

THE BITCOIN OVERLAY

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ABOUT THIS PIECE

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CHAPTER ONE

THE BITCOIN OVERLAY

No one knows exactly when the Great Schism began. Many claim that it never occurred — a mere figment of fevered imaginations. But for the outliers, the divide is an inescapable actuality. Some fled to far-off lands like Mexico or Sub-Saharan



Figure 1.1: The Bitcoin Overlay

Africa seeking refuge, while others were completely cast out of society, left to fend for themselves in the fringes. And then there is me, the bridge between the two worlds.

My job, if you could call it that, is to navigate the treacherous waters of the divide and help those on the periphery find their way to a better life in what has come to be known as The Bitcoin Overlay.

"I need you to understand that you can't bring anything material with you," I said, in a grave tone. "You'll only need your wits and your ability to work hard. But it won't be easy." I had delivered this speech countless times, but the look in Soria's light-brown eyes suggested that she didn't comprehend the gravity of the situation.

She fidgeted with the delicate gold bracelet on her wrist, and her eyes darted around the room. Her designer clothing was a stark contrast to the dingy supply room of this Chinese Restaurant. "I know what I'm leaving behind," she said in a hushed voice. "I just wish I knew more about where I'm going."

"I'm sure you have lots of questions. Unfortunately, I'm not the guy who can answer them." I tried to sound encouraging. "The important thing is that you've made it this far despite the grave risks. That means you'll be just fine once you make it there."

Soria exuded the air of someone born into the upper echelons of society. She was probably raised with tier-2 travel privileges and a personal AI ball — the kind of luxuries that the unwashed masses could only dream of. Was she really willing to leave behind all the comforts and conveniences that had defined her existence?

"We have to leave straight from here," I said, my expression solemn. "There won't be any time for goodbyes."

"But my sister... she will search for me," she protested.

“And unless she’s willing to take the leap herself, she won’t find you.” The light in her eyes dimmed by a shade. “You don’t have to leave. Nobody could fault you for wanting to stay here,” I offered. Soria shook her head, a determined look on her face. She composed herself and forced a smile. “There’s nothing for me here,” she said with a tinge of sadness in her voice. “Staying is not an option, even if part of me wishes I could.”

I nodded in understanding. I may not have been born into the same world of privilege, but I could relate to feeling out of place and yearning for something more.

“I know the stories probably make it sound like a far-fetched utopia, and at one time it was. But now there really is a genuine refuge for those of us who dare to dream.” I paused, allowing the weight of my words to settle in the air.

“It might seem scary, but once you make it to the other side, you’ll never look back.” I met Soria’s gaze, seeing a flicker of doubt in her eyes. “Do you truly believe that?”

“I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t.”

Just then, a grating beep erupted from the low-fi baby monitor screen on my desk. In the mush of infrared pixels, I watched the scout drone approaching the alleyway just above us. This could only mean one thing — a breach. I turned my attention back to Soria, my mind racing with the possibilities. “We need to leave, now,” I said firmly, grabbing my bag and heading towards the door. Soria followed close behind. We stepped out into the dimly lit alleyway, the sound of distant sirens echoing through the night.

As we moved towards our escape route, I knew that we were running out of time. The CamScram microbots we had deployed on

this block would soon be disabled. And we were traveling “naked” now, not equipped with any smart devices. That alone could land us in the Archipelago for a year.

The scout drone now hovered a few hundred feet behind us on Magazine Street, its bright light scanning every crevice it passed. We continued our brisk pace. I took Soria’s slender palm in my own, and we ducked down a narrow, graffiti-covered passage that would take us to a safe house a block away. The port was barely a quarter mile from here, but circumstances had changed. We would have to try again in a few hours.

As we rounded the corner, a figure in a black uniform spotted us. It emerged from the shadows, a sleek silhouette against the neon backdrop. Its face was obscured by a black visor. Was it human or machine? It approached with graceful, almost ethereal movements.

The Minder spoke, its voice a cutting, crisp sound that sliced through the air like a blade. “Good evening, Citizens.”

Without hesitation, I spun around and ran in the opposite direction, pulling Soria along with me. Soria’s hand tightened around mine as we sprinted down the narrow alleyway, the sound of the Minder’s footsteps echoing behind us.

The drone’s whirring propellers approached. “Halt,” the Minder boomed. “You have been warned.”

We burst out onto a crowded Tchoupitoulas street, elbowing through the throngs of passersby and merchants. I cast a glance over my shoulder. The Minder had vanished into the ether. In the distance, the port’s tall cranes and stacks of containers loomed over the Mississippi. We had no choice now but to press on and reach the docks.

Sweat dripped down my back as we ran, our feet pounding against the jagged pavement. The port was now within sight, and I could see the silhouette of the boat waiting for us at the dock. We were almost there. I could hear the water lapping against the hull of the boat, its engine idling in the darkness.

As we approached the side entrance, a figure materialized from the shadows. The Minder, with its obsidian uniform, glistened in the dim light. "This is your second warning," it alerted, raising a sleek weapon in our direction. "I am authorized to use lethal force should you continue to resist."

Soria and I were trapped. The thud of heavy boots echoed behind us as more Minders arrived. We were encircled now. I glanced over at Soria, searching her face for signs of betrayal. Had I been deceived by her beauty? Had she led me down this treacherous path, using me as her pawn? But the raw emotion etched onto her face was unmistakable. As the Minder drew nearer, she flinched.

"Soria Torres, prepare for interrogation; your compliance is mandatory," it boomed, the words dripping with venom. "These proceedings are being recorded for posterity. You are being charged with sedition, sabotage, and eluding authorities. How do you plead?" The Minder's tone was harsh and unforgiving.

Soria stayed silent, a tear welling up in her eye. The Minder reached out and wrapped his gloved hand around her delicate wrist. She gasped in pain.

"Easy now," I said. "She's complying."

The black visor slowly turned in my direction. "Silence," it interjected, its voice cold and metallic.

“How do you plead to the charges, Ms. Torres?”

“Sounds like your decision has already been made,” I countered.

The Minder’s visor flashed red as it spoke. “Eluding an agent of the state is a crime of the highest order. Those who attempt it have no place in civilized society.”

“I’d like to speak to my personal counsel before things go any further,” I said.

“Your sense of humor appears to be just as poor as your judgment. Get down on the ground and assume the position.”

Soria and I exchanged desperate looks, her eyes searching me for a solution, but I had nothing. We both slowly dropped to our knees.

A blinding flash of light illuminated the port, followed by the deafening roar of an explosion. The Minder stumbled backward, its weapon falling to the ground. I turned to see the other black-clad figures glitching out before tumbling to the pavement. In the confusion, a door to the port building flew open and a muscular, bearded man extended his hand. Soria and I sprinted towards him and ducked inside as the heavy steel door slammed behind us. The bearded man gruffly ushered us down a hallway and onto an awaiting Trawler boat. We leaped aboard just as it pushed away from the dock.

I collapsed onto the deck, gasping for breath. Soria’s face ran pale, her eyes wide in disbelief. My mind was still racing, trying to process what had just transpired. Small-scale EMP attack devices were something I had only heard rumors of but had never seen.

“You’ll need these,” the bearded man grunted as he dropped two life jackets at our feet. “There’s a storm up ahead.”

Soria turned to me, finally catching her breath. “Where are they taking us?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. And I didn’t. I had delivered countless freedom seekers to the port but had never taken the leap myself. Like Soria, I had held onto my past, comfortable in the world I had known.

As the boat cut through the dark waters of the Mississippi River, I looked back at the city we were leaving behind. The neon glow of the skyscrapers and the blaring sirens of the patrols faded into the distance. It was a world that we had once known, but one that we could never return to. The Great Schism has indeed occurred, and we were now decidedly part of the other side that dared to dream of a better world, a world where freedom and possibility still held sway.

SOURCE

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