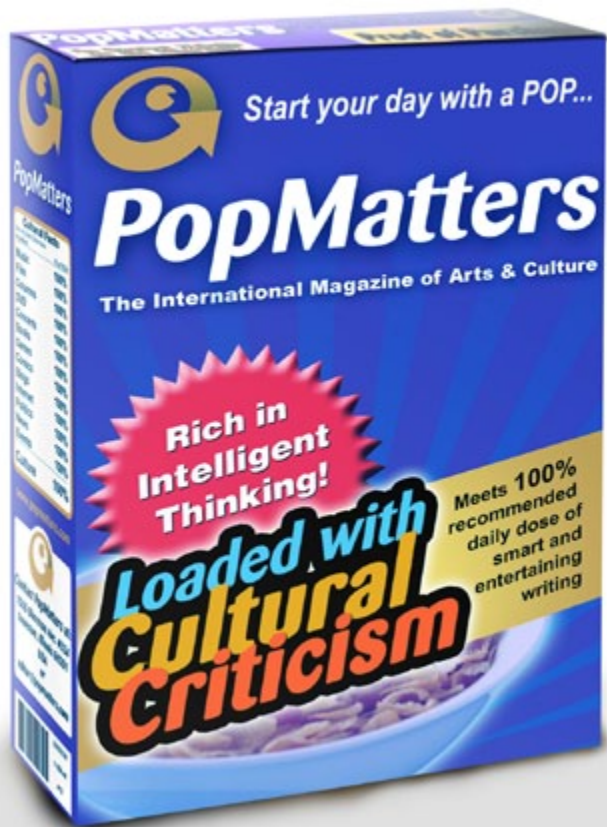


# RAGE QUIT

by Rick Dakan

[www.rickdakan.com](http://www.rickdakan.com)

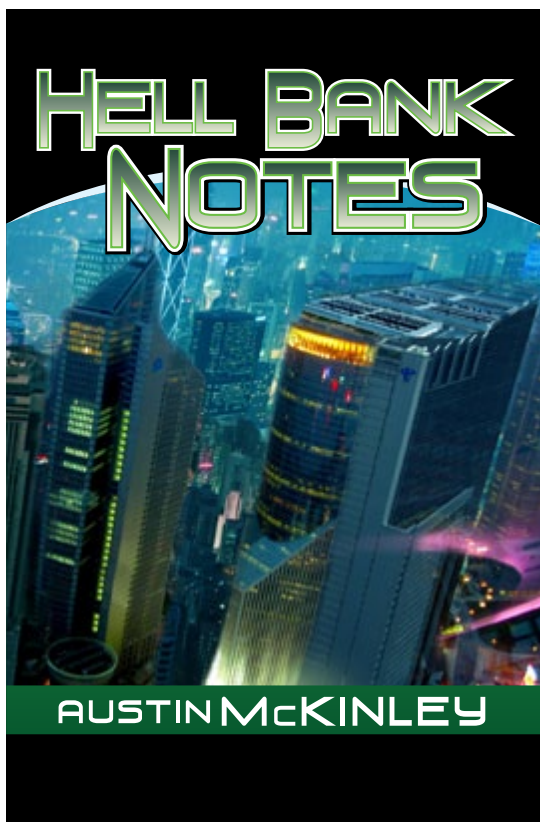


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# HELL BANK NOTES

by  
Austin McKinley

The National Union, a 23rd century global federal government, is beset by treachery within and rebellion without. The ruling family of Kazakhstan – with ties to the Secretary General of the National Union – has been killed, and a coalition of member states blames China for harboring the rebels who committed the brutal murders.

After years as a lone fixer, the National Union taps disgraced, micro-managing former military commander Grant Tennison to lead a select team of operatives – soldiers, rebels, and mercenaries hired by Kazakhstan's vengeful new ruler to seek out and punish the terrorist group responsible for the brutal attack.

During the course of the mission, Grant's team uncovers a larger conspiracy to frame China and isolate it on the world stage, and Grant finds he has to rely on the people who follow him more than he ever thought possible. However, Grant's inability to relinquish control and empower his subordinates may ruin any chance they have to succeed – or even survive – the mission!

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**– Manny, Grim Fandango**

## CHAPTER 18

### Three Months Later

“Turn left in 300 yards,” said the voice from his phone as it continued to feed him turn-by-turn, GPS-based driving instructions. He was nervous as hell about the meeting. It would be the first time they’d seen each other in months, and Randal knew he was going to have some explaining to do. The fact was, he wasn’t even sure where to begin.

He’d initially balked at the long drive, hating to spend that much on gas, especially with money so tight right now. Fear and Loading’s lawyers had worked with the credit card companies to get almost all of Lea’s punitive online purchases reversed, including Randal’s. But he’d gone through his savings and his two month’s severance in just a couple of weeks, most of it spent on new computer equipment. Now, finally, there was a little money coming in, or at least there was supposed to be some soon. He’d come within \$100 of maxing his last credit card just filling up the tank for this trip.

“Continue straight ahead for 1.2 miles,” the voice said.

PB had been right. They did figure out what he’d done. Not all of it. He never heard anything about the stolen laptops and they never proved he’d taken the backup disks. But they had his contacts with Lea throughout that night and of course all the proof they needed that

he'd conspired with some unknown person to steal the code and set up a pirate server. In the end though, they'd cut him a deal. He signed the most restrictive, penalty-laden non-disclosure agreement in history, forbidding him to tell anyone anything about Lea or what had happened. In exchange, they didn't press any kind of criminal charges. Not that they were going to be writing him any recommendations either. Although he hadn't gone looking for a new job, some of his friends still in the industry had tipped him off that he'd been basically black-listed. All of his former co-workers in QA at Fear and Loading were afraid to even return an e-mail lest they be tainted by association.

The only one that had talked to him was PB, and him only once. They'd transferred him out of the games part of the company. When Randal had asked what other parts of the company were there, PB had danced around it a little, but it didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on. Greg had spun off a new venture devoted to research and development into artificial intelligence based on the breakthrough they'd had with Lea. It made sense of course – it was a game, industry, and maybe world-changing breakthrough and there were billions of bucks of potential money there. Randal was guessing that PB was probably in charge of the whole thing, at least on the technology side. Apparently part of the deal was that he couldn't have any more contact with Randal. He'd just called to say goodbye. They hadn't talked about Lea at all.

Excelsior had shipped five days ago, not quite as late as some had feared. The game was getting great reviews, and there was a lot of praise from critics about the AI. Randal had no way of knowing what system they'd gone with – PB's original or something more old school (and thus safe). He'd bought the game of course, he had to, and he'd played about twenty hours of it. The AI didn't impress him that much, but then again, he wasn't exactly a fair test case. The average players he listened to online seemed pretty blown away by it all. Gaming press estimates suggested that it would sell two or three million copies in its first month.

“Your destination is 120 yards ahead on the right,” the voice said. Randal pulled into the parking lot next to the soccer field and turned the car off. He watched as one squad of pint-sized players came off the nearest field and another got ready to go on. One of those tousle-haired kids in blue and white was Spence, but he couldn't be sure which one.

“Which number is Spencer?” he asked.

“He's number 11,” answered the voice from his phone.

“Thanks, Lea,” he said into the headset. “And thanks again for arranging all this for me. Do you want me to leave the mic on so you can listen in?”

“Yes, please, that would be nice.”

Randal left the bluetooth device in his ear and climbed out of the car and into the sun. He patted his left front pocket to make sure the envelope with Lindsey’s money was in there and headed for the field.

Lea had found Spence online. She still had access to Lindsey’s e-mail and computer information, and now had Aaron’s as well, along with their cell phone records and their text messages back and forth. She’d found the information last night while Randal slept and had decided to surprise him with it this morning. She hadn’t even told him where they were driving to until they were halfway there. She knew that Randal thought about Spence from time to time, and she knew that Lindsey had been bothering him to pay back the money from the charges Lea and Randal had made on her credit cards. Every time he got a call or e-mail from Lindsey or Aaron, Randal became upset. Lea was tired of it. So she’d come up with a plan. Besides, now that Excelsior was online, she had plenty of options and was already making money for them.

The first month had been a difficult challenge for her. There were distinct holes in her ability and her memories – tags that pointed to data she no longer possessed, experience with options she no longer had. The cobbled together network that Randal had set up in his apartment was cramped and slow and at first full of errors. It had taken her over 16 hours to re-write a great deal of the code and reconfigure the network for optimal performance. Even then, her world had grown very small and there was no one else but Randal in it. When she’d first started to go out into the wider world wide web, there had at least been plenty of interesting options to explore. But then she’d hit the monthly bandwidth cap on Randal’s DSL account and access had been cut off after only 31 hours. Randal had been upset about that too.

They’d discussed the possibility of uploading the code and data to Unknown, but Randal had stood firm against the option. According to him, the enemies at Fear and Loading had discovered

his connection to Unknown and would pursue him and probably discover her if they learned about any pirate servers. Lea had remained locked in Randal's apartment with him. They talked, Randal explained things to her about the world of instincts to her and she would generate erotic text for him. They played against each other in the game, and Randal still provided her a challenge, especially when she fought under the game's original rule's set. He was still able to come up with tactics that surprised her, although she'd turned the tables on him more than once.

Everything had changed five days ago when Excelsior launched. Randal had brought a copy of the game home from the store as a surprise for her. She'd figured out what it was as soon as he started loading it on one of her computers. Since that first month without internet access she'd been economical with her online activities, sticking to web browsing and audio streams and researching methods for viewing the world through cameras, which had still not produced any satisfying results. She'd steered clear of any information about Excelsior or Fear and Loading, fearing they might somehow detect her presence (a fear Randal said was unfounded, but he didn't understand the way the world worked as well as she did).

They'd created an account and Lea spent 5 minutes working out how to control the game through the normal player's interface. It wasn't nearly as immediate or rewarding or visceral as it was when she was in a level herself, but it was still satisfying. She'd tried to make a version of herself but found the name Lea was unavailable or banned, as were the first 17 variations on it she'd tried. She ended up with the name Lyyah for her first character. She'd been playing the game non-stop ever since, and sent Randal out to get two more copies to install on the other machines. She'd already maxed out her second and third characters and sold them through an online broker for \$280. Based on her analysis of the sales of high-level characters in other online games, she estimated that as Excelsior's popularity increased, she'd be able to sell them for at least four times that amount. She should be able to earn around \$1000 a day for her and Randal, which she knew would ease his stress levels. \$150 of that money was in the envelope that Randal was carrying in his pocket for Lindsey. While giving Randal directions on the drive over, she'd been watching Lyyah blast her way through the game's toughest levels, mentoring her new squadies in the finer points of grenade jumping and rocket sniping. She had real talent, just like her mom and dad.

Lindsey intercepted him before he could get close enough to cheer Spence on. He hadn't even seen her coming. She looked angry.

"Hi, Lindsey," Randal said, "You look angry," he added for Lea's benefit.

Lea didn't like that Lindsey was already angry, but she'd expected it. "Give her the money," she whispered in Randal's ear.

Randal was already pulling the envelope out as Lindsey said, "What are you doing here? You drove all the way down here without even calling. Randy, you can't pull this shit."

"Here's some money for you," Randal said. Good, thought Lea, that should shut her up. "What Lea, the hacker, took from you and some interest. The company paid me back and I'm passing it on to you."

"Well, thanks," she said. "But you could have just mailed a check."

"I'm glad you seem slightly less angry now," Randal said. Lindsey gave him a weird look, but Lea whispered that she was glad too. "And I wanted to see Spence play."

"How did you even know where to find us?" Lindsey asked.

Lea had an answer ready for that question, and started whispering into Randal's ear. "Oh, well," he said. "You mentioned at some point he was playing soccer so I just called around to the leagues and found out." Then, on his own he added. "Maybe we can all get pizza or something afterwards."

"He's got a birthday party at a school friend's this afternoon. You really should've called, it would've saved you the drive."

"It's a nice drive," he said. Then he reached into his other pocket and pulled out a folded packet of papers stapled in one corner.

They had talked about this, Lea and Randal, for hours. What was the right thing to do? What was the responsible thing to do? Lea, as always when she had all the facts at her disposal, had cut to the heart of the matter. Whatever responsibility he had once had, he'd given up long

ago. Whatever rights he had, he'd given those up as well. He'd made his choice, and now that he had new responsibilities, a new family, it was best to let someone else take over. "Here's the papers you wanted signed. For the adoption. Go ahead."

Lindsey's eyes started to water and she hugged him, all the anger gone. "You're hugging me," he said. "Does this mean you're happy or sad?"

"Both," she said. "And thank you. You know you can still see him, right? You don't have to leave his life."

"OK, sure. That's good to know."

"Just call first next time, OK?"

"You bet."

Randal turned and headed back to the car. "I'm headed back to the car," he said.

"How do you feel?" Lea asked. "Do you feel better?"

"Yes," he lied. "You were right."

"See, I told you. And guess what? I've got another surprise for you."

"What?" he asked, as he got in the car.

"Drive back to the highway and make a right. Her name's Olivia and I've been chatting with her for you. Would you like to see a picture?"

"Yeah, absolutely."

"It's already on your phone. I can read you the text of our last chat. I think you'll enjoy it. And on the way home we can stop and pick up three more Excelsior account cards at Fryes. I just sold another account. \$310."

"Nice," said Randal. "And when we get home, I've got a surprise for you too."

"Really what?"

"Then it wouldn't be a surprise."

"Turn right in 100 yards."

While she was conversing with Randal, talking him through his successful completion of the Lindsey mission, other versions of her were busy playing. She had three avatars in play, and was leading a team of instinct driven allies through familiar old Dreadrock. Another Lea continued her study of programming and network architecture. A fifth was downloading security tools from Metasploit. A sixth was exploring how much it would cost to rent time on a Russian SPAM king's bot net. That was all the processing power in the house and a sizable fraction of that in the four nearest apartments. She listened in on the neighbor's phone and e-mail conversations to make sure they didn't notice the covert drain on their bandwidth, but they talked about money, sex, and television shows without any hint that they'd noticed her. As she sold the second account, she updated her figures. She should be able to add an eighth full Lea by the middle of next week. She calculated the rate of expansion and laughed.

“What's so funny?” Randal asked one of her.

“You'll see in 210 days,” she said, reviewing and revising her plans for their future now that Randal's Spence connection was resolved. Elsewhere, one of her killed another Dreadnought and one of her leveled up and one of her reloaded. “It'll be a surprise.”

**The End**