Digital Gold

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v1.0.0

Published by konsensus.net

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About this Piece

Luciano Rocha · May 5, 2024

An article published by konsensus.net.

CHAPTER ONE

Digital Gold

1.1 A Dog Day

A dog day afternoon. Not the movie, obviously, but the day that Max was living. The siren rang in his ears, and the car rocked and juddered along at more than 80km per hour. Damn idiots, Max thought. They'd interrupted his shopping in the middle of this chaos. He kept his eyes on the bike and his mind on finding his groceries when he got back to the store.



His partner leaned his whole torso outside the window, his hands clutching a shotgun. Taking aim at the two guys ahead of him was easy, as Kevin was a police skeet champion. The problem was shooting, since the whole city decided to occupy that road precisely at the time of the chase. Kevin himself had to dodge another motorcycle that was coming in the opposite direction and nearly clipped his gun — and half of his arm.

"Come on, Max, speed that shit up! They're almost losing us!"

"This is a car, not a 1200. I can't go around cutting all these idiots!" Max's head exploded with pain and his eyes were dry from focusing so hard on the bike.

Right ahead, the bandits returned fire with a pistol. One of the shots hit the blue light of the car, and the other whistled past the windshield. The shot nearly knocked the Ram driver out of control of the car. Max clung on to the wheel as the bullet punched into one of the crates in the bay.

Those guys… they must have looted as far as Mom's house because of this mess, Max said, giving the Ram driver a middle finger.

Suddenly, the motorcycle turned into an alley and almost disappeared from view. Max jammed on the brakes and brought the car to a stop. The curve was too sharp for the car and the lane too narrow. They would never pass by, and the bike kept accelerating. Kevin cursed the names of all the gods his old abuela had taught him. Then, Max floored the car and accelerated forward, turning into the next corner. He took the street parallel to the rubbish-filled alley.

"Max, are you crazy?! They'll get away."

"Kevin, you want to drive this crap car?"

"No!"

"So shut up and keep your gun ready."

Despite Kevin's resistance, Max had nothing to worry about — after all, he knew these streets like the back of his hand. He had never lived here, but he grew up in this sector, playing basketball with his school friends on the old court. But that was before assholes like those on the motorbike spoiled the neighborhood with drugs, guns, and robberies. Driving with concentration, Max knew they only had one road to take, and he would be waiting on the other side.

Max calculated that there would be time to close the entrance to the alley and make the motorcycle crash into the side of the police car. No sooner said than done. As Max reached the end of the alley, he slammed into the bike that was halfway out of the alley. The blow made the motorcycle hit the wall, knocking the thugs to the side. One of them went down, knocked out, while the other hit his face and fell to the ground, groggy but still alive.

They almost got away, thought Max. But the police's job is to improvise, and once again it worked. Kevin tended to the groggy passenger and Max lunged for the passed out driver by climbing onto his chest. He was unconscious, but breathing.

"Is he alive, Max?" Kevin asked, putting the handcuffs on the other.

"Yes he is. He's just blacked out, but maybe my 'alarm clock' will work on him," Max said. Grabbing the collar of the guy's T-shirt, he began to slap his face.

"Come on, idiot, wake up soon, we don't have time to wait for the princess," said a commanding voice.

The motorcyclist on the ground woke up, and Max saw him looking at the fallen motorcycle beside him, along with two pools of blood. Then the guy looked to the other side, where Kevin had already immobilized his partner in crime. A bruise had formed during the fall. Before waking him up properly, Max had handcuffed the guy, who still tried to struggle but was met with a nice punch in the face. Max knew that police rules didn't allow officers to hit defendants who had already surrendered, but he didn't care. It was riot time, and he just wanted to send those two to chess and get back to his shopping stash.

"You are under arrest for assault. You have a right to an attorney. You have the right to remain silent and anything you say can be used against you in court," said the taller of the two men.

"What?! This is ridiculous! How did you get into this alley? There is no driveway here."

"It does not have. But there is an exit, and we were waiting for you there," said the second officer with his shotgun pointed at the two of them.

"How did you know that?" asked the man in handcuffs.

"That's simple. I live here," said Max. "And now you're going to let me finish my grocery shopping."

"Kevin, will you take these two to the station?" he asked.

"Sure, leave it to me. But where are you going, Max?"

"I need to get back to my shopping before I run out of stuff."

Kevin nodded, and the two of them got the thugs into the cruiser, making sure to fasten the handcuffs securely and close the

window divider. Afterwards, Max waved at Kevin and started to go, but his colleague yelled, "Hey, asshole." Max turned and found Kevin passing him a gun. "Be careful. The streets are in chaos today, and we know it's not going to get better."

"Don't worry, I'll take my precautions," Max said, heading toward the supermarket.

When approaching Martin's supermarket, the closest one to his house, Max saw a scene that looked like a war zone. People running back and forth, many with carts full of groceries, others with their hands full rushing to fill the trunks of their cars with whatever they could carry.

From behind the counter, Martin came out with his rifle pointed at the mob, shouting, "Get out of here now, or the next person who picks up even a pack of cigarettes will eat lead!"

The threat took effect almost immediately, as luckily no one else had a firearm. Shoppers ran outside, closely followed by the aim of the furious owner of the supermarket. Max went the opposite way to enter the market, when he ran into the barrel of the shotgun.

"Didn't you hear what I said? Get out if you don't want a bullet!"

"I heard Martin, but relax, I'm not here to loot. I just want to do some shopping."

The man looked at Max as if he didn't quite recognize him. Then, Martin lowered his gun.

"Oh, Max, sorry. The adrenaline was too much. But I'm afraid you won't find much here. Those marauding idiots took pretty much everything," Martin said, making room for Max to enter.

In fact, there wasn't much of value other than a few cans of food and a few pieces of fruit that weren't trampled by the maddened crowd.

"Why did they loot the place?" asked Max as he put what he could into a basket.

"Because of that damn control!" replied Martin, putting the shotgun on top of the counter. "As if confiscating our money wasn't enough, the government's now imposed limits for cards. They got mad, and, before I could get the gun, they locked me inside and took everything they wanted. Then the gate opened, and everyone started to enjoy it. It's a miracle I got out."

"Damn," said Max. "I'm glad you weren't killed, Martin. I almost got hurt at Morrigan's two weeks ago."

"You were there. Wow, man, I read it in the papers. The massacre, the motherfuckers even killed a kid. Damn government! They opened Pandora's box so everyone started acting like a herd of wild buffalo!"

1.2 The Morrigan's Massacre

When shit hit the fan, one of the first things the government did was to mandate strict financial controls. It did not go well. The withdrawal limit was set at $1,000 per month, a ridiculous amount, barely enough to pay for the month's bills. Cards were still allowed, but the government established a second control: purchase limits. Max still remembers the day he handled each of the two controls.

In the first, it was the trip to the bank that made him realize the seriousness of it all. Max needed three thousand bucks to buy

a few things and change the car battery, but he couldn't withdraw more than $800 — he had already withdrawn $200 a week earlier. Angered, he went to the bank manager and demanded an explanation.

"Greg, good morning. Why the fuck can I only withdraw 800 bucks from my account? I have over 30,000 here, and I've been a customer of the bank for over seven years!"

"Max, my dear!" greeted Greg with a pale face. "I apologize, but unfortunately these are orders from the board. Haven't you seen the new government decree?"

"What decree?"

"Withdrawal limit, my friend. No one can withdraw more than $1,000 a month. Went out last night, didn't you see?"

"No, I was out all day taking care of things. But I noticed the huge bank queue, obviously!"

"Yes, and unfortunately, it goes for everyone. Not even us bank unit managers can get more than this miserable amount. I don't— MAX, WATCH OUT!" Greg, jumped on his client and pushed him down.

A stone hit the windowpane of the bank, which shattered into a thousand pieces. On the other side, Max saw a mob of people pouring into the agency almost as if it were a single entity. Enraged people, ignoring the warnings of the guards who were pointing their guns, began to loot the agency and assault staff, shouting the same desperate war cry:

"WE WANT OUR MONEY!"

It was amazing, Max thought, that these people weren't there to rob or loot the bank. They only wanted what was rightfully theirs

— or it should have been before the government decreed otherwise and stole billions in one go. Unfortunately the police decided to fight back and caused the Morrigan's Massacre: fifteen people dead, including manager Greg, two bank employees, and a child. In response, all branches closed, and every bank installed sliding doors to protect the facades from glass.

1.3 Brave new world

It wasn't Max's turn to do the rounds, but who said being a cop is a 9-to-5 job? "This is not what I signed up for."

After the newspapers started reporting the event, simple journeys turned into epic ordeals. Max could have been at home stocking up instead of here, staring at window panes. But protecting the glazing was his job now, and the sheriff hadn't trained his men to question schedules or ask for time off, especially in times of crisis.

Facing the supermarket, the cop watched the crowds as they bubbled and boiled in tumultuous movement. Chaos everywhere. Earlier today, when passing in front of familiar houses, he found broken windows with boards filling the gaps, the vast majority abandoned because they no longer had value.

Queues began to form and fill the product boxes. Everyone was in a hurry to pay and, at the same time, keep an eye on the other customers. He didn't know if they were looking to steal the contents of their carts or to keep them from stealing theirs — maybe a little bit of both. No one was hurt - yet - but the alarming presence of aluminum baseball bats and shotguns on the carts, as well as a few pistols in their waistbands, spelled big trouble.

Max also had a gun, or rather two; both had the safety on at that moment. But something else was at the ready: his gaze, which now covered the entire place. He saw one of the customers remove a carton of canned food from the shelf, a favorite of those reality shows he watched — what was it, survivalists? That was right. The crazy ones have now become the smart ones. Now, they are safe in their basements without dealing with queues. He thought survivalists, in general, were a little strange, but he didn't criticize them either. After all, he kept a tool that could be considered extremely survivalist, which he never thought of using in times of crisis, but today it could save his life. He really needed to stock up. Resigned, he entered the supermarket and headed for the shelves.

The line at the supermarket gradually grew in the few minutes it took him to collect things. By the time he made it to the checkout, there were already at least twenty people in line. The sign at the checkout said "maximum 10 items," but that no longer mattered. Carts with bundles of canned food completely dominated the queue. Max, himself, took three of them and had a hard time keeping the most excited customers away from his cart.

They wanted what was already sold out in the only two grocery stores on the street. There remained only the great "predator," as the Carrefour grocery conglomerate was once called; today, however, it was a lifeline in the midst of turmoil and chaos that had lasted since the Great Collapse.

Little by little, even the Carrefour shelves, once full of products which reflected the golden times, gave way to emptiness — or rather, the flashy posters, which had replaced the equally flashy

cereals and sweets. Now, the posters were merely bittersweet reminders that marked the height of decadence.

"We are out of stock!"

"There will be no replacements!"

"Last units of corned beef! Only two cans per family."

"We do not accept Reais, Euros, Dollars, or cards!"

Cigarettes quickly disappeared, although the entire city had embraced the non-smoking "new normal." Ironically, the lack of them was due to non-smokers and the owner of Carrefour himself. Non-smokers were "good citizens," but these days cigarettes were as good as money, both inside and outside prison.

1.4 Good Old Alfred

Mr. Alfred owned the only other establishment, besides Carrefour, that had resisted the looting and remained operational during the crisis. Refusing to accept what they called money just a few days ago, old Alfred summed up the situation well during Max's visit. "Those bastards caused this mess! Because of them, I have to barricade my shop with bars so vandals don't try to steal them."

"They don't want to buy anything?" Max asked, looking innocent.

He got a withering glare in return. "They want to pay in cash. With cash! If you want those paper notes, keep them and use them to wipe your asses." And with that polite and cheerful farewell, the man closed the shop and erected another sign to decorate the landscape: Empty shelves! We are closed!

With the decisive slam of the shopkeeper's door, Max made his way out, his cart loaded with the final goods, the usual groceries, plus corned beef and a carton of Marlboro, that could be bought in old Alfred's general store.

Right now, I'm probably the richest man with the most diversified portfolio for blocks, Max thought. Then chills penetrated his spine, and his hands shot to the cart. The coat, protecting the groceries, was wide open, and any one of these freaks could have just whipped it away. The jacket was threadbare and worthless, but it had an internal tactical security pocket. And here was the true value of the play.

While his left hand gripped his coat, his right hand clutched the barrel of the gun. Max reached into his pocket with his left hand and held the small object. As he did so, he realized how skewed his list of priorities was: the items in the cart would be of little use if the item now in his coat pocket had been lost. This item contained treasure more relevant than any item it carried.

It was time to make the long journey to his vehicle. Long in theory — the distance itself was only twenty meters. However, the people streaming towards Max (running from who knows what), together with the cars abandoned in the middle of the street (some wrecked, others burned, most out of gas), made the trip even more difficult. And dragging a fairground cart didn't make him more agile.

Finally, Max spotted the 1989 Dodge Ram. A true war relic, and today it was more current than ever. Inherited from his father, that car was a fortress alongside the "modern" cars that looked like they

were made of plastic. The Ram's wide front end, capable of moving most obstacles with ease, had brought Max here. He hoped it would get him home safely.

1.5 Sammy

As he slid into the Dodge, he checked the gas gauge. "My second most valuable coin." This time, nothing had been stolen. The car was also in working order, which was a miracle considering the situation. Max emptied the cart and put the groceries in the truck. Although he had a big enough bay to carry everything, Max preferred to put things inside the truck. The bay had no roof and he definitely didn't want to be mugged or have his precious food stolen. Beside him, "Sammy" was on the lookout, in case any smart ones tried to act.

Sammy, his friend and guardian, was an AR-15 rifle, a gun that Max bought for two reasons: the first, to defend himself, and the second because it was the model he liked the most. But Max never imagined that he would need to use that weapon, much less in a situation like the one that was happening in the streets. There were no more guns for sale, as everyone emptied stocks from old Joe's store before the Great Collapse. Only Joe's guns are left in the shop, but no one in their right mind would start a gun shop riot. It was 15,000 satoshis well spent. Although the law allowed easy access to guns, automatic weapons were virtually impossible to buy mainly because of the stock issue. Max bought one only for its legal benefit; he was a federal employee and a member of the police, which

gave him the authority to choose whatever gun he wanted. The purchase of Sammy, by the way, was the last "act of authority" that the position afforded him.

Until the first controls, Max didn't consider himself a man with an ideology. On the contrary, he manifested a certain contempt for what he called "doomsday theorists." They were just obscure economists and analysts, who had been predicting financial crises for years without ever getting it right. He believed, like the rest of the world, that governments would not let a crisis of great magnitude destroy the economy. He, of course, did not understand that the destruction would come precisely from the measures that the government would take to "protect" the economy.

Once the first indicators of the crisis began, the dreaded Withdrawal Control Event, the prevailing sentiment among Max's neighbors and a large part of the country's population was disbelief. This wasn't supposed to happen in the world's largest economy. Max could hear the neighbors talking at the top of their voices, with a mixture of disbelief and fear: This is absurd! Withdrawal controls here in America?! It must be fake news!

Two days later, the Morrigan's Massacre happened. The government had regressed to barbarism. In a matter of days, millions of people, including Max himself, lost almost all their savings.

1.6 A New Hope

Max's only salvation was the book, given to him by a friend who had lived in Lebanon for twelve years.

The work, written by an economist whose name Max did not remember, was treasured more than the Holy Bible. With the lessons in the book, Max was able to withdraw what little he had left before the second looting control, which gave rise to the riots seen now. He had also exchanged his remaining money for the satoshis he now carried in his pocket, the only thing the supermarket would accept.

"I can't believe I'm thinking about this," he said to himself while watching the bustling streets and carefully packing his things before some smart guy tried to attack him. I can't waste bullets here.

The irony is that until recently, Max would never think of spending his satoshis on basic grocery shopping — he would never take the money out of that little "pen drive"; it was his only store of value. Naturally everyone wanted to get rid of their bad money while it was still accepted by some. That's what bad money is all about. Suddenly, everyone only wanted satoshis and tangible goods, like guns and bullets.

Max had to trade most of his ammo for water with one of his neighbors, who hadn't been able to find enough bullets before they looted the gun stores. The water was almost gone, and the bullets Max had in his stash could no longer serve as a store of value.

1.7 Mine your own business

The idea that real estate didn't lose value was another belief that Max had lost. Along with most of his money, its value was decimated by the crisis. Although he retained ownership of his home,

he was one of the lucky few who did. Max was part of a privileged minority: he had no mortgage; his house was paid off, and he had no other loans.

His house stored the only possession he still saw as having any value. Max affectionately called it the "energy sink," a nickname chosen by his ex-wife, who had left him months before. The equipment stored in his house was part of his obsession with getting hard currency, a mission he always performed every ten minutes. Most of the time, though, it was a pointless pursuit that required a lot of money, which caused his wife to leave him.

"Truth to be told, I don't blame her," Max said, thinking of young Lily and how she would be in the middle of all this mess. When thinking about his wife, Max was surprised by the peace of mind that took over. His wife's abandonment occurred when Max was going through one of his worst phases. He was without money, having only his individual mining and hearing almost daily criticism from Lily. "Max, our energy bill is over $500 this month, and you won't turn those machines off. And what's that all about? Get some change with those game coins?!"

"It's not game currency, Lily. You can be sure this will be worth a lot of money in a few years," Max said. He repeated this phrase so often that it became a memorized mantra, his true conviction.

"Well, you aren't paying the house bills, and I'm tired of waiting. I'm going to spend a few days at my mother's house and I ask you not to contact me. I need to be alone for a while, Max, and not stay by the side of someone I'm loving less and less."

That same day Lily packed her bags and left. Max's marriage ended, but the penny took at least a week to drop. After that, Max

was unstable for a long time. He loved his wife, and, aside from financial problems, he wasn't a bad match for Lily. But less than two weeks after the end of the relationship, Max received a new blow when he saw Lily next to a 'drug guy' that she presented as her new boyfriend on her social accounts.

For seven months, between that day and three months before the start of the riots, Max entered a deep depression and left his house only to go to the supermarket. Thanks to his skills as a military man, he landed a security post at Carrefour — yes, at the predator so feared by the city. But despite the locals' revulsion, Max enjoyed the job, which allowed him to resume mining. And he finally got it. Twice. In two successful mines, Max withdrew the equivalent of two years' worth of electricity. Even without a dollar in his pocket, he was already the richest guy on the street. After all, he was the only one who had food and a car that still worked.

1.8 Citadel Danny

"Max. Hey Max!"

Max turned quickly. It was finally a recognizable voice among the screaming he left behind. More than that, it was a friendly voice. It belonged to Daniel, his neighbor, the man responsible for his good fortune. "Daniel!" Max saw the cart in the neighbor's hands. "I assume you were on time too?"

"Yes. I was the last customer to leave before Miller closed Carrefour."

"So he's finally out of stock¿'

"So he is. He told me he had just enough on hand to keep his family alive. Closed the supermarket and left an entire crowd without food."

"What do you think they'll do? Do you really think they're gonna loot the supermarket?"

Daniel shook his head, pointing to the roof of the Carrefour. Even though it was far away, Max could see the generators his friend was pointing at. "Miller installed electric conduction in the gates. If someone outside tries to break in, they'll get shocked. That was 37,000 satoshis well invested."

Max nodded — smart. Miller had used his real money at the right time. Like Max, old Miller owed Daniel the credit for his ability to protect his supermarket right now. An old man with a millennial spirit, Daniel was part of a 21st-century hippie generation. He rarely ate meat. He considered himself a minimalist, but he had one of the biggest gun collections Max had ever seen. The guy didn't skimp — he even paid almost 1 bitcoin for a replica of the rifle used by Finnish Simon Häyhä in the war against the Russians. A reminder that little men are the greatest defenders of freedom, he justified when Max had asked him about the purchase. And at 1.69 meters, Daniel was more than adequate to live up to the saying.

Above all, Daniel's house was a real blueprint for how to create a modern fortress. The tiles, shaped into five columns of solar panels, provided a surplus of energy. The garage housed his car — a Tesla Model S bought just before the crisis — and also a generator, which helped the panels withstand power outages. Last but not least, the house's biggest consumer (and provider): the greenhouse.

Despite Daniel's fame as a 'prophet', Max liked him. He had been accurate in his predictions about the crisis. Daniel carried a bundle of canned food in his arms and a newspaper under his left arm. Max put his groceries in his car — an armful of cans, probably the last ones in the supermarket.

Daniel walked unsteadily, as if he were more tired than someone carrying only a few tins of sardines, tuna and beans.

"It won't be long before these guys will start blowing up stores," Daniel said.

Max noticed that Daniel was sweating more than usual, but what startled him was the red stream coming out of his neighbor's jacket sleeve. "What happened, Dan? Are you bleeding?"

"It's nothing. It's just a scratch."

"Well, anyway, let me at least help you carry this thing." Max took the bundle from Daniel's arms, but soon saw that the bloodstain ran the length of the coat's sleeve. Without ceremony, Max tugged on his coat, ignoring his neighbor's protests.

A deep knife cut that ran the length of Daniel's arm. The wound was large but did not appear to be life-threatening, although it explained the fatigue. Max asked what had happened.

"When I walked into the supermarket there was just this bundle of food on the shelf. It was just sitting there, almost like the Holy Grail in the middle of an empty shelf, so I grabbed it. Suddenly there was this goon with a foul stench on top of me and tried to steal the food, I fought back. The fight was bad, and he had a knife. You know those hunting knives with serrations and everything? He pulled it out; he cut me good. God, how that thing is

sharp. I was lucky he didn't hit me squarely, or I'd be serving worm food in the fucking supermarket. The idiot almost managed to kill me, but even with the blood I managed to get in on the ground and stuck him in the chest. Right into his heart!"

Max looked at his neighbor in shock. He could barely breath and his face turned pale by degrees. Despite his military career, seeing someone so close to him talk about a cold-blooded murder, even in the middle of all this mess, was not something he was used to. Daniel was always calm and attentive to his plants. Max never imagined this guy could kill someone. Would he? Of course he did it. Any man can kill when faced with starvation. Max faced his new reality.

"So it's worse than the authorities make it out to be," Max said, mostly to himself.

"Oh, it's a lot worse," said Daniel grimley. "Besides, have you read today's headlines?"

Max raised his eyebrows. "Only the ones about the riots. I didn't even know the media and news were still in business, especially after all this trouble." He sighed. "I should have read them more carefully."

"Take a look here..."

Max took the copy of the Times from his neighbor. It was beat up, but it was the issue of the day. He read the headline written in bold letters:

THE CRISIS HAS ARRIVED! EXPERT RECOMMENDS BITCOIN, GOLD, FOOD, AND WATER FOR AT LEAST TWO WEEKS. DON'T LEAVE YOUR HOUSE AND DON'T WASTE FUEL. STAY SAFE AND PROTECT YOURSELF!

Daniel broke into a wide smile as he looked at Max, who returned the gesture. Lucky for us, we don't trust the newspapers, he thought. Max loaded Daniel's groceries into the car then made his way to his own car. He nestled Sammy near him in the driver's seat and drove home. The Great Forfeiture took the world by surprise, but in his pocket was the hope of a better future that, even though he had rejected it in the beginning, brings a new future for himself.

"My miners are waiting," said Max, thinking of how many more satoshis he could collect while there were still power services available. At the same time, he hoped that there was still a world to return to when he had more of that prized possession — his digital gold.

Source

Originally published at konsensus.net/article/digital-gold