



UNDERSTANDING

Why Learn When You Can Understand

There has always been a fine line between knowing about something and understanding it. And a huge gulf between the rich and the poor. The haves and the have-nots. Now the gaps aren't just a distance which can be crossed, now it's protected by walls... firewalls.

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New York City, Lower West Side

The rain pounded on the pavement. You could smell the water in the air. It was cold. But none of this seemed to affect the giant screen looming over the pavement. The man in the image also seemed unaffected by the inclement weather. The sky behind him was blue, the scene pastoral. His suit was immaculate. The voice was charming, convincing.

Once you had to spend years learning, struggling... and even then, there was no guarantee of understanding. But not anymore. Now with a subscription to FREEWILL, we can give you an understanding, not of one subject, but the whole breadth of human knowledge. You can have all that and peace of mind as well. Contact a recruitment agent now.

The light from the video ad poured into the dirt-encrusted window of the tenement building across the street. The poor building had been built at the end of the 21st Century and was long overdue for replacement. Two young people, slim and almost gaunt, huddled over a holographic keyboard and a monitor. He tapped away at the keys and she watched.

ACCESS DENIED

The text message blinked bright orange in the air. “No again,” rasped Andy.

Owen Gordon grunted and covered his face in his hands. “It’s not as easy as it looks. No one has ever broken into FREEWILL before. That’s part of the package. They don’t want anyone in the system who hasn’t paid a subscription fee. It’s got the best security in the universe.”

“We’d better get out of here,” Andy whispered. Her voice slow, the pitch deep. “Security will have locked on to us. They’ll be here any minute.”

“Just one more try,” he insisted. His fingers danced over the holographic keys.

ACCESS DENIED

“Damn,” he shouted. They could both hear the footsteps running up the stairs.

“We have to go,” she offered, her voice now a quick tempo. Her forehead wrinkled. “It a good thing there’s no power in the building. The elevators don’t work.”

Owen rolled up the equipment. “But they’ll still be up here in a minute or two.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What about the solar batteries on the roof?”

“No time. We’ll have to leave them.”

The two left the room through the window, crawling out onto the old fire escape. The rusted screws screamed and gowned as the two stood on the landing. Owen wasn’t sure the old structure would support the tow of them. He headed down the steps, Andy close behind him. The whole fire escape shook as they descended. Andy practically sucked in her teeth as they proceeded.

The last part was the most nerve-wracking. The two resistors could hear the security forces yelling from the open window about their heads. If they were caught, they’d be treated as terrorists and executed. No trial would be required. The rain was splashing upward, bouncing off the cracked pavement once the

two landed on the street. The drops of rain splattered on the dark road surface, echoing as tears shed for their defeat. Andy and Owen looked like drowned rats; their clothes plastered to their bodies as if they were shrink-wrapped. They headed down the alleyway and ducked behind a dumpster. They heard the collapse of the fire escape as the twisted metal structure separated from the building and landed in the street begin them with an enormous crash.

“Good,” Owen muttered, “It’ll take them some time to get out of the building. We can use that time to escape.” Taking Andy by the hand, he led her to a manhole cover in the street. Owen pressed a button hidden under the rough material of his shirt sleeve. The manhole cover hovered up into the air, kept up by a magnetic constrictor beam. The two climbed down into the hole. The last thing anyone might have seen was the metal covering clanging back down on top of the hole. But people didn’t like to be out in this part of New York in the rain.

Running down the sewer tunnels, it didn’t take them long to run into an ominous crowd of poorly dressed who appeared to be homeless. The blond-haired resistance leader forced his way forward. Owen and Andy didn’t even know his name. It’s why he had survived this long as the most wanted man on the planet. He was just called Leader X. “How did it go?”

Owen hung his head, bringing his whole body down. “It didn’t work.”

Leader X slammed his fist into a wall. “We paid good money for those cypherkeys.”

“They were worthless,” Andy protested.

Leader X snapped his fingers and two hooded men disappeared into the crowd. It would have been best if the two programmers who had sold the keys had left the country. But it wouldn’t matter. No place would be safe for them now. They were two names whose letters had yet to be carved into tombstones.

Leader X held his body upright. “Talk to Intelligence. Tell him everything you learned from your interface with the system. Then you’ll need to go into hiding. Network Security will be looking for you.”

Network Security made the KGB, the Men in Black, and the CIA look like rank amateurs. When Network Security wanted you to disappear, you were never heard from again. They walked around in their all silver uniforms, terrorizing everyone. They had access to every piece of data available in FREEWILL. Sure, they had virtually eliminated crime, but they also made a joke out of the system’s name. No one had freewill anymore. Not unless you paid for it.



Luke 254k stepped into his single-room apartment and pulled down the zipper of his silver uniform. The blinking light in his eyes told him there was an incoming priority message. He sighed. He was in FREEWILL, but he was still a working stiff. Little more than a servant. He accepted the call.

“Evan 3137582k here.” Luke could see the tall hairless white man in his mind. He could tell Evan had a stick up his ass about something.

His reply was virtually toneless. “Go ahead.”

Evan was the administrator of FREEWILL. A position more powerful than the President of Earth. But he was a hard man to work for. "Someone sold the fake keys we gave them to the resistance." His voice was cold. His eyebrows formed a frown and he stared directly into the system. "I want you to find them and eliminate the leak."

"I'm on it," Luke replied zipping his silver uniform back up. Evan closed the communication and Luke was once again alone in his room. No rest for the weary, he thought to himself. He checked the data and found someone using the fake keys to access the system. Probably resistance fighters. Low-level hackers, he was sure. Leader X didn't send his better people on these kinds of suicide missions. Not to test out an unknown key they had bought on the black market. Luke checked his ID. He was still 254k. He hadn't even gotten a bonus for his last mission.

When you paid for access to FREEWILL you changed your name. It was like a handle in an MMO. You got to pick your first name, but your last name denoted how much money you'd invested in your place in the system. How much understanding you got was dependent on how much money you put in. Only the top names knew everything. Luke's stake had been paid for by the corporation when he agreed to join Network Security. It was the only way he could afford to get into FREEWILL. His level was enough to get him access to all the data he needed to do his job, but as far as understanding went, it didn't buy him jack shit. He was a policeman. Nothing more and possibly a lot less.

He corrected himself. He did understand one thing. He was a cog. A small part of a big machine designed to control the entire planet. Luke was, for lack of a better term, a servant. A pawn of all those who numbered above him. Earth had become a strict caste system. The rich had everything and the poor were left with nothing but the desire to get in.

Luke comforted himself with the idea he was at least on the inside, looking out and the poor downtrodden masses. He didn't have to be one of the poorly dressed drones making up the working calls and the resistance. He was no fan of the resistance. They wanted to bring everything down. It was their virus that had brought down the weather control system. This six-month-long monsoon was their doing. But they were only harming themselves. The farmers whose fields were flooded out would be the first to starve when the emergency rations ran out.

He checked the link. No images of the hackers. Typical. They'd picked a building without power and no security cameras running. Clever. But it would do them any good. Once they attempted to access the system, the fake keys put trackers on them. They were walking around dead, only they weren't aware of it yet.

Luke called up the tracker system. He could see the entire layout of the city in his mind. He could track every person's movements. They appeared as yellow or orange dots on the map. He checked for the tracker symbols... and couldn't find them. Whoever this was didn't jack into the system mentally. They must have used a non-sentient keyboard. He was impressed. These resisters knew what they were doing. Inwardly Luke smiled. This was going to be a challenge and he liked challenges. Luke mentally conveyed a few messages to the system and the dots all disappeared. He zoomed in on the lower part of the city. There was a faint red line down two streets in the old bowery section. They headed off Hester and down Elizabeth Street. Then the trace line simply stopped. He zoomed in tighter. Luke couldn't figure out where they went. Until he saw it... a manhole cover. Right where the line stopped.

Luke punched up a connection in his head. “Hey, Jackson why doesn’t our map system cover the underground in the old Bowery section?”

He got audio-only for his response. Where it was at the other end sounded groggy. “Good morning to you lieutenant,” the voice replied, “Nobody likes down there, so we don’t have a map on file, why?”

“Meet me on Hester Street and bring a wet suit. In fact, bring two.”

“Can we wait for the sun to come up?”

“No.”

The voice sounded disappointed. “Okay, just let me take a shower.”

Luke couldn’t help sounding smug. “We’re going down in the sewers, Jackson. I think it would be best to take your shower after you get out of the sewers.”



Owen pulled up a table at the Canal Street Chess Club. Intelligence had finished debriefing the two of them. The older man clicked his tongue constantly. Intelligence looked disappointed, but his tone was emotionless. Owen realized he should have been tired. He didn’t get much sleep before the mission and they’d been up all night answering questions for Intelligence. But he was too wired to sleep. And maybe a little angry about the whole thing. This was probably his only chance to get into FREEWILL and he blew it. He felt as disappointed in himself as the look on Intelligence’s face. Not that he was being judged... no, on second thought, he was totally being judged.

Owen knew Network Security would still be after them. They were relentless. Andy thought they might be Okay, but Owen knew better. When Intelligence didn’t give them a safe house to go to, he knew they were cooked. When you fail in the resistance, there is no second chance. Not once Network Security is on to you. Owen had visions of lonely walks. Pacing back and forth in an orange jumpsuit. He imagined seeing the paint peeling off the walls. The ugly institutional green barely clinging to the concrete walls. Be he knew he couldn’t be that lucky. Network Security didn’t keep prisons. He wondered if they would be disintegrated as everyone always said, leaving nothing but a stain on the floor. Or would the two of them find places at the bottom of the East River?

He unrolled the holographic keyboard and monitor and started typing away. The Chess Club was one of the safest places he knew. No one noticed his setup; they were too engrossed with their games.

“What are you doing?” Andy barked.

His fingers danced over the keys. “I’m checking the ciphers.”

Andy lowered her head and stared at him almost through her eyebrows. “But they’re fake. What’s the point?”

Grunting, Owen hunched over the keyboard. “They must have some connection to the system, so they look live. Otherwise, you couldn’t sell them.”

“So?”

He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I can use the signal to trace a route back into the main junction and create a link there."

Andy watched him as her partner worked the numbers. He was getting a signal and the system hadn't booted him out yet. It was a good sign.

"Pawn to king's knight four." Owen turned, desperately trying to hide the equipment. He held his breath. But it was Old Man Smedley. It was the first move he'd made in an hour. Owen exhaled and returned to the monitor. What he saw on the screen shocked him even more than Old Man Smedley's bad pawn move. He must have hit something on the keyboard when he was trying to hide it. It was the only explanation possible. Owen would have given anything at that moment to know what he had done by accident. But it didn't matter. They were in. It's what they had wanted... and he wasn't about to blow his second chance. There it was, in bright orange letters on the screen.

SYSTEM ACCESS

Owen dug deep into his pockets and pulled out two silver disks, each about the size of an old-fashioned quarter. "Here," he gasped as he told Andy, "put this on."

She took one of the disks from Owen's hand, her fingers shaking. "Are you sure?"

His voice was as shaky as Andy's hands. "It's what we've been waiting for all this time." He slapped the disk onto the back of his neck. The first electronic buzz was painful. There was a rush of sensation, followed by a pause.

It was difficult to sort through the information. It all came flooding at them at once. Andy's body even shook for a moment as if she was having a seizure. Most people had a look of peace come over them as they joined the FREEWILL network. Their eyes lit up like they were in a candy store. But both Andy and Owen went right to the top. They knew it all... and they understood.

The plan had been to shut the system down, just like the weather system. Without the system link, everyone's knowledge would go away. What you didn't get from learning the hard way you could only keep through the link. If the link shut down, you'd be helpless. Leader X had a whole detailed series of orders for this eventuality. They would quietly slip in and take over. Then they would destroy the system for good. But Owen and Andy understand now. They understood it all... and they knew the plan wouldn't work. They didn't have smiles on their faces or frowns. If the chess players had been watching, they would have seen two looks of abject terror.

Only Old Man Smedley was smiling. "Pawn takes pawn," the grey-haired man murmured.



"We've got them," Jackson confirmed. "They're on Canal street."

Luke checked the map in his head. There were two bright dots on Canal Street. They blinked solidly, not moving. Luke's eyes open wide. "They're not running."

"They're in the old chess club. We'd better get down there," Jackson piped up.

Heading for the exit on Eldridge Street, Luke took off his gloves. “Yeah, it looks like we made our collar for the week.”

“Hey, boss...”

“What is it now, Jackson.”

His voice sounded shaky. “They’re in.”

“In where?”

“The system, they’re inside FREEWILL. They show up as Owen 0000k and Andy 0000k.”

“Must be a mistake,” Luke objected, “the system doesn’t assign a number that low.”

“Or that high,” Jackson added.

They didn’t have any trouble finding them. They were sitting in the back corner of the club. Neither of them moved when they entered the room. The two just sat there, slowly breathing. Luke pulled up a chair. Sitting in it backward, he rested his arms on the chair’s back. It was the boy who spoke first.

“You’re Luke 254k, aren’t you?” It wasn’t stated so much a question as a realization of the fact.

Before Luke could react, Owen’s hands flashed over the holographic keyboard. Luke froze, his name displayed as Luke 0000k. They upgrade him. Since he was already in the system, there was no shock. At least not at first. They’d upgraded him and he knew. He knew it all... and he understood.

Reincarnation was real. Everyone on Earth had lived not one, but hundreds of lives. Through FREEWILL you could see not only this life but all your past lives as well. Luke knew who Evan 3137582k was and who he had been. Evan had learned well in his past lives. He’s learned a lot as the successor to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Evan didn’t need a body anymore. They were weak and they died. He had learned how to transfer his consciousness to FREEWILL. Evan would live forever, and he controlled everything.

Jackson lowered his weapon, turned, and headed for the door. Behind him were three greasy stains on the floor of the Canal Street Chess Club. Three fewer problems for the new world order.