



∴3

"No balance can be established
without first exploring every edge."

Chapter 3.1

♻ moving parts

Amsterdam freight checkpoint K, outskirts of Paypal twelve district. Rotterdam region—EU.

If things go as Ennis hopes, there won't be any need for what's in the trunk. The bomb is intended only as a diversion, there to hold Amsterdam's attention while he slips through its border unnoticed.

That's Plan A.

Plan B is a little more convoluted.

It relies heavily on improvising, some ad-libbing, and a lot of thinking on his feet.

Despite the haste, Ennis has hedged his bets well. Either he gets in, or the nuke does.

The PDA shows 19:46.2155.06.20. In nine minutes he makes the call.

A pair of border agents wave forward the vehicle in front of his utility. It pulls into the inspection zone as agents scan it with specialized PDAs.

Its occupants—a pair of couriers—get out and place their hands against the hood, letting the border guys search.

Ennis watches as they get back in and drive onto the loading ramp.

The agents wave him forward.

Pulling onto the marked platform, he gets out and throws a PDA on the hood.

Hanging in the air, the damp smell of nearby rain. Dark gray skies about to let loose.

When the nearest agent sees Ennis he waves the other off.

"Go talk to the next guy," says the agent, "he's flashing some indicators."

The other agent walks back up the line while the first lays a PDA on the hood also. It confirms their transaction with the standard ch-ching.

"Nice. I assume this favor doesn't get anyone shot or maimed?"

"It's not that kind of package."

The agent laughs. "Who ever heard of a guy smuggling dope *into* Amsterdam?"

Ennis smiles. "No one ever will, right?"

He gets back in and drives onto the concrete dock, backing up to a cargo arm.

A toggle on the dash splits open the ute's rear, which folds away to reveal a crate marked 'Medical Material—Do not open outside of Level 3 quarantine'.

Rain begins to drum down on it while Ennis gets behind the arm's control panel, the automated freight train sounding its five minute departure warning.

♻️ the bluff

Charging on its dashboard cradle, the PDA projects Amsterdam's Chief of Police on call.

"Chief Walter, my name is Ennis Pryce... I have a nuclear device within Amsterdam's borders. I intend to activate it if my demands aren't met by your government."

"This is a legitimate threat?" asks the Chief.

Ennis takes his eyes off the road long enough to look him in the eye. "I will legitimately blow you the fuck up if you don't take this seriously."

"Well... uh, what are your demands?"

"Check your q-mail," says Ennis, "I'll call you back."

The rented utility speeds through tight Rotterdam streets and laneways, tracing the border's outer wall.

♻️ the several demands of Ennis "crazy bomber" Pryce, in no particular order

2155.06.20.19:58

Dear Amsterdam, as you may or may not be aware, I am a disgruntled former resident of your fine city banned from returning under penalty of death. My crime was setting foot beyond your borders.

Seeing as how I've got an A-Bomb now, I decided to dictate this list of demands. I really feel that these few changes could spruce the place up a fair bit for those fortunate enough to still live within the walls (and I mean 'fortunate' sarcastically, which I concede is difficult to convey via q-mail).

I suppose I could be persuaded not to blow up Amsterdam if you get working on some of this stuff tonight, but you'll probably want to put all your guys on it, as I demand satisfaction.

That is to say, I order you to carry out the following demands, satisfactorily.

1. Abolish no leave/no return. I had to leave for an operation, and would have died waiting for clearance. It's just an all around dick move.
2. Open borders to cheap electronics. Not everyone can afford K-Racs. The Z-Rac is a perfectly capable alternative.
3. What's the deal with Geeves Stoodle? I'm not saying I won't watch his show if it's on, but why does his sense of humor have to be so dry?
4. More sporting teams, am I right? Just because you reject the outside world and its universalist ideals or whatevs, doesn't mean we can't see some mofos getting their armball on from time to time. I know there's no such sport as armball but everyone I know is so into football and I'm pretty sick of those guys.
5. How did you dudes fill up that moat around the city? Shipped in water, or was it all done with aqua ducts? Really curious about this. My friend swears it comes from an underground river but Dave can be totally belligerent when he drinks, and is usually wrong.
6. I want to play some golf with your President. I don't really know how to play so he'll have to show me the various golf moves but he seems like the kind of guy I could hang out with, and if he doesn't play golf then that would be pretty weird for the president of a whole country don't you think?

Wait, country? Or city? What are you guys exactly?
Province??

7. The bomb was aboard a flight that docked in Amsterdam yesterday. From there it was transported to a mysterious secret location. It may be in another airport, or possibly a museum. It is a mystery! I'm aware that this part isn't a demand but I don't know how to make my PDA stop doing the numbers when I carriage-return.

Oh there we go. Okay so the bomb is somewhere in Amsterdam and is set to go off some time tonight or tomorrow. Or maybe even later in the week. Actually let's just say tonight or tomorrow.

Sincerely,

Ennis Pryce
"Crazy bomber"
11,284 Sky City Seven
PayPal 12 District
Rotterdam region—EU.

♻️ defcon

Presidential office of Amsterdam City. Netherlands region—EU

"This isn't a serious list," says the President of Amsterdam, showing it to the other advisors in his briefing room.

Chief Walter—sitting opposite—shakes his head. "At this stage sir we're working without a psyche profile, Pryce may actually expect us to take the document seriously, despite the unfocused rambling."

"And how likely is it that he has a nuclear weapon?"

"To be honest, they're not that hard to obtain outside our walls. We'll have three satellites tasked within minutes. If there's anything radioactive in Amsterdam they'll locate a signature."

President Gibbon takes a moment to process the information, vacantly staring at the far wall. "This is going to sound a little cliché, but Amsterdam doesn't negotiate with terrorists."

"If the device is real sir, we'll find it. We know our city better than this guy. Once we locate his bargaining chip, negotiation becomes a moot point."

The President leans back in his leather chair, fidgeting.

"Clive, what do you think?"

The advisor by his side reads the list of demands. "Sir I believe the list is a diversion."

“How so? He wants our attention on the airports and museums obviously?”

“Yes... but not to stop us finding a nuclear weapon. This guy doesn't want to blow up Amsterdam. He wants to come home. The bomb—if there is a bomb—is just more misdirection. Pryce knows that a high-level internal threat will thin our ranks at the border. He's counting on it.”

“Chief,” says the President, “you should focus on airports and train terminals, and of course the museums. I want grunts there ready to search by hand if we get a sniff of it, but reinforce border checkpoints with a spread of TRG teams in case Pryce's notion is remigration.”

“What should I tell him when he calls back?”

“Say we're working on his list—that it'll take several hours, but nothing he wants seems unreasonable. It doesn't count as negotiation if we're lying.”

“I'll make it convincing—” says the Chief, interrupted by his ringing PDA. “Do you mind, sir? This may be him.”

“Go ahead.”

The Chief removes it from a pocket. “Answer. This is Walter.”

“Chief I'm Jim Kraft in E-Warfare, I was asked to do a sweep of the city for some sort—”

“I know the story. What did we find?”

On speaker, Kraft says, “There's definitely nuclear material on the island, sir. It's something pretty big.”

Every man in the room turns slightly more pale.

“Where is it?” asks the Chief.

“We're having some difficulty with that part.”

“What's the problem?”

“The footprint we're seeing originates from within the island's central freight terminal. That's a seventy floor underground station—automated, with minimal access for maintenance.”

“Okay, keep me up to date.” The Chief stands, pocketing his PDA. “Sir, I'll let you know as soon as we have more. It won't take us long to find a way in.”

The President nods, now deep in thought.

As Chief Walter leaves the room, Gibbon turns to Clive the advisor.

“How certain are you that Pryce doesn't want us all dead?”

Clive is silent for a long time. “Ninety-six per cent.”

♻️ safety net

Amsterdam City (outer ring). Netherlands region—EU

At Checkpoint 31, border agent Luna Phranc is nervous.

The TRG guys who showed up twenty minutes ago won't tell anyone why they're here. Rumors are circulating that a terrorist threat was received. And then there's the utility speeding through slow point two, already halfway across the bridge.

Her orders are to shoot... but no one seems to be doing any of that. Not even the tactical response team.

She turns to the nearest TRG guy and asks, "Do I shoot?"

Head shakes, eyes glued to the scope.

The TRG all wait until the vehicle hits slow point three, then one by one they arm their rifles.

♻️ threading the needle

When shots begin to ricochet off the hood and windshield, Ennis sinks lower behind the wheel.

Despite the utility's 'bullet resistant' selling point, he doesn't wish to quality test it here.

An RPG round curls out of the checkpoint's bunker, missing by a good ten feet.

The explosion in his rearview barely registers. Ennis is focused only on the first of three concrete gates—slowly rolling closed.

Amidst a hail of small arms and tracer fire, his rental scrapes through with room to spare, already baring down on the second gate.

♻️ control

From inside the bunker Luna can clearly see that gate three won't close in time.

She exits via steps at the back, looking around for a vehicle.

Running to the armored TRG troop transporter, she climbs into the driver's seat.

A keycard hangs from its sun visor.

♻️ home run

Sparks fly from the back left panel as it glances the second gate, whipping out the ute's rear wheels for just a second before traction control kicks in.

The third gate is only now beginning to close.

At 200KM/H, with open air between Ennis and Amsterdam, nothing can come between them now.

Nothing, as luck would have it, except an armor-plated TRG troop transport.

❖ an armor-plated TRG troop transport

Luna throws the big transporter in reverse and backs it out, aiming for the third gate.

It rolls past the bunker and its adjoining wall, crashing into the far side—wedged in the opening.

She barely has time to brace for impact as the border jumper's truck rear-ends hers at high speed, triggering all thirty-six airbags.

❖ kinetic sponge

Red crash foam bursts from the crumpling dash, slowing Ennis to a tolerable speed as he hits the windshield.

What's left of the utility comes to rest jack-knifed against the transporter, its interior still relatively intact.

The foam hardens against shattered windows, dissolved quickly by its exposure to oxygen, blowing away on the wind.

Ennis slowly regains consciousness while TRG troops surround the crash scene, weapons ready.

Dazed, he shows them a remote detonator, flipping the safety panel open on its thumb switch.

"What is it?" asks one of the troops.

Another says, "Distress flare."

"It's a detonator!" screams Luna, climbing out of the transport's passenger side with her sidearm trained on Ennis.

Ennis kicks out the side window and crawls free, showing them all the remote, face numb, drooling, seeing stars.

Focusing his will he begins to limp away from the wreck toward Amsterdam.

Luna follows close behind with a two-fisted grip on her pistol.

"Can't do that," she yells after him, trying to sound authoritative.

As Ennis turns back she stops advancing.

"You don't understand what's happening," he tells Luna. "I'm still in control."

"I get it—you wired yourself with explosives. But I don't think you wanna die today... so I'm calling your bluff."

He laughs, a little bemused.

She eases back the pistol's hammer. "I'll die defending this border. It's the oath we all took."

"Oath? Please. Your oath will kill everyone in the city."

Luna freezes, unsure.

Seeing the other troops hang back she cautiously lowers the pistol, beginning to sense the gravity of his words.

Satisfied, Ennis staggers toward Amsterdam again, ignoring the dull throb of a broken leg.

Shock will get him the rest of the way. All he needs now is to remain conscious.

She drops to one knee and takes careful aim at his centre mass, unable to shake a slight nervous twitch.

Luna fires four times—two sets of two—catching Ennis between the shoulder blades. Each nudges him forward like a friendly shove.

Feeling the corners of his world fade to white, he looks down at pulpy black exit wounds.

A crimson spatter decorates his favorite pair of sneakers.

"Well..." says Ennis, uneasy on his feet, "there's the irony."

He turns away from Amsterdam and closes his eyes, pressing down on the remote.