did.

"Tell me what you think, Jim."

Great. Typical for Linda to make him show his cards first.

Jim steepled his fingers, trying to look thoughtful. Campaigns were his forte, not day-to-day politicking. "My read? The president is going to do it no matter what. So the question WE have to think about isn't 'is it a good idea?' but 'do we want

to be on the bus or not?"

Senator Haig let a small smile creep onto her face. "Good. But take one step further back. If her plan works, what's the result for us if we're in? And if her plan doesn't work, what's the result for us if we're in? And, of course, the same two questions presuming we're out."

Jim nodded. It looked like Linda had already thought this through, and wanted an audience more than she wanted advice. Fine - he could provide that. "Before I dive in - which is it? Are we in or are we out?"

"We can't stay out - it comes across as rank disloyalty. The sub-parties may come to open blows soon - five years? Ten? But they're not there yet. So if the president is serious about this, we have to back her. Also, I want the assistant floor leadership next year, and she's hinted that she'll back me for that if I help her on this."

"OK, so we're in."

Lina gave him a disappointed look. "Of course we're in - but there's more to it than that. If it goes well, then everyone involved smells like roses. But if it goes poorly, we need to set ourselves up for a graceful exit. Or if not graceful, at least survivable. So the REAL question is how we back the president, but position ourselves so that we come out OK no matter how it goes." She looked at him directly. "How do we do THAT, Jim?"

Jim waited a moment, to make sure the question wasn't rhetorical. Actually, he was pretty sure it was rhetorical in the larger sense - the Senator would disagree with whatever he said...but if she wanted to him to throw out ideas so she could swing at them, so be it.

"The usual: we supported the president, emergency state of the economy, California earthquake, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera...but if it all goes to shit, our line is that we expected better execution. She is, after all, the commander in chief. So you offered her advice and consent, but you were as appalled as anyone when it all went bad."

The senator shook her head. "The most loved woman in America? You're forgetting that people still watch reruns of her old shows. There are CLUBS that get together and watch them, for God's sake. We try to spin it that way, and she

spins it right back: she was tricked. She was the only one with skin in the game, and we gave her bad advice."

Jim squinted. "She wouldn't say that - it makes her look weak."

Linda barked a laugh. "Jim, have you even studied the woman? Her confessional episodes were the most watched. The people love her as the victim who picks herself up off the floor for one more go-around."

Jim braced the thumb of his right hand against his cheek and massaged his temple with his first two fingers as he thought, and then caught himself doing it and immediately stopped.

"OK. Right. We - ah -." He paused, out of ideas. Wait. "I've got it. A three-part strategy. First, we lock her into her position with us, so that she can't slip away and leave us hanging. Second, we set up the DoD to hold the bag if it goes bad. That works on two levels, actually - it gives us an out, AND it lets us do a favor for her: we've prepared her escape route. We already have an umbrella in hand, we hold it over her, and then she owes us."

"That's two points. The third part of your plan?"

Jim grinned. "We make sure that you've got at least as much intel on the expat situation as she does. Maybe even more."

"How?"

Jim thought for a long moment, then sighed. "That I don't know."

"What if I sent my son Hugh there? Or, rather, planted the seed and let him come up with the idea on his own?"

Jim looked at the ceiling and thought, then looked down, locking eyes. "Your son? Interesting idea. You do that and you've got behind-the-scenes intel."

Linda shook her head. "You've met Hugh? No? Well, I wouldn't send Hugh expecting to get intel. No, if I sent Hugh there, it would be for friendly news coverage to prepare the electorate at home. And -"

Jim smiled, catching the idea. "And it gives you another card: you can always

reveal it as a sympathy play. 'My own flesh and blood, behind enemy lines.'” He paused to consider it further before rendering judgement. "I like it. I like it a lot. There's just one problem."

"And that is?"

"The president wants to move on this today, tomorrow at the latest. It will take a week, maybe more, to get Hugh there."

"Then it's a good thing I planted the idea in his head four months ago."

Jim narrowed his eyes. Was she telling the truth about that? She looked serious. Dead serious.

If she was, she was playing the political game at least as well as he ran campaigns. Maybe better.

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