

text. “You’re quite a fan of early rock and roll...apparently to the point where you held onto some illicit vinyl record albums, albums that were subsequently discovered by our nation’s thought police. The Beatles... The Who... Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. Real artists, and revolutionaries in their own way. Worth taking a risk for, I suppose.”

Branford’s eyes focused on Blake again, and he flashed a grin. “I also know that you took a course in modern sculpture as a sophomore at UCLA. You’ll have to view our garden in the daylight sometime. As you can see, not everyone in the Zone is a twenty-something, living in a squat with a Stratocaster for company.”

Rising from the mat, Branford walked over to his desk and picked up a brown leather briefcase. He was in business mode now, his speech growing more clipped.

“I’m about to trust you with some highly confidential information, Blake,” he said, tapping the side of the briefcase. “For the past several years, the Municipal Alliance has been engaged in what might be called a low-level cold war with the rest of the nation. They want us to close down the Urban Zones, stop advocating progressive policies, and basically behave like good boys and girls, giving our unquestioning support to the powers that be—which, of course, has been the deepest wish of the ruling class throughout human history.”

Branford stood silent for a moment, running one hand over the back of his crewcut scalp. “As you may have noticed, the Federal government has recently been stepping up their attacks on us,” he said. “They see this upcoming election as their chance to close down the UZs once and for all. And maybe go even further—declare the city-states dysfunctional, and begin a legal process to return them to their parent states. We’ve begun pushing back against their propaganda in every way possible. That’s where these come in.” He held up the briefcase.

“Wireless mesh networks?”

“Exactly. For a number of years now, our group has been distributing mesh network software that lets people share encrypted Internet connections over their phones or computers. We’ve also manufactured thousands of these wireless routers that serve as nodes, each one capable of supporting local networks for a radius of up to a kilometer.

The routers are inexpensive and completely expendable. If the authorities happen to discover one, we simply substitute another.”

“May I?” Blake opened the briefcase. Inside were several weather-proof routers with attached antennas, plus a handful of USB drives and a half-dozen smart phones.

“As I noted, we’ve put thousands of these routers into the hands of people sympathetic to the Alliance. Collectively they’re capable of connecting people to the Internet and enabling the transmission of print, audio and video files in most parts of the country, outside the control of the government,” said Branford. “They’ve proven quite effective. Our biggest problem involves disseminating content to these local networks. For sensitive material, we usually employ flash drives sent by courier. As a result, communication on a large scale is excruciatingly slow.”

“So you’re looking for a better method.”

“If we had a technology that could remotely transfer digital data to our nodes in a way that couldn’t be blocked, traced or intercepted, it would be a tremendous blow against authoritarian rule—not just in this country, but around the globe,” Branford said. “You, my friend, appear to have developed that technology.” His voice had been gaining energy as he spoke, and now he was pacing the room excitedly. “Imagine thousands, even millions of your devices, in use around the world. Governments would no longer be able to eavesdrop on their citizens with impunity. People could share ideas freely once again!”

“But they could just as easily use it to hatch plots...commit crimes,” said Blake. “Our intelligence gathering apparatus would be hamstrung.”

Branford gave him a pitying look. “Of course, criminal activity is a concern,” he said. “But Blake, you’re an educated man. Surely you understand that in the history of the world, the greatest crimes have *all* been perpetrated by governments themselves. The worst are those that have spun out of control—countries or movements that have been taken over by cabals whose only purpose is to dominate others. But even our supposedly benign democracies are infected by the hunger for power. When you’re running the show, no matter how noble your original intentions may be, accountability to the populace becomes a

burden to be despised. I know—I've been there."

As if his growing excitement had suddenly depleted him, the former governor sat down heavily on the couch. Blake was struck by how pale he looked. Branford was not a well man, he realized. Closing his eyes, the other man drew in a deep breath before resuming.

"As I was saying, Blake, one day your invention will make this possible. For now, though, I would gladly settle for two working prototypes that could be fully functional by next week."

"Next *week*? Why the mad rush?" asked Blake.

"We believe our nation is at a make-or-break moment," Branford replied. "This November's election will very likely determine the direction of the country for decades to come."

At Branford's mention of the election, Blake suddenly understood why he'd been summoned to the house in Venice. Like most of the planet, he knew all about the Maxwell Fish saga. "You don't seriously think Fish can win, locked away in his Fifth Avenue penthouse?" he said.

Branford's face flushed abruptly. "He not only can, but *will*," the older man growled, his voice the loudest it had been all evening. "We have our own polling data, showing that Fish's actual support among likely voters is greater than anyone realizes." Branford's eyes were burning now. "You must understand, Blake, that Americans are *sick* of living in fear—sick of watching our leaders mouth patriotic platitudes while doing everything they can to restrict free speech and social justice and empower the rich—not that they need any more empowering!"

Branford closed his eyes again, visibly calming himself. "You're an intelligent person, Blake," he continued in a more even tone. "But you're not particularly interested in politics—I know this from your file. Not that I blame you, the way the game is played these days. As you gain more life experience, though, you'll realize that true electoral governance—democratic rule by the people, for the people—is the most important social tool humanity has ever invented. And effective democracy, at its core, comes down to one thing: using the ballot box to restrain the powerful few."

Blake thought this over for a moment. "There has to be more to it than that," he offered. "Defense of borders. Educating the population.