

LEOPOLDO GOUT

GENIUS

THE CON



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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To all the daughters, mothers & immigrants.
Those who dream big will change the stars.

August 8, from Boston field office to New York:

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

Precedence: HIGHEST LEVEL

Case ID #: 281M-TF-164629 (Pending)

Title: U.S. COURTS—VICTIM; COMPUTER INTRUSION—OTHER;
DATA THEFT—BANKING, GOVERNMENT(S); FLIGHT—OTHER;
POSSIBLE UNSUB(S)

Between August 1 and August 8, the two dozen government and private institutions on the attached list were accessed utilizing stolen log-in information. While a forensics team is analyzing the scope of the intrusion, it is estimated that nearly 560 terabytes of information were stolen—this includes personal information (passcodes, identifiers) and classified documents. The stolen data has emerged on the black market via deep-Web sites.

The FBI has identified three individuals as being directly involved with this intrusion: REX HUERTA, 16—a computer prodigy from Santa Cruz, California; TUNDE ONI, 14—a self-taught Nigerian engineer; and an UNSUB identified only as PAINTED WOLF, possibly 16, from Shanghai, China.

All three have been linked to an online “white hat” hacking cell dubbed the LODGE. The LODGE was present at the recent “GAME” held by OndScan’s CEO and founder, KIRAN BISWAS. Mr. Biswas claims that Rex Huerta utilized an experimental quantum computer to run a program—identified in police communications as “WALKABOUT”—to perform the intrusion. After the Game, Boston PD took Mr. Huerta into custody. He was subsequently released into the custody of an Unsub claiming to be his lawyer (Painted Wolf is strongly suspected) and fled Boston.

Mr. Huerta is assumed to be working in congress with Mr. Oni and Painted Wolf. They were last spotted boarding a southbound train to New

York City. All units are to be on highest alert and parallel activity with NYPD. Airports across the region are on alert, and facial recognition software has been updated with the most recent images of Mr. Huerta, Mr. Oni, and Painted Wolf.

As REX HUERTA, TUNDE ONI, and UNSUB identified as "PAINTED WOLF" are wanted in connection to multiple counts of computer intrusion and data theft, Boston field office requests that the NYPD work in conjunction with NY field agents to locate and hold them.



PART ONE

SURFACE TENSION



1. TUNDE

Omo, please take my advice: Never jump from a moving train.

Outside of the physics related to falling and landing and rolling, there are a number of ridiculous hurdles one must overcome. The speed at which the train is traveling, the conditions of the ground onto which you are landing, the angle of your descent, these are only but a few. This is why the people who risk life and limb to jump from trains do it in a heartbeat. It is one of the few things in life in which the brain needs to be rerouted.

If you think about it, you will not do it.

It is *na beanz*, my friends.

So my advice to all who know me is, always use your brain.

After Painted Wolf and I broke my closest friend, Rex Huerta, from federal custody, we took the first train out of Boston and headed for New York. I will tell you, I was very anxious. I was sitting, in the very literal sense, on my own future.

The jammer, the piece of machinery I believed would save my family and my dear Akika Village, was just under my seat. My father told me at an early age that there is only one way to ensure you do not lose your most prized possessions—you must always have one hand on them. And so it was that I kept my hand on the jammer for the brief time we were on that commuter train.

Yet as this train rounded a bend and slowed to a manageable fifteen miles an hour, we pulled the emergency release on the hydraulic doors and jumped out into the midmorning cold.

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One of my favorite concepts in physics is the first law as conceived by Sir Isaac Newton. It is very simple to understand and yet that is why it is so elegant.

Simplicity is always the hardest skill to master!

The first law is this: An object that is in motion will continue in motion at the same speed and in the same direction unless it is acted upon by another force.

In our case, the other force was the ground.

I landed with the jammer slamming up against my back. Painted Wolf was the most graceful. Rex *don sakoro* before he tumbled head over heels in the pea gravel just beyond the tracks. We were up and moving before we could feel the bruises.

Our timing was excellent. Only a half-mile distant we could see the by-now-familiar blue and red strobe lights of police vehicles. They were waiting for us at the next station. Seeing those cars instantaneously brought our actions into focus. The police wanted us, and we were running!

Running!

My friends, never in my life had I broken the law. I say this with confidence. I was an honest person, an upstanding member of my community. To break the law went against everything I believed and yet here I was. What we had done paled in comparison to the wrongs that had been committed against us!

I no just dey dive! My people, my entire village, were in the crosshairs of a madman. Rex was ruined, his name synonymous with the greatest cybercrime of the twenty-first century. Painted Wolf was concerned for the well-being of her entire family. The cards were stacked against us and the dealer was cheating.

This is why we ran, my friends. We were desperate.

We followed Painted Wolf from the train tracks toward a busy intersection where taxicabs whizzed by at incredible speeds. I assumed we might try to catch one. I was very wrong.

"There." She pointed to a bus packed with commuters at the station.

"Are you kidding?" Rex blurted. "We're still forty-two miles from New York!"

"They'll be looking for us running or on foot. Every cab on the street is going to get an alert. They'll be talking about us over the radio. We'll only get a few blocks. But no one is going to expect us to be on a bus."

1.1

The first step of any good escape plan is confusing your pursuers.

We knew there was simply no way we could outrun the police and FBI.

Not only were they highly mobile but they also had access to every aspect of public transportation. Step onto a bus and they could see us from the driver's-side mounted cams. Hide out in the subway and we would be picked up by facial-recognition software. Even walking down the street was fraught with peril, as the authorities had undertaken the highly unusual step of launching surveillance drones on U.S. soil. I tell you, *omo*, it was like we had stumbled into a war.

But we were not without our resources.

Namely, Painted Wolf!

As we ran toward the station, she pulled out a cell phone and began typing. Painted Wolf typed for three city blocks as Rex and I shook with anxiety that we would be spotted.

"What are you doing?" Rex asked her.

"We have to go," she said with a smile.

Omo, we wove like vipers in tall grass through the parked cars that ringed the station. Most of the police officers were inside, waiting for the train to arrive (surely it would be only minutes before they heard of our escape!), and those who were outside were distracted

enough that they missed us make our way around the back of the station. Thank God, I saw no officers there.

Ah, but there was a good reason for that!

"Watch out!"

Painted Wolf motioned to the sky as Rex hustled me behind a parked car. Before I could ask him what had him so spooked, he pointed skyward. Three drones the size of dinner plates hovered a block away. As they moved toward us, I could hear the faint whine of their servos over the distant crash of traffic. My friends, though it was clear these things were likely looking for us, I was impressed. What amazing design! Even in the midst of running, *I give big throwaway salute* to technology!

"Think they've seen us?" Painted Wolf whispered.

"If they haven't, they will soon," Rex replied.

The drones spread out. Two of the clever machines hovered about fifty-five feet above the edges of the parking lot and one, seventy feet up, hovered over the middle. Just glancing at the bulbous 360-degree cameras on their bellies told me they would easily find us. And they would do it quickly.

"We need a diversion," Rex said. "I'll do it."

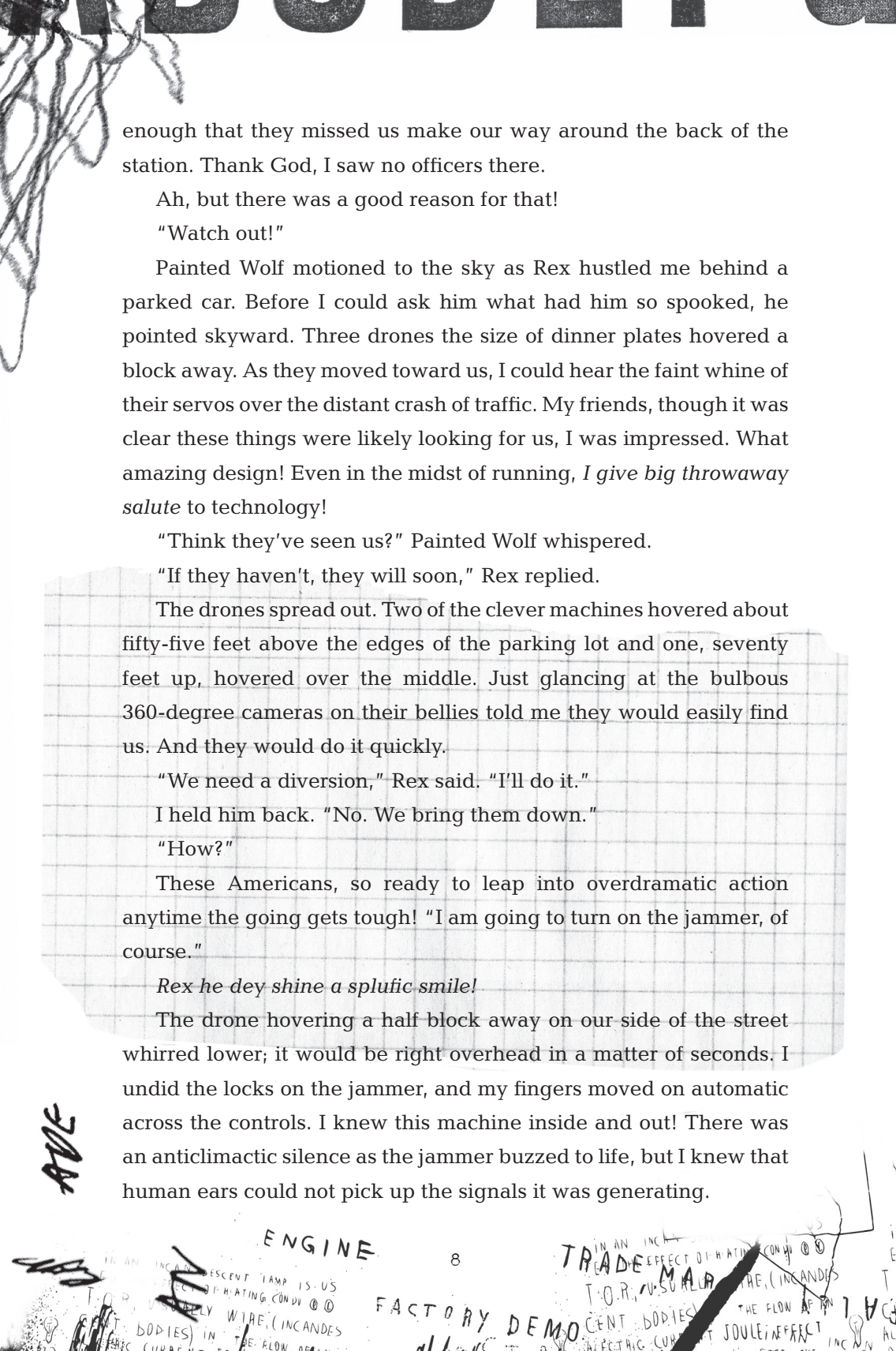
I held him back. "No. We bring them down."

"How?"

These Americans, so ready to leap into overdramatic action anytime the going gets tough! "I am going to turn on the jammer, of course."

Rex he dey shine a splufic smile!

The drone hovering a half block away on our side of the street whirred lower; it would be right overhead in a matter of seconds. I undid the locks on the jammer, and my fingers moved on automatic across the controls. I knew this machine inside and out! There was an anticlimactic silence as the jammer buzzed to life, but I knew that human ears could not pick up the signals it was generating.





The drones that were chasing us down

The drones, however, could.

The one on our side of the lot was only twenty feet away when it suddenly plummeted, clattering to the pavement. The second and third drone dropped like stones soon afterward. One shattered; the other lost its rotors in an explosion of plastic. Ah, it was sad to see such refined engineering broken on the pavement.

"A waste," I said as I stood.

Rex grabbed me and pulled me back down. "Not so fast. Even though their GPS systems are jammed, their cameras could still be working."

"Let me handle it," Painted Wolf said.

With a wink to Rex, Painted Wolf pulled a laser pointer from her

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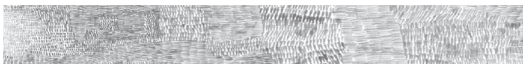
purse, then slowly, carefully, eased herself up over the hood of the parked car and aimed it at the nearest drone, targeting its camera eye. We were too far away to tell if the trick worked, but Painted Wolf hit the other drones with the laser, too.

Still, my friend Rex was not taking any chances.

He jumped up and ran to the nearest downed drone. When he got to it, Rex stomped it to bits! What a sight, to see those pieces spinning across the parking lot. Rex next made a beeline to the second drone and delivered the same treatment.

Finally, letting off all his steam, Rex crushed the third and last drone with a well-placed leap. Though I hate destruction, I will tell you, the crunch of the glass was incredibly satisfying!

1.2



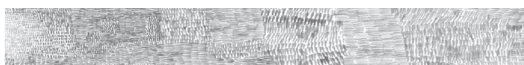
We reached the bus only seconds before it lurched into gear.

This was no *danfo*!

Not only was the ride impeccably smooth but the interior was more like that of an airplane than a highway bus. With the bus half full, Rex and I sank into our seats near the back while Painted Wolf paid the driver. The other passengers, young people with too few bags and older people who were already fast asleep, largely ignored us as we settled in.

I did notice one young woman eyeing her cell phone and then glancing back at us. Was she taking photos? Checking her news feeds to see if we were the ones the police were looking for? The way her eyeballs darted from her cell screen to our faces told me we had to do something fast. Even though I may have been growing paranoid, who could blame me!

I told Rex and Painted Wolf to power off their cell phones. Then I switched on the jammer again and the bus instantly became a moving bubble of GPS failure. And more! As it had at the Game,



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NA

the jammer wreaked havoc with every device receiving and generating electronic signals aboard. The young woman watching us restarted her phone, tapped it ruthlessly, and then finally put it away, completely flabbergasted.

I turned the jammer back off a few minutes later. I did not want to be responsible for any accidents. I figured the best use of the jammer was to turn it on and have it send out a very low disrupting signal every five minutes or so. The process would be laborious, but that way at least we would have the best of both worlds—a moving digital bubble that did not leave a trail of broken phones and equipment. This way, the phones would work but there would be no incoming or outgoing messages.

The bus made its way through traffic to the highway on-ramp. Passengers complained about lack of service, and though she had nothing to do with it, the bus driver actually turned around and apologized to everyone. She was a good person, and I did feel guilty about the situation.

But my guilt did not last that long, *omo*.

With the phones and tablet computers rendered momentarily inactive, the passengers were forced to do the unthinkable: They had to talk to each other or gaze out the window at the beautiful landscape surrounding us.

It is true that most of it was industrial—warehouses, refineries, factories—but, my friends, I believe that all human ingenuity is beautiful.

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2. CAI

I've never had a bus ride pass so quickly.

My mind was spinning.

I spent the time from Boston to Hartford mentally charting our course. We'd made the bus, but we'd also have to get off it and make it to Teo's apartment unseen. I didn't know New York City beyond maps I'd studied, so a lot of the moves I assumed we'd make were guesses—things that had worked in the past in Shanghai.

Every big city is a grid; the trick is finding the fastest way across it.

I spent the second hour figuring out the "what next" after we would hit Teo's apartment. If he was there, that meant a radically different approach than if he wasn't. Regardless, we had a flight to catch. I could come up with all sorts of ways to get us to the airport, but getting onto the plane would be the trickiest part.

Running would only get us so far.

If we were going to make it, I figured we'd need some help.

While Tunde was focused on the scenery blurring outside and giving us an occasional update on what we'd just sped by ("Did you see that petroleum refinery? No, I cannot believe you missed it! It was amazing!"), Rex was lost in his thoughts. Every now and then he'd tap away at a coding app he'd opened up on his cell phone and type out a few mathematical formulas.

"Brain never stops, does it?" I said, already knowing the answer.

"Helps me focus. I'm writing out programs we might need to use when we get to the airport. It's all potential, you know, like different

signal blockers and masking tech. I've already got a police radio scanner application for both UHF and VHF channels. We are wanted felons after all."

I leaned over and glanced back down the highway.

"Right now, the only people tailing us are commuters."

"Look," Rex said, putting his cell phone down, "not all of us are infamous."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I'm just not exactly used to running from the authorities. I mean this is insane. I've broken more laws in the past two days than in my entire life."

"It's not even noon," I joked. "I'm sure we'll break some more."

Rex didn't laugh. I elbowed him and winked over my sunglasses.

"It's funny," Rex said. "But I've just had this idea that finding Teo is going to fix things. Maybe it's like a big-brother complex or something. I'm sure psychologists have come up with a condition for it. We've got so much we need to fix, it'd be great to have his help."

He needed a pep talk. He needed to know **we could do this**.

"We're strong," I said. "Stronger than we've ever been. You got us here, all your hard work. You got us here and we're going to find your brother. But no matter what, you need to know that we can overcome whatever the world throws at us. You might not always have your brother, but you'll always have us."

"Good to have a friend like you, Wolf."

As Rex went back to coding and looking down at his cell, I knew what we needed to do. How we were going to get to Teo's apartment unseen.

"Guys, did you just see that junkyard!?" Tunde spun to us, eyes wide, fingers pointed outside. Rex and I looked at him skeptically.

"What?" he asked, shocked that we weren't as thrilled at looking at a scrap yard as he was.

"Tunde, focus. We're a bridge away from the city," I told them. "Good news is, I have a plan on how we're going to get to Teo's apartment and not be seen. Bad news is, I need you to turn off the jammer for a minute."

"Hang on," Rex said. "That's taking a huge risk. . . ."

"Taking **huge risks** has gotten us this far, right? Hit the button, Tunde."

Tunde looked to Rex, then back to me, then nodded and shut the jammer off. Instantly, a dozen cell phones beeped and buzzed as messages and e-mails that had been backlogged came through. Everyone, even the driver, pulled out their cells and started reading and making calls.

I borrowed Rex's cell and sent a text message, then deleted it.

"You're planning something big," Rex said.

"I think you're going to like this."

2.1

The bus was swallowed up by the Port Authority Bus Terminal minutes later.

Though we couldn't see more than a sliver of the city surrounding us, I could feel its weight all around. Towering buildings and mobs of people—if we wanted to get lost, this would be a good place to do it. As soon as we stepped outside, Rex was on his cell mapping a route to Teo's apartment.

"Thirty minutes by subway," he said. "That's too long."

"Maybe we catch a ride," Tunde said, eyeing a line of taxicabs. "We certainly cannot be out walking the streets. From this corner I can see five surveillance cameras. They are on top of the buildings and some on the streetlights."

"We'll get to Teo's," I said, "but not in a cab or on the subway. Come on."

We merged into a passing group of tourists and followed them for two blocks. Rex was deliberately slouching behind the taller guys in the group; Tunde was in the lead, eyes wide, ready for anything. Nothing happened, but I could feel the tension when a helicopter passed overhead.

"Wolf, we close?" Rex asked, ready to run again.

"There," I said, pointing to a Chinese restaurant on the corner. "Our ticket."

It was called Hunan Palace.

We ducked inside and found the place filled with lunchtime customers. Most of them were Chinese, likely recent immigrants and their first-generation kids.

"How exactly are we going to get across town?" Tunde asked.

"Easy. We'll have a party."

Rex and Tunde looked at each other.

Rex asked, "Who are we inviting?"

I grinned. "**Everyone.**"

I flagged down a waiter, a young man with dyed-pink hair. I asked him in Mandarin if his uncle had gotten my message. He nodded.

The waiter motioned for us to follow him to the kitchen.

As I stepped inside, my stomach instantly started growling. Hunan cuisine is known for its heat—spicy foods with rich flavors. We walked past sous chefs prepping bean curds, dry-wok chicken, and smoky fish in chili sauce. Entering the kitchen was like wading into a fog of deliciousness, and it made me miss home terribly. For me, comfort food is a plate of *máo shì hóngshāo ròu*, Mao's braised pork.

But there was **no time** to reminisce or even catch a bite.

The pink-haired waiter took us over to a rotund chef with a large smile. His name was Mr. Tan. He was the acquaintance of a microblogger in Nankin who went under the handle of Element B.

A year ago, Element B and I had worked on a project together virtually, and she'd told me I could come to her with anything. She told me Mr. Tan was familiar with the microblogging community in China, knew the risks we were taking, and was a "big fan."

He shook my hand and bowed. "Welcome, Painted Wolf."

I thanked him repeatedly. "You're doing us an amazing favor."

"I am happy to help. We have something you requested."

Mr. Tan motioned to one of the sous chefs, and he pulled a black duffel bag out from a cabinet. It was big and stuffed full. I took the bag and bowed my thanks.

I then turned to Tunde. "Mr. Tan needs a favor."

Mr. Tan gave Tunde a vigorous handshake before he handed him a satchel of tools. Tunde turned to me, utterly confused.

I clarified the situation. "I told him you are going to fix the AC unit in the back; it seems it's having some real problems."

"You do know we are currently **on the run**, right?"

"Of course," I laughed. "I'm sure it won't take more than a minute."

Mr. Tan pointed to a boiler room just off the kitchen.

"Fine," Tunde said. "But first, please, tell us what is going on."

"We're going to social network our way out of this," I said. "Three hours and thirty-seven minutes ago, I had Element B send out a message. It went to all of the LODGE's followers, anyone and everyone we know. I'll be honest with you: I've only done this once before, but it was small scale. Just me and only for a few minutes when I was in a real jam."

"I think this qualifies as a jam," Rex said.

Tunde asked, "Wolf, can you tell us what exactly you asked all of our friends and followers to do?"

"**Join us**," I said. "Here."

The distant sound of a passing siren caught our attention.

"I still don't get exactly how this helps," Rex said. "Even if we had an army of our friends, the police would just bowl them over."

"It's not the number of people that matters; it's what they're doing."

"And what exactly is that?" Tunde asked.

"Those based here in New York City are going to hit the streets and provide cover. The people who can't physically be here will be doing whatever they can to help—hacking street cams, rerouting traffic."

Tunde grinned. "I have no idea how that will happen, but I love the sound of it. Go on now, tell us what is in the duffel bag."

I pulled the bag up onto a nearby counter and unzipped it. Inside were clothes. Shirts, skirts, pants, socks, shoes, and even wigs and jewelry. "These are donated," I said as Tunde and Rex looked over the goods. "Everything should fit."

"Incredible!" Tunde said. "We truly have amazing friends."

"It gets better."

I pulled a manila envelope from the bottom of the duffel bag and handed it to Rex. He was stunned to see what was inside. Three passports. One Chinese, one Nigerian, and one American. Each had our photos (harvested from social media and Photoshopped to perfection), but the names and biographical details were entirely fictional. They looked incredibly real.

Tunde opened his and laughed. "My name is Mobo Oyekan! This name means 'freedom' in the language of my people. A very fitting choice, Wolf."

"Well, at least you're not Damian Quintanilla." Rex frowned.

"You don't like it?" I said, half laughing. "It's fancy."

"Makes me sound like a cheesy pop star."

"You are always a star in my book, Damian." Tunde grinned.

"What about you, Wolf?" Rex asked.

I opened the Chinese passport and held it up for them to see. The photo was of me in full Painted Wolf gear, done up with as much makeup as possible.

"Chen Jiang," Tunde read aloud. "Beautiful."

"How did you even get these made?" Rex asked. "This is nuts."

"Some of our followers don't exactly have sterling reputations," I said. "They're not perfect but I think, given the time crunch, **they'll do.**"

"Oh, they'll more than do," Rex said, shooting me a smile. "Wolf wins again."

2-2

While Tunde worked on the AC and Rex coded on his cell, I sent a few e-mails and texts to a second wave of people.

Folks I didn't know well but I'd worked with in the past.

We needed to have as many available hands as possible.

Even though we didn't know what would come of our visit to Teo's apartment, I knew we had a flight to catch. Getting to the airport was going to be a problem, but it was minor compared to getting through security and onto the plane.

We had the disguises. We had the passports.

But those were only two facets. At a rough estimation, there were a million and one ways the operation could go wrong. I had to come up with patches for each and every one.

And that was going to require **pulling in every favor** I could think of.

Twenty minutes later, we were ready to go.

Tunde had fixed the AC unit, and cool air soon filled the restaurant. Mr. Tan swelled with gratitude and shoved a to-go carton of smoked beef and dried chilies into his hands.

Ever gracious, Tunde explained that it was a simple matter of

clearing a rodent's nest from around the AC's capacitor. I translated for Mr. Tan. Although Tunde was eager to go into the details, I had to ask him not to share. Last thing I wanted to think about was a rat's nest in the back of the kitchen.

I spared Mr. Tan the embarrassment.

"You guys have to see this," Rex shouted from the front of the restaurant.

We ran up with the waitstaff to see forty-seven people in the street.

They ranged from young kids to old men. I saw a nine-year-old boy on a skateboard, a woman pushing a stroller with a sleeping infant, a man over sixty with a very long beard, and a tattooed woman with pierced eyebrows.

It was unbelievable that all of them were there to help us.

But what stood out most were the teens who looked like Rex, Tunde, and me. When I say that they looked like us, I mean it was uncanny. They were wearing the same clothes and had very similar haircuts. It was like looking into a corner mirror and seeing myself reflected out into infinity.

Tunde couldn't help himself. He ran out into the crowd and gave high fives and hugs. Then, beaming, he turned back and waved for us to join.

As Rex and I stepped into the mob of clones, he said, "We're fugitives. Why are they—"

I stopped and lowered my sunglasses to catch Rex's intense stare. "They wanted to help. Honestly. Although I felt bad about them taking a risk for us, so as far as they're concerned this is all part of an experiment. I think a lot of them just think it's fun. Crazy as that seems . . ."

"So how's this work?" Rex asked, looking around at our twins.

"We run. They run. Pretty simple," I said.

Tunde clapped twice and shouted, "Then we need to go!"

All of our copies ran out into the streets of the city in a burst of excitement. Maybe passersby thought it was some sort of video prank, a flash mob for the cameras, but most of them got out of the way quickly. If there were drones above us at that moment, they would have had digital heart attacks attempting to track all of the moving bodies.

"Come on." I pulled Rex and Tunde into a group of six of our clones and sprinted to the end of the block.

At the end of the street, half of the group went left, the other right.

Tunde turned to go with the left half, but I caught him. He was following the wrong Rex! Thankfully Rex didn't notice.

We headed downtown, pushing through the crowds, before I motioned for the guys to join me under a tree in a small park. Rex scanned the skies and the rooftops. He was acting as paranoid as I felt. Tunde was amped up and sweating hard. He looked like his heart was threatening to break out of his chest.

"Okay," he said. "We got this far. How do we get to Brooklyn?"

"I got us a ride," I replied.

"You thought of everything," Tunde said.

We were interrupted by a loud honk and turned to see a delivery van roar up the street alongside the park. The driver jumped down and opened the back where the interior was lined with shelving for packages. He was in his early twenties and tall with short-cropped hair. His eyes were a startling blue.

"Hey, Wolf, glad to meet you in person."

He gave me a hug. Watching, Rex had a weird look on his face. Almost like he was jealous, which was flattering but totally unnecessary.

I introduced the driver to the guys.

"This is Nigel. He's a friend."

I'd known Nigel for about ten months. Virtually. He frequented a

deep-Web forum on game theory where people posted clever twists on old puzzles. Nigel was best known for his take on one of the oldest opening moves in chess, the **King's Gambit**.

"Hop on in," Nigel said. "We don't have much time."

We jumped into the back of the van.

As Nigel closed the door, he said, "Hang on tight."

2.3

I'd tried to keep Nigel in the dark like our doubles.

I'd told him it was a competition and we needed to get across town, in secret, fast. I was worried he wouldn't buy it.

I was right.

"So you guys are on the run, huh? Rad," Nigel said as he pulled the van into traffic. "I know you're trying to keep me safe but don't worry, I got this. Truth is, we've got friends in common. Word gets around."

As the van whipped into traffic, Nigel manhandled the wheel to keep the vehicle from tipping over. We had to brace ourselves every turn.

"Which friends?" Tunde asked as we careened around a corner.

Nigel glanced back at us with a grin. "People interested in changing things."

Concerned, Rex leaned over to me. "How do you know this guy?"

"He's on our side."

"Let's hope so," Rex said, motioning to rows of high-tech police-avoidance technology lining the interior of the van. Radar gun scanners, thermal cameras, laser jammers, and a CB radio system that crackled with the voices of any pursuers. Tunde looked to be in seventh heaven scanning all the equipment.

"Cost a pretty penny to hook it all up," Nigel shouted.

I'll admit I was a bit shocked to see how much equipment Nigel

had packed into the van. I'd had the feeling he might be something of a conspiracy nut, but this definitely solidified it. We'd accept the ride and be grateful for it, but that was it. I certainly would think twice about calling Nigel for help again.

"What do you use this van for exactly?" Rex asked.

Nigel laughed. "As Painted Wolf knows, sometimes you need to get in and out in a hurry. I deliver packages during the day and help my friends at night. We're not as high-profile as you all, but we like to **get things done**."

Rex coughed: "Terminal."

"Ha," Nigel chuckled. "No. No way. Those guys are maniacs. To tell you the truth, I think they're probably just puppets for some shady corporation. Don't get me started on the whole thing; I could talk for ages about it. But, no. No, I'm just a friend of a friend. Painted Wolf hooked up one of my buddies a few months ago. He was in Beijing— Wait, can I even talk about that stuff?"

Nigel glanced back at me.

"Nigel's friend needed help getting a message out through social media. He's part of a hacker crew exposing the dirty laundry of some of the big conglomerates doing business in China. Needless to say, he needed to get through the Great Firewall, and I hooked him up."

"Wolf did more than that," Nigel yelled back.

Rex turned to me and frowned.

"They were going to try to send the messages unencrypted," I said, trying quickly to defuse Rex's suspicion. "It was like they were doing this for the first time."

"Well . . .," Nigel said.

"Anyway, I ran it through a few programs. Gave them some pointers."

"She saved my friend's butt," Nigel said. "Seriously. Huge props."

We came to a sudden halt at an intersection and Nigel turned

around in his seat and smiled. We picked ourselves up and dusted the debris from our clothes.

"It's really good to meet you in person, Wolf," Nigel said. "You look awesome."

Rex rolled his eyes at that.

"We're all exhausted," I said. "But we really appreciate your helping us out."

"Hang on. Almost there."

Our stomachs had only just settled when Nigel hit the gas and the van lurched forward. As we sat plastered to the van's rear door, Rex held out his cell phone. He had three windows open; each displayed a scene of chaos only a few miles away—our clones were being questioned by police.

"They've caught fifteen so far," Rex said. "I feel terrible for these people."

"I do, too. But they'll be fine."

"How are you so sure about that?"

"It's okay to let people help you, Rex."

"I'm fine letting people help me. I just don't like the idea of people I don't know putting their necks out for me. That feels . . . wrong."

"You're looking at it incorrectly," I said. "This thing is bigger than you. It's bigger than the LODGE; it's bigger than the Game or even Kiran. The people helping us get out of here right now are doing it because they want what's right. They want justice. And getting us to Africa, getting you out of jail, that is doing the right thing."

Rex chewed that over carefully, glancing back at the news feed on his cell.

"Are we close?" Tunde asked Nigel.

The van jumped another curb as it careened through traffic.

"Yes," Nigel said, putting his hand on some of his equipment to hold it in place. "But you're going to have to walk the rest of the way."

There's some crazy traffic up ahead. Think it might be a roadblock. Anyway, place you're looking for is three blocks south of here. Keep your heads low, roll quiet, and you should be cool."

Nigel pulled the van over to the side of the road.

He put it in park and turned around, grinning.

"Pleasure helping you guys," Nigel said. "We even, Wolf?"

"For sure," I said. "But **you never really owed me.**"

"Awesome. Catch you guys later."

We all piled out of the van. It was great having my feet on the ground again. The sounds of the city came flooding in as Nigel pulled the van back into traffic and vanished. Tunde grabbed the duffel bag and swung it over his shoulder.

"He was a nice fellow," Tunde said.

Rex huffed. "Seemed a little weird to me."



3. REX

adrenaline

industrial

So this was it.

Months of coding.

Two years of searching.

Now I was only a few hundred feet from my brother.

For me, adrenaline isn't so much a boost as it is a fuel. I was pumped up, ready for whatever came next. I sprinted ahead of Painted Wolf and Tunde.

"Come on, only a block to go."

We were in an industrial part of the borough.

The type of place no one was living in a few years earlier. There were factories and wide streets and very few trees. On the horizon, I could see the shimmering towers of Manhattan through the haze. Somewhere to our left, the river was slapping the shores, eating its way into the island one millimeter at a time.

I slowed and Wolf ran alongside me as we approached the address, a three-story concrete apartment building that wouldn't have looked out of place in SoCal.

"You all right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Just feels a bit weird being so close."

"But weird in a good way, right?"

The closer we got, the more I was grinding my teeth.

This is it. Everything you've been waiting for . . .

My heart was in my throat. It's an old expression. One you hear all the time, but it's true. You can be so anxious, so excited, that your

heartbeat overwhelms every other sound. It's like a drum in your ear. And your throat . . .

Take it easy, Rex. Keep focused. Keep cool.

With no sirens wailing, no rush of approaching police vehicles, I stood behind Painted Wolf while she picked the lock to the apartment building. Her motions were insanely smooth. Clearly, she'd done this more than once before. As I watched her, the first thought that came to my head was: *What would Ma think of this girl?*

We cautiously made our way up three flights of narrow stairs to the apartment the quantum computer had identified as Teo's.

We stood together by the door. It was nondescript, a slate-gray door with a chrome knob. Behind it could have been anything.

My hand hovered over the doorknob.

"Think it is locked?" Tunde said.

"Maybe we should knock first?" Painted Wolf asked.

My stomach was in knots. I knocked quietly.

There was no response from the other side of the door.

So I knocked louder.

Still nothing.

So I grabbed the doorknob and turned it.

It was locked. Painted Wolf pulled out her nail file and bobby pin. She went to town and within seconds the doorknob clicked. It was unlocked.

"This is it," she said.

Then I took a deep breath and opened the door.

3.1

I don't know what I expected to happen when the door opened.

I guess I've seen too many movies where a spy or a detective cracks open a mysterious door and there's either a sudden explosion or something terrifying comes rushing out at them.

None of those things happened.

The door swung open silently on an empty studio apartment.

A TV in the corner was still on, anime flashing across the screen.

The place looked like a college kid's dorm room. Secondhand furniture battled for space with ancient, threadbare rugs. There was a bookshelf stacked with books and DVDs. A small fridge hummed anxiously. The place smelled faintly of old pizza and laundry freshener. It was like he'd just stepped out.

"Hello?" I shouted before heading inside.

There was no response.

"You think he's—" Painted Wolf started, but I cut her off.

"Teo!" I yelled into the room. My voice bounced off the walls.

Nothing.

That's when I saw it. A sketch pad on the coffee table.

"This is the right place," I said. "He's just not here."

I picked up the sketch pad. It was turned to an open page where there was an amateurish but clever drawing of a scooter. To be exact, an Eagle scooter circa 2001. The same one my brother and I had won in a carefully orchestrated con when I was six. It's a long story; I'll share it another time.

Needless to say, the drawing was proof.

"This is Teo's place. He drew this. But . . . but he's gone."

"You cannot be certain," Tunde said. "Perhaps he is just out for a moment."

Painted Wolf turned to me; she reached out to touch my shoulder, but I stepped away, shaking my head. The doubt that had been gnawing at the back of my brain crept closer—maybe WALKABOUT hadn't worked as well as I'd assumed? Maybe he'd left this place before the Game had even begun?

As the questions swirled, my heart sank.

Painted Wolf grabbed my hand, spun me around to face her.

"We're going to find him," she said. "Maybe not now. Maybe not

here. But we're not going to give up. Rex, you just told us that he was here. This is his sketch pad. His place. That's huge. You're so much closer, don't you see that?"

She was right, of course.

Didn't feel that way, though. In the moment, it felt like being kicked in the gut. My mind raced back through everything that had happened, everything that led me to that apartment—all the heartache, all the anger, all the coding, and all the running. And for what? For a sketch and his abandoned stuff.

I felt like I was going to topple over.

That or scream.

"I know it's disappointing," Painted Wolf continued. "Even with the program, this was always a long shot. You said so yourself. But it must feel good to know how close you are. Just a month ago, you didn't even know where to start."

A good pep talk but . . . I needed to see Teo.

So close but so far . . .

Walking around the room, examining the books and DVDs, Tunde said, "I am sorry, *omo*. Painted Wolf is right. We will find him. I am certain of it. If not here, then again, another place. Knowing what you have told me about Teo, though, I can assure you there are many, many clues left behind here."

I looked down at the sketch pad and flipped through the pages.

It was filled with drawings and doodles, most of them about biological processes—the interior of cells, neural networks, carbon chains. The rest were just little swirling designs, as if his hand had been on autopilot. Thing is, the sketch pad wasn't open to those drawings. It was open to this one page.

A page only I would have instantly recognized.

"You're right," I said. "You're both right."

Tunde said, "Where do we start?"

I pulled the cell from my pocket and started taking pictures.

Before any of us touched anything, before we disrupted any of the room's arrangement, I took photos and video from every angle. If we missed something, there was now a record.

"We need to go through everything," I said. "Notebooks, books. I hate to say it but considering our time constraints, we're going to have to pull the place apart."

Tunde took the kitchen, I took the sleeping area, and Painted Wolf handled the bookshelf. Tunde was very careful, placing everything neatly to the side. I piled things up. Painted Wolf was a tsunami.

We quickly realized there was nothing hidden.

No secret charts or binders full of in-work projects. This wasn't Teo's lab. If anything, it was just a crash pad—a place to kick his feet up and watch DVDs of old shows like *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World* and *Firefly*.

I sat down on the futon. "We're missing something."

Painted Wolf sat down beside me with my cell, listening to police radio chatter on a Bluetooth through the scanner app I'd written on the bus. "They're doing sweeps nearby," she said. "There's enough going on to distract them for now, but we can't be relaxed."

Tunde opened the refrigerator.

Inside were condiments, seltzer water bottles, and old Chinese takeout.


"This place makes no sense," I said. "Teo was a workaholic. Used to drive my parents crazy. Even when he was a kid, he'd bring his books to the playground. The very idea of even an hour off would give him hives."

"So this isn't his place?" Painted Wolf asked. "'Cause it's very chill."

"It's a front," I said, jumping up.

I tapped all the walls, listening for empty spaces behind them, hidden spaces. I tried the bookshelf for any levers that would reveal trapdoors. Nothing.

Only thing incongruous in the place was the fridge.



There wasn't anything outwardly unusual about it; maybe five years old, not a top-of-the-line model. But still, something didn't sit right. It hummed weird.

That sounds silly, but if you listen to fridges, they all have a similar, white noise-like hum. This one growled.

I opened it up. Nothing inside but bottles of jalapeños, pickles, seltzer water, and the Chinese takeout. I opened the box, sniffed it, and instantly regretted it. Week-old chow mein. Freezer had even less. Much of it wrapped in foil and double bagged.

And that's when I saw it: the button that controls the light inside the fridge, the one that goes out when the door closes and pushes it in.

That button was funky.

I called Tunde over to look at it.

"It is a cap," Tunde said. "Let us see what it is covering."

He pried the button off and beneath was a switch.

Tunde looked up at me. "What do you think?"


I didn't answer.

I just flicked the switch and the back of the fridge slid open.



3.2

The fridge was a *servante*.



That's what magicians call a secret compartment behind their table. The place they sneak things into to hide them from the audience. Sure enough, Teo hid what he'd been working on inside a hollowed-out space maybe four feet by three.

A passageway.

"What do you think?" Tunde asked as I leaned down and peeked inside.

"I think we have ten minutes tops," Painted Wolf said.

I was the first one through. The passage went only a few feet before it stopped at a small sliding metal door. It rolled open easily,

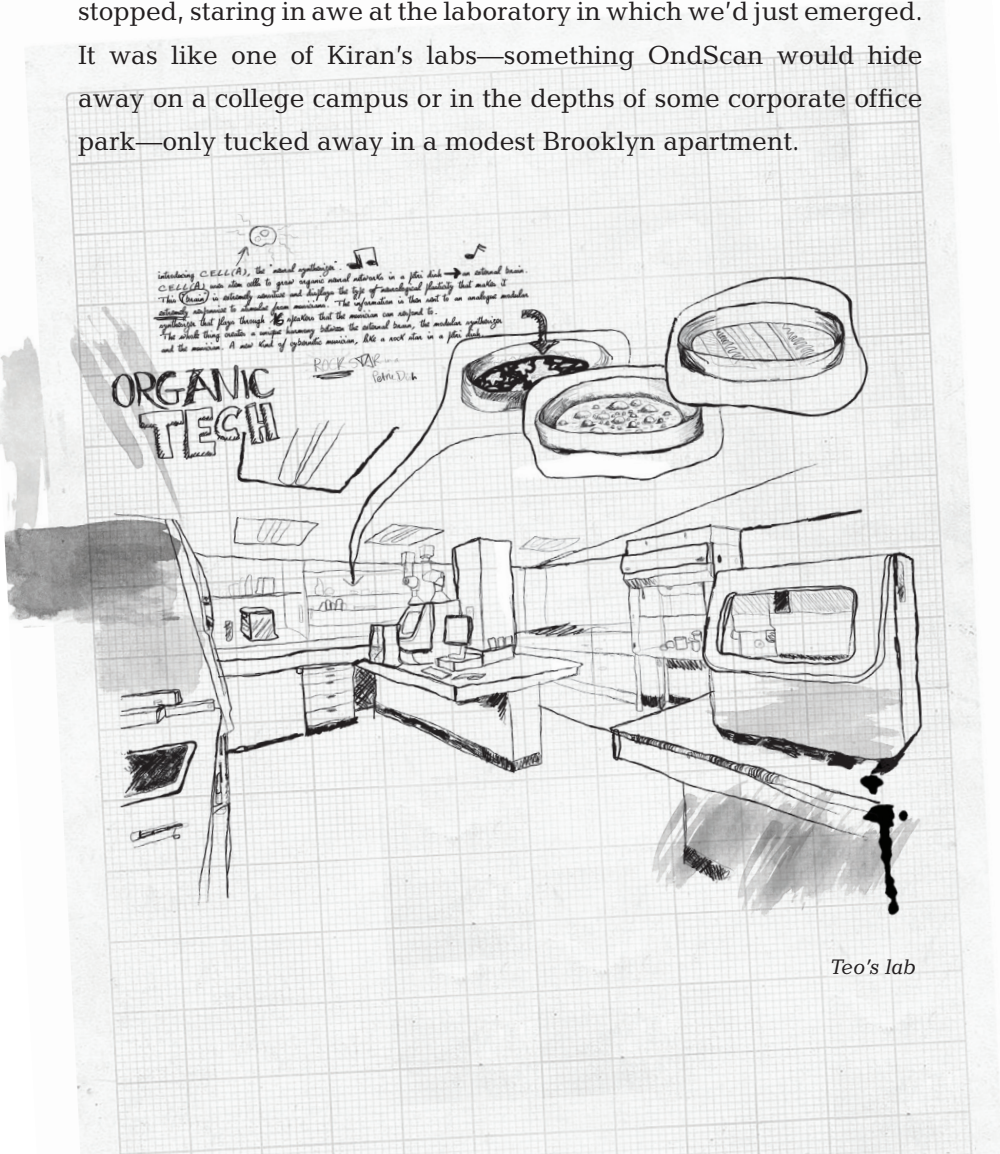
on wheels. I climbed through and stood up in a dark room. Pitch black, nothing but the blinking green and white lights of sleeping machines.

And then the lights came flickering on.

They must have been motion activated, 'cause they came on in a flickering wave of bright white from the back of the room to where I was standing. I had to close my eyes and then blink furiously for them to adjust.

Tunde came through. Then Painted Wolf.

"I closed the fridge door to make sure . . . ," she started, then stopped, staring in awe at the laboratory in which we'd just emerged. It was like one of Kiran's labs—something OndScan would hide away on a college campus or in the depths of some corporate office park—only tucked away in a modest Brooklyn apartment.



Teo's lab




"This is impossible," Tunde said. "How did—"

There were no answers.

Teo couldn't have built the place himself. He'd either found it and burrowed his way inside or . . . or someone else had put up the money for its construction. I couldn't see any other way.

Unless Teo isn't the same person you thought he was . . .



While the walls were lined with shelves and equipment, a featureless white cube dominated the lab. It was a perfect square, four by four by four feet. It looked like a piece of modernist art. I wasn't sure what it was at first, but when Tunde and I got closer to it, we could hear the hum of inner machinery beneath its smooth surface.

"Very sleek design," Tunde said. "You can barely see the seams."

"Where?" I asked. "I don't see any at all."

Tunde motioned for me to kneel down beside him, and as I did, the seams etched into the sides of the cube suddenly became visible. It was like a puzzle someone had glued together, each piece so snug it was nearly impossible to see.

"Any thoughts?" I asked.

"Some sort of storage unit?" Tunde said, walking around the cube.

"Looks like the quantum computer," Painted Wolf added.

I nodded. "It does, but . . . I don't think it is."

I pulled out my cell, leaned over the top of the cube, and turned on the flashlight. At an angle, the bright light illuminated a symbol and several letters very lightly embossed on the cube's surface. It must have been cut with a laser and only a few dozen microns deep because I couldn't feel the symbol or letters when I ran my fingers over them.

"What is it?" Tunde asked.

It was hard to make out but looked like a teardrop, possibly a raindrop. In its center: ineffably faint letters, A G C T.

I turned to Painted Wolf and asked for a safety pin.

She looked down at her leather coat, the pins a stylish accessory, gold and silver. Then she undid one and handed it to me.

"I'll give it back in a sec," I said.

I poked my ring finger on my left hand. The blood welled up and I handed Wolf the pin back. "That's okay," she said. "You can keep it."

"What are you doing, Rex?" Tunde asked.

"Watch."

3.3

I held my finger over the top of the cube and a single scarlet drop splashed down on its center.

A wheel of light moved under the acrylic surface of the cube.

Blue and overly bright, it looked like the lights inside a copying machine.

"How did you know?" Tunde asked.

"A, C, G, and T. The building blocks of DNA," I said.

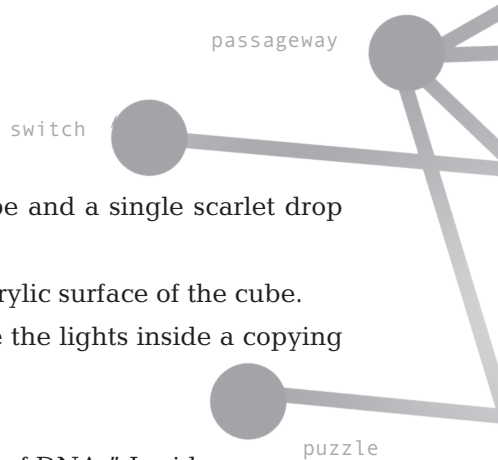
"It is unlocked by your genetic code? This is brilliant."

"We should step back," I said.

We did—just as the cube began to unfold. It moved silently, turning on expertly calibrated hydraulics that made Tunde gasp.

When I was a child, my aunt Alejandra would make me intricate origami animals. She loved to fold and unfold them, delighting in how big my eyes would get as they came together. "*Otra vez!*" I would shout. "Again! Again!"

Teo's machine was like one of Alejandra's origami, only fifty times the size and made out of state-of-the-art alloys and precision engineering. The cube twisted, rotating at its center, as petals of metal unfolded the way a flower opens, to reveal a hollow space inside that glowed with a green light. My heart was going nuts inside my rib cage.



"Talk to us, Rex," Painted Wolf said. "What's in here?"

"Teo left that sketch pad out to tell me this place was special, that he wanted me to find it. The fridge, the lab, this box, I don't know if this is what it was all for, but I don't think he'd hide old sweatpants in here. Whatever is inside, it's important."

The space was filled with equipment, documents, tablet computers, and a stack of five multicolored gel disks.

Tunde was exuberant. "This is incredible!"

The cube stopped rotating. A clank echoed from inside.

I reached in and pulled out several notebooks. Thumbing through the pages, I found notes that ran the gamut from annotations on research articles to drawings and calculations. Lots of doodles, too. Excessive doodles. But in it all, I saw the same intense combination of focus and creativity.

Tunde pulled out a small plastic box with what looked like clear sticky note tabs inside. Each was the thickness of tissue paper.

"I did not know these were publicly available!" Tunde was delighted.

"What are they?" Painted Wolf asked.

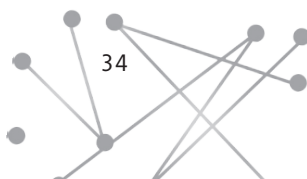
"Sticky drives. Well, technically they're flash drives," I said. "But they're flexible. Ultra thin. No one has these outside of the tech giants at this point. And even then, it's mostly just research. Each one holds at least 10 gigs."

Tunde pocketed some of them.

I picked through the other stuff in the cube and found earbuds coiled at the bottom. I recognized them. Teo had gotten them for Christmas the year before he vanished. He wore them all the time, even slept with them on.

The fact that he'd left them behind for me to find was telling: Maybe they were a gift, a way of saying, "You're close, brother, keep moving" or maybe they were another enigmatic clue.

Regardless, I grabbed them.



Two years in the wilderness, he'd been crazy busy. . . .

"This is all about lysosome transport," Painted Wolf said.

She'd picked up one of the notebooks and was flicking through the pages. I looked over her shoulder and was blown away by what I was seeing.

"Teo solved one of the mysteries of lysosome transport," I said, scanning through the scrawled notes. "I don't exactly know the details of it, but Teo always told me that cellular biologists couldn't figure out how the Golgi apparatus does a lot of what it does. This whole notebook is a breakdown of how a lot of it works. Like eighty percent of it. I have no idea how he figured it out. I don't see any electron microscopes around here. And guess what? There are at least fifteen other notebooks just like this one."

"It's like we're looking into his head," Painted Wolf said, flipping through another one of the notebooks.

"Look closely at these," Tunde interrupted.

He was holding one of the gel disks up to the light.

It looked like a petri dish, exactly the kind you see in labs to grow bacteria. There were at least twenty of them, each filled with a different colored gel; like a little kid's idea of heaven, a Jell-O rainbow.

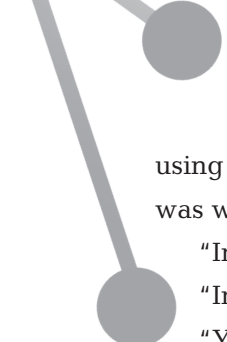
"So he's growing something?" Painted Wolf asked.

"Data," I said, shaking my head in disbelief. "He's growing data."

Teo, you maniac, you actually did it. . . .

"Come again?" Tunde picked up another dish and held it to the light.

"All these files, its data, but he's stored it biologically. We all know computers store data very, very simply: zeros and ones—just reams and reams of them. You can store the same data, terabytes of it, in a biological way, using proteins and peptides. Each one of the molecules is a one or a zero. You can code the gel, then read it back



using transcription. I recognize this stuff. This was the science Teo was working on at home, just before he left."

"Ingenious . . . ," Painted Wolf said.

"Insane . . ." Tunde shook his head.

"Yeah but . . . ," I started, "who paid for all this? The sticky data drives I get. Teo could get ahold of those, but this? Maybe Teo developed some of this tech, maybe he came up with part of the engineering process, but he couldn't have made it—not here, not in some secret lab by himself."

Painted Wolf shushed us for a moment as she listened carefully to the police scanner app. While we couldn't hear what was being said, judging by Painted Wolf's expression it wasn't good.

"We're going to have to deal with all this stuff later, Rex," Painted Wolf said. "It just came over the radio: The cops found Nigel. They'll be here in minutes."

"We can't leave yet!" I shouted. "This is my brother's stuff. Even though he's not here, he *was* here. I need to go through everything. There could be clues. Messages. An explanation for why he left. There's no way I'm leaving right now."

Both Painted Wolf and I turned to Tunde simultaneously.

Tunde thought for a moment.

"There is a ton of stuff here," he said. "How much time do we have exactly, Wolf? I mean, I know you have to estimate. But judging from the police scanner, give us a time frame."

Painted Wolf sighed, looking back at the fridge we'd come through.

"Five minutes."

3.4

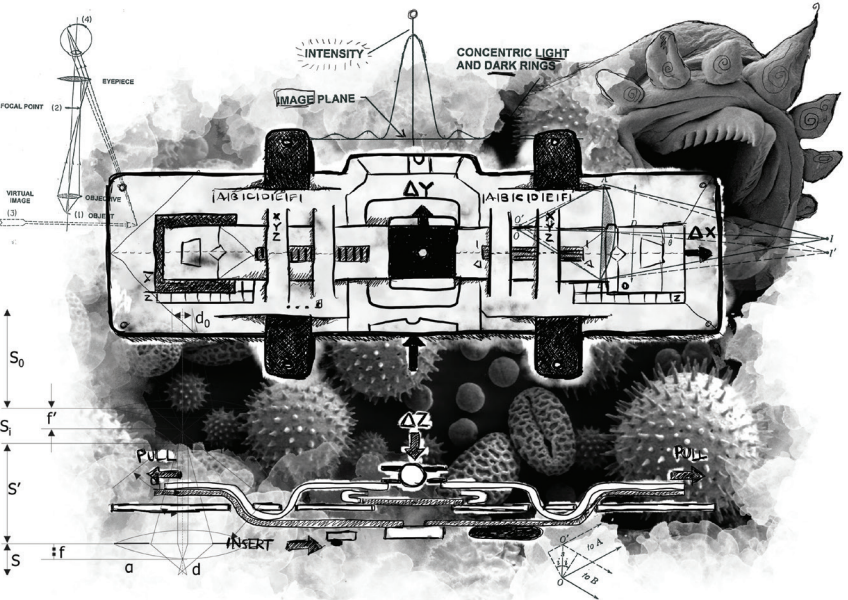
I couldn't even get through half of one of Teo's notebooks in five minutes.

It was going to take hours to assess all the material in the lab. If there were clues, there was no way I was going to find them in five minutes. It was overwhelming. There was only one answer:

"If you're right," I said to Painted Wolf, "then we're going to have to take it with us. As much as we can carry. We need to find some bags, something to carry it. I want to take the gel disks and the notebooks, at the very least."

Painted Wolf went to look for a bag while Tunde and I continued to explore the contents of the white cube.

"Look at this," Tunde said, removing what looked like a large folding microscope. Each of its parts, from the stem to the scope, moved with a simple twist. Within seconds, he had it assembled and ready: a prototype gel reader.



The folding microscope

"Omo," Tunde said. "This is amazing. It looks like science fiction."

I handed Tunde a green gel disk and he slid it inside the reader.

Tunde flicked the device on. It buzzed to life as a deep red light scanned the front of the gel disk. A tiny screen flickered on and numbers streamed across it.

"I don't know DNA sequencing that well," I said, "but I'd say there's a tiny strain sensor inside this machine. Like a graphene nanopore—"

Painted Wolf reached over and flicked the microscope off.

"Sorry, Rex," she said. "But we really, really have to go."

She was right; no point in getting this far and then being swept up by the police. We'd have time to go through all the notebooks and the gel disks later. If Teo had left clues to his whereabouts, I prayed he left more than just one or two. And if he didn't, then maybe I'd be able to tease them out of what he did leave behind.

"Okay, okay. I know," I told Wolf as I folded the microscope up.

"Check this out."

She'd found a backpack that looked like something a mountaineer would take up the north face of Mount Everest. Inside were all sorts of pockets, some of them lined with what looked like a cooling system—flexible tubing filled with cold water, controlled with a battery-powered pump.

"Perfect," I said as we loaded in several of the gel disks.

Tunde and Painted Wolf stuffed notebooks into the backpack as I took one last look around the lab.

I could see Teo working here, up all night catalyzing proteins and scribbling formulas in his notebooks. This was his haven, his true home.

The place on the other side of the fridge was just a mock-up; if anyone stopped by they'd think he was just a normal twenty-something kid living the New York dream. But this lab, it was everything he had wanted.

With the backpack stuffed, we climbed back through the fridge. As soon as we stepped into the apartment, we could hear the sound of sirens. The cops sweeping the streets were close. Too close.

I turned to Painted Wolf. "What's our next move?"






4. TUNDE

My friends, I was certain my heart would explode as we ran from the lab.

I had expected police officers to be waiting for us in the apartment, but they were not. We scrambled down the stairs to the street where again I was certain we would find an army waiting for us. But they were not.



Painted Wolf listened to the police scanner as we moved carefully down the street. As we approached the corner, she held up her hand. We stopped. Painted Wolf pulled a pocket mirror from her purse and used it to peek around the corner. In the mirror, we could see several police vehicles idling on the side of the street.

"We need to cross quickly," Painted Wolf said.

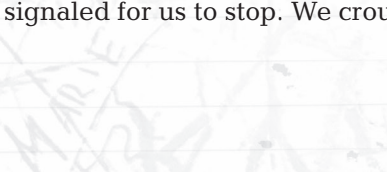

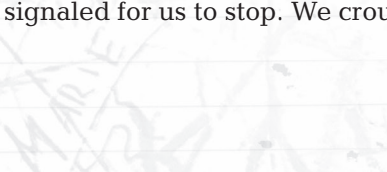

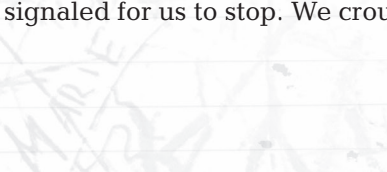

Taking a deep breath as though we were about to dive into a sandstorm, we crouched low and ran across the street with the flow of traffic. Despite Rex's stumbling at the curb, we made it. Running from the law had every nerve in my body on edge, but Painted Wolf was quick and unfazed.

"There's a subway station two blocks ahead," Painted Wolf said.

"Sounds risky. Aren't the subways packed?" Rex replied.

"If we're lucky," Painted Wolf said.

She signaled for us to follow her down a narrow alleyway past rows of dumpsters to another, narrower street. Then, again motioning like a soldier, she signaled for us to stop. We crouched down behind



a dumpster while Painted Wolf listened carefully to the incoming police chatter.

"We need to wait here for a moment," she said.

One minute later, a police car zoomed past.

"Let's go," Painted Wolf said, jumping up.

We raced across the narrow street and around a corner before we clambered down a long staircase into the mugginess of a train station. It was loud there, like an urban echo chamber, and I was so overwhelmed that I merely followed whatever moves Painted Wolf made. She studied the posted signs for a few seconds before leading us to a row of turnstiles.

"Tunde," she said, turning back to me. "We'll pay them back later."

And with that, Painted Wolf leaped over the turnstile without swiping one of the magnetic cards I saw the other commuters using to gain entry. You have to understand, we were on the run. Jumping the turnstile made me feel terrible but Painted Wolf was right, we had no other choice. We had to run.

Thankfully, if we were seen, no one chased after us.

Down at the platform, commuters darted from train to train and tourists with children tried to navigate the crowds with varying degrees of success. I saw many of them, scared like cattle being led into pens, just step back to catch their breath.

"Okay, now what?" Rex asked.

Painted Wolf pointed to the wall opposite us where a sign was pasted.

"Says Myrtle Avenue. We need to take a train to the airport. And fast; they found Nigel only a few blocks from here. They've got teams sweeping the subway stations. Frankly, I'm amazed we've gotten as far as we have. . . ." She paused and looked around. "I see a half-dozen cameras from right here."

"There's a map." Rex motioned to a subway map on the side of a sign behind a row of benches. We made our way over, and as Painted Wolf consulted the subway map, I noticed movement at my feet and was taken aback to see a rough-and-tumble pigeon step atop my left shoe. The pigeon looked up at me, curious, with a cock of the head, as if it was surprised that I should be standing in a place it had already claimed. He did not even move when a train roared into the station a few feet away.

"*Oga pigeon,*" I said. "*Na you biko.*"

"Tunde," Painted Wolf yelled as she grabbed my arm. "Let's go."

We scrambled across the platform, dodging businesswomen and teenagers with multicolored hair, and leaped onto the train only heartbeats before the doors whooshed closed and the train lurched forward.

Unfortunately, the subway car was not very crowded. I was hoping we could use the crowd as cover. Rex, Wolf, and I made our way toward the back of the car where there were several empty seats in a row. We sat down and spread out. Despite being out in the open, it felt good to catch my breath.

"How many stops until we are there?" I asked.

"I don't know, ten, maybe more. We take this to the end, Jamaica Station. Then we catch the train straight to the airport," Rex said, studying a subway map near the ceiling. "Might take a while."

"About an hour, give or take," a businessman standing nearby said.

He had a large mustache and his tie looked far too tight. I honestly wondered how well he was breathing.

As the train pulled away from the station, Rex took the folding microscope from the backpack and began examining the gel disks we had smuggled from the lab. He thumbed through the notebooks and scribbled in the margins. Ah, my friends, Rex could turn any

location, no matter how cramped, into a working space. Though he got a few ugly glances from fellow travelers, he ignored all of them.

With the train in motion I felt as though I could take a moment to reflect. I turned to the window and stared out into the pitch black of the tunnel. Beyond the reflection of my own face soon materialized the faces of my family and the people of Akika Village. I vowed then that I would return to New York with my parents.

My mother had always loved trains. As a child, she went once to visit her grandparents in Kaduna. They traveled by rail. She said that while everyone else in their car read magazines and talked, she sat closest to the window and stared outside as the landscape whipped past. She felt as though she was flying like a bird, darting down low along the ground.

She told me she could have been at that window for many days, completely content in watching the world pass by. My mother is a dreamer, happy to live in the moment. I once argued with her that passive people, people who do not jump at every opportunity to grab life by the horns, are stifled. They are the ones who bring ignorance and smother creativity.

I felt horrible for saying it and only realized later how truly wrong I was. I will not pretend I have the wisdom of an old man, but knowing what I know now, I feel as though I have aged ten decades. It seems to me that those who chase the future, like the general, living only to find riches around the next bend, wind up disappointed, their arms full of minerals but their hearts full of loneliness.

Rex saw my serious expression in the window and paused his activity.

He turned to me and said: "No matter where you go, there you are."

It was a ridiculous statement. I assumed he was trying to be funny.



"That is obvious," I replied.

"Is it?" Rex asked. "It's from Confucius."

"Yes. It is silly . . . ," I began but then trailed off as I realized what he was saying.

"It's something I read in a book or saw on TV as a kid, a couple of years before Teo left. I used to say it to him every time he got that same faraway look in his eyes that you've got. I don't know why I like it, but I do. It makes sense. Even if you travel across the globe, hike your way into the deepest, darkest jungle, or catch a cab to a café at the very heart of the city, nothing really changes. It's still *you* there. The only way we can truly change our lives is to change ourselves."

We both nodded in unison, happy with ourselves.

"Enough with the armchair philosophy, boys," Painted Wolf interrupted. "We have to plan what we're going to do when we get to the airport."

"What happened to just waltzing on in?" Rex winked.

I could see that in her mind, Painted Wolf was already off the subway and in the concourse at the airport. She was processing every step, every move we would make until our plane touched down in Lagos. Most people, they can barely plan a vacation to the beach. But Painted Wolf? Ah, my friend, she could plan a way to Mars with only a two-speed motorcycle engine and a box of Swedish fish.

"So," I asked her, "has inspiration struck yet?"

Painted Wolf smiled.

That meant we were in for quite a ride.

4.1

The train to John F. Kennedy International Airport rode above a busy highway.

It was largely empty and we had the back of the car entirely to ourselves. Certainly more than enough space for Painted Wolf to

explain how we were going to get onto an airplane as international fugitives.

"They'll have the place locked down," she started. "If we try to go in through the vents or underground, we'll be caught. The only thing we've got going for us right now is time. We have five hours before the flight. Check-in, security, both of them will be crawling with police. They'll be using dogs and scanners."

"So you're saying this won't be easy," Rex said.

"I'm saying this is going to be the most difficult thing we ever do."

Painted Wolf grinned; she clearly liked the challenge of this endeavor.

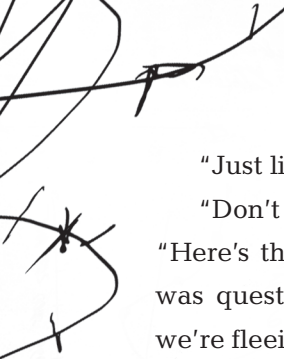
I groaned. "That does not inspire much hope."

"I didn't say we couldn't do it," Painted Wolf said.

"So what's the angle?" Rex pushed.

"We utilize all of our skills. I am going to work my magic and talk us through check-in and security. Rex, you're going to be the glue that holds it all together."





"Just like usual." Rex grinned.

"Don't get a big head over it." Painted Wolf elbowed him. "Here's the thing, though: If you thought what we've done so far was questionable, this is going to be ridiculously illegal. I mean, we're fleeing the country and taking over one of the busiest airports in the world. . . ."

"Hang on. Taking over?"

"Yeah," Painted Wolf said. "The way I see it, the only way we get through the airport, only way we get onto a plane, is to control it. Rex, can you take control of the airport's systems, all of them, and keep it operational? Running as though it was just any normal weekday? We get onto the plane, and once it takes off, we back our way out of the system. We plan it well enough, it will look like we were never there."

I blanched.

"Wolf," I said, "I am afraid you have picked up some of the insanity that is always surrounding Rex. I worry it is contagious! This is an impractical plan!"

I did not realize I was shouting until a woman at the other end of the train turned and stared hard at us. I mouthed: *Sorry*. And waved. She seemed satisfied with that and went back to looking at her cell phone.

Rex shook his head. "Tunde's right. It won't happen. There's no way I can hack into Kennedy from this train with only, what, less than an hour before we get there? I'm good, but I'm not that good. We need a different plan."

Painted Wolf said, "Frankly, I expected it to be harder to get where we are now. I only broke into a sweat once today."

"Just once?" Rex asked mockingly. "You need to work harder."

Painted Wolf lowered her sunglasses very briefly and shot Rex a look. He turned away for a moment, then met her gaze. If they had just met, I would say she was sizing him up. Ah, my friends, but

there was something more going on here. I would call it flirting, but it seemed to come from a deeper wellspring. Normally, I would be delighted for my friends, but I very much needed them to focus on the plan before they got lost in each other!

“You are playing with fire, *omo*,” I told Rex.

Painted Wolf pushed up her sunglasses and tied her wig in a ponytail.

Rex cleared his throat and gave a very fake and obvious cough.