Chapter 12 — "Don't Self-Sabotage"

The next morning, Yevgeny surveyed the car-less street and texted Pyotr: *"Stu & Maria left. Apt empty."*

The message got an emoji thumb-up, so Yevgeny gave Dimi a real thumb-up.

Dimi looked up at Stu's apartment and wagged his finger horizontally. "Why do I have to do it?"

Yevgeny held up his disabled arms and asked, "Really?"

"You use that excuse a lot. Not doing a lot of favors for your disabled rights movement. One of these times, you're gonna have to dirty your hands."

"Climb the damn wall, Dimi."

"I can break front door, take elevator, and then break Stu's door. I promise it'll be faster."

"No. Brute force is for reckless idiots or when you are against reckless idiots. Straight-up robbing — it leaves too much evidence for cops and especially for Stu. Who knows how many countermeasures he's installed?"

"My point exactly. So, what's the difference?" Dimi stood his ground on this.

"Pyotr said you climb. So that is all," Yevgeny said, trying a harsher pitch.

Dimi's head lurched back, "So, okay. You should've said at beginning."

Yevgeny helped Dimi rig up professional rock-climbing gear. Dimi kicked his metal crampons against the wall to check their integrity. He was about to start his ascent when Yevgeny handed him a realistic-looking Halloween mask of a Latino face. "Wear this."

"I have balaclava in my car."

"No, we want every misdirection possible. This face makes you resemble old classmate of Stu's."

Dimi liked Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Black Panther* and *Captain America* series for Marvel Comics. Subsequently, he got into Coates' essays and non-fiction books. Dimi could always perform his vicious mafia enforcer assignments, but he nevertheless had a moral code. Everyone has a line they won't cross. Dimi held the "Latino Man" mask and cleared his throat. "The thing is… I'm 100% Russian, so I don't feel comfortable doing such cultural appropriation and perpetuating racist stereotypes. I'm a violent thief, not a white supremacist."

"If Pyotr wants you in a Pope Margaret the first mask, dressed like Indian belly dancer, singing… I don't know… those tween, New Wave, Nigerian K-Pop songs in most offensive accent, you do it. Now stop stalling."

"Yeah, but, so you know, Ahmed Olade's music is not for just tweens. I argue he single-handedly resurrected BTS's career last year. So don't be pop-snob, Yevgeny. Or a racist. It's not cool, bro."

"Dimi! Climb up the fucking building!!"

Dimi shrugged, popped up on the wall, and scaled a few floors with well-trained fleetness. He was indeed the best choice for the job. At Stu's apartment window, Dimi pressed a hand-held transmitter, which activated Stu's automatic window opener. "It worked," Dimi said, comforted by accurate plans with no surprises.

Out of the corner of Yevgeny's eye, he spotted a police drone on a standard tour of the neighborhood. He reached for his EMP gun, aimed, and knocked it out of the sky. "I had to drop a drone. You got maybe eight minutes to get done and out of there." Yevgeny radioed to Dimi's earpiece.

"Roger that," Dimi said while sliding inside Stu's kitchenette.

Tillman leaped on Dimi, barking three times at a medium volume.

“солнце, you’re such a handsome wolf,” Dimi said while giving Tillman affectionate alpha-petting. That was another reason Dimi was the best pick; he was good with dogs. Tillman smiled and laid on his back for a few more tummy rubs. Dimi toured the apartment and entered Stu’s home office with all his computers.

The counter’s smart TV sprang on with Digi-Stu framed actual size, “Tillman? Tillman! It’s me, daddy’s here.”

Tillman jumped to attention and rolled his head to try to recognize him.

“It’s me. Or, for practical purposes, it’s me. In two dimensions, you should think it’s me. Now listen. There’s a very bad man in there.” Digi-Stu pointed around the corner.

Tillman wagged his tail, convinced and ready to accept Digi-Stu and his orders. Tillman pointed his nose around the corner to confirm.

“Yes, good boy! The cops will be here in three minutes. So you gotta keep the bad guy here and don’t let him take anything.” Digi-Stu took a moment for reflection. “Yeah, this is probably too much info for a canine. Ah, body language nuances are important.” Digi-Stu pantomimed biting and holding while Tillman enthusiastically panted.

“Be careful. Stu’s on Facetime with the dog,” Yevgeny said, radioing to Dimi.

“Understood. Don’t worry, I’m leaving now, anyway. I have Stu’s hard drives,” Dimi said while placing them in his bag. He turned the corner and…

Till pounced on Dimi, this time ferociously and terrifyingly. Dimi realized his dog-whispering didn’t work this time. He tried to fend him off, grabbing Tillman around the snout to keep his jaws closed. But Tillman parried, freeing his jaws for more attacks. Dimi punched Tillman, who yelped in pain, giving him time to get up.

Dimi turned to the window. Tillman locked onto Dimi’s bag. This was a tug of war, and Tillman would never give up. Back and forth they went. Dimi tried lifting both the bag and Tillman off

the ground, but Tillman got leverage by instinctively using the corner of the counter.

A faint police siren in the distance grew louder and was joined by a second.

"You hear that?" Dimi asked Yevgeny.

"Yeah. They're faster than we expected. Get out of there."

"Crazy-big dog has the bag with the drives."

"Then shoot the dog!" Yevgeny demanded.

"I'm not shooting a dog, Yevgeny." Dimi had some hard lines he wouldn't cross.

Digi-Stu addressed Dimi, "Wise choice. Hate to have a John Wick-style vendetta here."

"Ha! I don't give a half-a-shit about you. I'll kill you and your whole family for fun. But dogs are angels on earth," Dimi shouted between furious pulls of the bag.

The police sirens grew louder, two blocks or closer.

"Fuck this," Dimi said, giving up the bag. He fastened a rappelling wire to the windowsill and bounded down in seconds.

Yevgeny had the car running. "You got 'em?" he asked.

Dimi said, "This dog might be a bear. I hear cop sirens. We gotta go."

"I don't hear… Okay," He hit the pedal, and they sped off.

"Stu's drives were probably massively encrypted, anyway."

Yevgeny checked back at Dimi and said, "Oh, man. Don't get blood everywhere. I didn't get the insurance on this rental."

"What? Oh, shit," Dimi said, noticing Tilman's teeth slashed his punching hand.

Yevgeny said, "You gonna need rabies shots. Two weeks of the needles."

“No way Stu’s dog has rabies.”

“Once rabies takes hold, you die. Not worth the risk that dog just got rabies from squirrel in the park. You take the shots.”

“Fine, take me to hospital,” Dimi said, clutching his wound.

“Ah, Pyotr says we only go to urgent care. Is good enough and less price.”

Digi-Stu finished praising Tillman. “You’re the best, Tillman! Daddy’s so proud of you!!”

Tillman wagged his tail with glee and jumped around in excitement. The sirens abruptly ended. “You don’t want to hear those noisy, fake sirens from these speakers. Do you, boy?”

#

Hira entered the office and saw an anguished, angry Chuck reviewing lab results strewn and posted everywhere, scanning their various warnings. She recognized those dire charts. With a deliberate, concerned tone, Hira asked. “Are you going to be okay, Mr. Rosti?”

Chuck was inconsolable and working himself up. “No. Rotting, stinking shit maximum NO... with a giant fist in the ass! Scorching, merciless AAaahhhhhhh! GOD DAMN IT! I have the worst luck!”

Like a child first petting a neighbor’s scary hound, Hira put her hand on Chuck’s shoulder. Unsure of the next safe step, she was grateful to be blindsided by the blasé henchmen taking pride in the doctor’s fresh corpse on the floor.

She tried to seem carefree while stepping over it like daily logs among lumberjacks. Demonstrating her value was her only shield against Chuck’s wrath and whim. “There’s got to be a treatment we haven’t tried yet. We’ll fix it, Mr. Rosti.”

“We?!?! Yeah, Hira? Will ‘WE?’ You gonna cure thyroid, lymphatic, and lung cancer in the ‘maybe one to two weeks’ that I have left above ground?”

He had his millionth coughing fit. “Plus, I may spend my last pitiful days behind bars. Dammmmmiiitttt!!!”

His entourage averted their gaze for fear of incurring his wrath. Chuck’s spasming diaphragm and hacking lungs blocked most attempts at sneaking oxygen. When that stopped, Chuck could breathe, buzzed with adrenaline and cortisol.

Zephyr entered, propping the door open for effect, but squelched her smile some as she read the room. “Good news, Mr. Rosti. The appeals court is doing an ‘en banc’ review of your prosecution in the Illinois case. Might be ripe for a dismissal. But your retainer with our firm requires replenishment. $9,000,000 should be sufficient.”

“Illinois!?! That’s scheduled to be heard next year. I’ll be dead or a machine by then. Who fuckin’ cares! Why are you even wasting any hours and my money on it? You blood-sucking mooch!” Chuck hadn’t been this energized in weeks.

Zephyr eased a step back and averted her gaze in beta-status deference. “No associates on this one. You got me, and I’m all you need right now.” A few feet around the hallway, Zephyr’s associates avoided eyelines and eavesdropped in fright. “And I’ll refund the time back to your other cases.”

This gave Chuck a momentary sense of victory, but wrath and frustration took over. “I got a rant I’ve been thinking about for a while. So, you get to hear it first.”

Hira waved in Chuck’s social media crew, who were there in seconds but soon regretted it.

“Get the fuck out. Nobody called you.” Chuck said. He looked over to his henchmen, adrenaline-up and itching to jump in. Chuck pointed to his crew and said, “These bastards have ten seconds to sprint out of here, or I want you to beat their dumbasses until they’re off my property.” The crew raced away like hares chased by hounds. He

closed by saying, “And don’t pay them any ‘punch-bucks,’ either!”

The stampede of extra fleeing feet were those of Zephyr’s associates, already clomping down the emergency stairs.

Zephyr was paralyzed in fear, staring straight down. A remaining henchman stood by for Chuck’s next orders, deplorably ready to physically assault this professional, educated, poised woman.

Chuck tossed a hand-drone camera, facing it down, his thumb never hitting record. His eyes searched upwards for words as he improvised a rant he’d have broadcasted on almost any other day.

Zephyr looked relieved. Anyone in Chuck’s orbit knew his pontificating mode was less likely to be menacing. The henchman recognized the window for authorizing violence was closing and downshifted his adrenaline a couple of gears.

Chuck surveyed the parts of the skyline that belonged to his empire. On a digital outdoor ad, a news segment played, showing clips from Chuck’s trial, which he avoided attending in person.

Chuck jolted as if with an epiphany and swatted down the drone, cracking it on the floor. “Shit, if there were no lawyers and loopholes… I don’t want to think about it. Glad my gut sensed not to record this. This was a cathartic rehearsal for a speech I’ll never give again. But I’m still right.”

Chuck’s eyes scanned everyone’s faces in the room for approval but soon recognized they were all terrified sycophants, and this time, he wasn’t in the mood for them to fake it.

Zephyr got a phone alert and didn’t have the poker face for this level of bad news. She excused herself. And it was evident she had just forwarded it to Chuck, who saw it on his phone and growled.

Chuck noticed his ankle monitor, by default glowing green, began flashing orange. He had to hobble over to an electronic check-in station lock-booted to his table. The small screen displayed an alert: “Secondary Location confirmation: approved.” He watched it click off. The display read, “Reminder: Get affairs in order.

Defendant must be prepared for immediate remand at verdict announcement."

Chuck focused his energy on finding an urgent solution. "Okay, we're moving up the timetable."

Chuck video-called Stu, who was intently working at the ZerQuali lab. Stu opened a drawer to get his blanket for primitive but effective privacy. He hid underneath it while his phone was still ringing and joked in a booming voice to the lab tech marching by, "Don't worry. I'm just masturbating." He regretted amusing himself with that line and doubted it'd be worth the impending call from human resources. From under the blanket and while still reviewing his work, Stu answered the video-call from Chuck, "Hey, boss."

Chuck got irritable at the nurses hooking him up to an IV cocktail of vitamin B, ultra-nutrients, steroids, and Provigil, mixed in with the hyper-oxygenated lab-farmed blood cloned & from an 18-year-old Olympic triathlete. His glare made them back off for the call. "Stu, you've now got 24 hours to get the device. And it better work."

Stu lowered the volume and firmly whispered, "I need time to finish the security camera hack. You gotta wait. I'm not assuming any more risk."

"Oh, I won't let you deprive me of my legacy."

Stu was so preoccupied with his coding, he offhandedly offered heartfelt sympathy, however oblivious to Chuck's inevitable reaction. "I pity you, Chuck. The end of your life is the worst time to be selfish."

Chuck gut-knew Stu must've been ignorant of how the world worked. Chuck said, "Billions of people exist on less than you. Why don't you pay for their lives to improve? Each had hopes, loves, and reasons they 'need' your money. What makes them so undeserving?"

Stu heard this but had no response.

Chuck registered Stu's silence and said, "Exactly. Every man has his own priorities. You bleeding hearts stupidly include all humans or, worse yet, all animals, for chrissakes. Patriots exclude foreigners. Me, I only care about success. Unlike you... for that incendiary firebrand, Maria."

Stu felt like a pastor to a troubled youth. "Empathy gives humans purpose."

"Your only purpose is to get me that device."

"I'll honor my promise. But since I'm the only one who can get it, recognize you're at my mercy."

Chuck wound up like he was going to tear into Stu but held his breath. Taunts aren't worth risking goals. He raised his eyebrows, seeking confirmation.

Stu could only take so much of this. He hammered his point, saying, "Glad you've learned what's what. I'll give you what you want. Just wait." He ended the call.

The hang-up sound echoed in the deadly silent room. All wondered how their Alpha would respond to this challenge.

Chuck screeched his lungs out, "He's teaching me? He pities me?" Which caused a single, convulsing, full-torso cough. He sucked in too little air too fast, so he could only faintly ask, "I'm at his mercy?" These were conditions for a rage stroke, but Chuck had a fierce will to live. "That punk! I master my fate." Chuck's cheeks and neck stayed purple-pink.

Hira saw Chuck stewing and texted Stu. *"It'd be wise to call Mr. Rosti back right now."*

Stu used voice-to-text, saying, "When I can, uh, hugging emoji, no, thumbs-up."

Hira's primal instinct skipped "fight" and went right to "flight." She quarter-faltered like a first-time shoplifter walking to Zephyr and whispered, "Should we get our own passports and 'go bags?'"

Zephyr said deadpan, "Working for Chuck means we all should, plus buy dual citizenship from non-extradition countries."

Disregarding the possibility that was facetious, Hira said, “Would you kindly send me the list and any relevant legal guidance?”

“Sure thing. Spending $500K for a second passport and international sanctuary is unequivocally worth it.” Zephyr said, now clear this was serious.

#

Maria put the unwieldy protest signs on the sidewalk. Noticing the mini-garden a yard away, she took the opportunity to “touch grass” and reconnect with nature (even on a tiny scale). She saw the dedication sign from the benefactors, the Koch family, and rolled her eyes. Maria said, “Of course, they’re not succulents. Too few step up.” She felt a passerby brush past her, so she turned to ask him, “Too few step up — Am I right?”

The man kept walking without even a courtesy look back.

Maria video-called Stu and, not waiting for a pleasantry, said, “I forgive you. Now prove you can make me a top priority by taking the day off to help us out. We’re protesting outside Senator Hawn Woods’s local office, who grabbed all that government funding for climate refugees and redirected it to subsidize digital immortality research.”

“What’s with the test? C’mon, querida. You either believe me, and you should, because it was just a kiss, and the shower was only to prevent it from becoming a ‘this,’ or you don’t believe me. In which case, you should dump me.”

“Don’t self-sabotage. I’m trying to find a reason to forgive you, Stu. Take the win.”

“This kills me, because I can’t. ‘The’ deadline moved up. Got one day now!” Stu said.

“That’s messed up. But let’s talk. Just five minutes — let’s shift to some positivity.”

Stu pulled his lips in his mouth and agreed.

Maria's eyebrows bounced to reset the vibe, and she said, "While we're protesting, we're gonna help non-voters get registered… with signs for fringe third parties. Get it?"

Stu squinted and asked, "How does that help?"

"To work, a protest needs to make some sort of threat – ours is non-violent, of course. Maybe a bit of property damage, I'm joking. No 'criming.' Though graffiti shouldn't be a capital offense if we're keeping it a buck. I'm getting sidetracked like you do, Stu."

Stu grinned. "It happens. Starts small and then, reminds me of a..."

Maria stopped mid eye-roll and said, "Here's the strategy: we have all these absurd party signs to make the main party leader think we're shifting votes away from him."

"What happens when you actually get someone to want to register?"

Maria and Stu dove into the ultimate, nerdy, political wonk-out. Truth bonds.

Bonus Link #18 — ONLY CLICK IF YOU'RE FEELING ULTRA-NERDY ABOUT POLITICS & PERSUASION (otherwise skip) –
Click away to read: "How Are You Going to Win?"

TL;DR — Stu argued there are only two ways to win elections — activating people who rarely vote or persuading regular voters to change their minds. A potential voter in the major party closest to you should be an easier target than someone in the opposing party. So, primaries are where you can challenge the establishment. If you can't win those, you can't win general elections where the supreme establishment thumbs on scales are even heavier. If you don't care about winning, then you're de facto supporting the even worse party by doing precisely what they want. Stu also explained his strategy for persuasion imagining literal, not figurative, "Foundations of Belief."

"Okay, I'm buyin' that 'Foundations of Belief' tactic and tryin' it soon. Appreciate you, babe," Maria said, "But I'm telling you, I'm mad busy recruiting folks in real life for the next day or two. So you gotta be responsible for Tillman. Later, Papi." She gave the camera a smooch and hung up.

Stu searched his doggie-care apps, which showed none of his trusted dog-walkers or caretakers were available. "Ah, fuck it. I got money now. Time for someone in our family to live the good life."

Stu took a ride home and called out, "Tillman!" He noticed the damage Dimi inflicted and assumed it was his dog but didn't blame him.

The friendly beast galloped up, slobbering with excitement. He ended with a rare, perfect "sit and smile."

"I'm gonna spoil you at the Leona Pet Hotel." Stu gave his best friend that signature calming touch, soaked in a moment of a better future, and said, "Let's go."

Tillman flexed and kept panning for prey, feeding on Stu's high energy as they left. A quick e-taxi later and they arrived at the Waldorf-Astoria of animal care facilities. Embedded in the lobby floor, a mini-pool six inches deep enabled dogs to clean their feet walking through. Brushes moved like automated car washes. On the other side were grates and drains, followed by sublime, plush Angora towels. Those must've been changed every fifteen minutes, given how clean they were. Tillman's quick-swinging tail showed his enthusiasm for this experience.

The concierge was a super-duper-friendly young woman with a heart-warming smile and Disney character-proportioned eyes. Stu's smartphone relayed his payment info and Tillman's preferences.

"I see this is your son's first time with us. Would you like to upgrade his meals to organic for sixty dollars more?"

It might've been Stu's nerdiness about accuracy, but referring to animals as one's children always bothered him. Regardless, Tillman deserved the best. "Sure, bill me."

On the lobby screens, Stu finally saw the jumbo doggie rooms packed with toys and thought about how unhoused people lived in honeycombs of Sleeping-Pods in abandoned lots. He wondered if this was overkill.

"Would Tillman prefer a suite?" the concierge said, smelling a potential up-sell.

"Regular is fine," Stu said while handing over Tillman's leash.

She promenaded Tillman away, both so comfortable and enthusiastic like they had been together for a decade. Stu got a subtle touch of the queasy, chest-tightening combo, this being the first time Stu ever saw Tillman take to a stranger in seconds. Maybe it was the pressures of the moment affecting his mindset. He was 90% not joking when he thought, *Someone took my baby away*. He recognized his historic hypocrisy of mocking pet owners who called themselves pet parents. That didn't matter now. What was most important was that his baby was safe.

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Sample Chapter —
IMMORTALITY BYTES: DIGITAL MINDS DON'T GET HUNGRY
By Daniel Lawrence Abrams https://linktr.ee/immortalitybytes
SOLSTICE PUBLISHING