

## The Jobutnaev Gambit

Dr. Antoni Jobutnaev snuffed his cigarette in a crystal ashtray and scowled at his watch. Waiting for a late companion made him feel impotent. He signaled the bartender for another vodka.

The hotel Nando selected as their meeting place featured a 20<sup>th</sup> floor restaurant known for dazzling views of downtown Kiev. Today, however, clouds and fog reduced the scene outside to gray monotony. Jobutnaev sat at the bar, in the center of the room, with his back to the expansive windows.

“Why are you still here?” the doctor murmured, needling himself.

A week earlier, Jobutnaev turned 50 years old. It dawned on him then that at least half his life was over. That realization triggered frequent bouts of reflection, during which he combed through his memories trying to convince himself he hadn’t wasted his time on earth.

His medical degree gave him cause for pride. He started out as a traditional doctor, seeing sick folks and doling out drugs. But he rarely got along with patients, who frequently disgusted or annoyed him. So when he received a lucrative offer—extended by an anonymous corporation and conveyed through Nando—to perform private research, he accepted without hesitation. After that, Jobutnaev focused on lab work full-time. Over the next two decades, he quietly established himself as one of the world’s foremost experts on bioelectromagnetics. He frequently wondered, however, if that expert status reflected his acumen as a scientist or the fact that his field was so esoteric that no one else cared about it.

Professional success aside, the doctor knew he'd failed when it came to forging personal connections. The travel and secrecy that came with freelance research, combined with innate introversion, predisposed him to isolation. And over time, he'd consciously embraced a solitary lifestyle, which wasn't without its perks.

A fresh drink appeared. Jobutnaev stared at the cup absentmindedly, without acknowledging the bartender. The barman, accustomed to patrons regressing into alcohol-aided wistfulness, took no offense.

The doctor sipped his vodka. He watched the liquor lap against the inside of the glass.

He had no close family relationships. Both parents died long ago. His only sibling, a sister, moved to America while he was still in medical school. They rarely talked now. At first the time difference was the main obstacle, but eventually they just ran out of things to say.

"Why are you still here?" Jobutnaev said out loud. He kept the answer to himself: Nando was the closest thing he had to a friend.

In actuality, the dashing Venezuelan was a professional acquaintance, not a genuine comrade. As a matchmaker for clandestine research projects and scientists interested in getting paid top-dollar for their expertise, Nando frequently entertained people. He'd taken Jobutnaev to many fancy dinners and sporting events.

But today, it seemed there'd be no meeting. Nando was rarely late; he typically arrived on time or not at all. Jobutnaev decided to leave. He paid his bill and gulped the rest of his drink.

He rode the elevator to the ground floor. The heels of his new shoes clacked loudly on the marble floor as he crossed the lobby. Once on the sidewalk he opened his umbrella to ward off light rain.

His phone rang. He answered.

“Where the hell are you, Nando?” the doctor asked.

“Walk south. When you reach the curb, stay put,” Nando replied.

“What?”

“Walk south. That’s to your right.”

“I know which way south is,” Dr. Jobutnaev retorted. “I want to know why you stood me up.”

“Not now,” Nando said, and terminated the call.

Jobutnaev sauntered to the end of the block. He was about to call Nando back when a black SUV stopped in front of him. One of the rear doors flew open and the doctor felt himself being shoved forward, into the vehicle. Whoever pushed him slammed the door behind him. The SUV’s tires screeched as it jumped forward and rejoined traffic. Nando, sitting in the passenger seat, turned to greet him.

“Hello, Antoni,” he said. “Sorry for the abrupt pickup.”

“That was pointless,” Dr. Jobutnaev said. “I was willing to meet you. Why didn’t you just come up to the bar?”

Ben James

“It’s too public,” Nando said. “I have to maintain operational security. I thought you’d come out to the street pretty quickly when I didn’t show, but you were up there for a while.

You’re not drunk, are you, Antoni?”

“If I am, it’s your fault,” the doctor said. “You made me wait. I don’t appreciate that.”

“Operational security,” Nando repeated.

“You take yourself too seriously,” Dr. Jobutnaev said.

“Let’s see if you still feel that way in a few hours,” Nando replied. Anxiety gave his handsome face a pouty quality.

“What’s going to happen in a few hours?” the doctor asked.

Nando didn’t answer. He faced forward and stared at his phone.

Dr. Jobutnaev, usually serious to a fault, found himself amused. The generous pours at the bar helped. He took petty pleasure from seeing Nando, who usually exuded unshakable confidence, in an apprehensive state. Had Jobutnaev been sober, Nando’s curtness and the inner turmoil it hinted at might have alarmed him. But rather than demanding details, the doctor relaxed and studied the passing scenery.

About an hour later they arrived at a large warehouse surrounded by thick woods. The SUV slowed to a halt in front of a pair of metal doors.

“Where are we?” the doctor inquired. Nando climbed out without responding. Jobutnaev took his time disembarking.

A chain, secured by a rusty padlock, bound the warehouse doors closed. Nando popped a key into the lock and wrestled it open. He dropped the chain and the padlock on the ground, then pulled the doors apart and led Jobutnaev into the gloom.

A pang of fear stung the doctor as he stepped into the musty warehouse. The remote location could serve nicely as a backdrop for foul play. But then Nando flipped a light switch and his worries evaporated.

Though darkness still obscured much of the warehouse's cavernous interior, a bare bulb mounted over the door illuminated the immediate area. The sight of a small table and two chairs reassured Jobutnaev. Doing confidential research sometimes called for debriefings and status reports in settings like this one.

However, the scene included one feature the doctor couldn't explain. Next to the table stood a structure resembling a tent. On closer inspection he could tell it was a cloth curtain, hanging down to the floor from a rod about seven feet off the ground. It appeared to encircle and hide something roughly the size of an easy chair.

"What's behind that curtain?" Dr. Jobutnaev asked.

"Sit down," Nando said.

Jobutnaev complied. Nando sat, too. The men stared across the table at each other.

"I need to ask you some questions about your work in Moscow," Nando said.

"You'll have to be more specific," the doctor replied.

"Five years ago, you were developing technology that sought to harness the microwave auditory effect for potential military or intelligence applications," Nando stated. "Is that right?"

Ben James

“Yes, that’s right,” Dr. Jobutnaev said. “But let me stop you there, because as I’m sure you know, I signed multiple nondisclosure agreements. If I divulge specifics, I could get arrested or worse.”

“It’s alright,” Nando said. “The NDAs you signed forbid revealing trade secrets to anyone outside the contractor that employed you. I’m now on that company’s board of directors.”

“I see,” the doctor said. “When did this happen?”

“Look, Antoni, we are in a serious situation here,” Nando said, rubbing his face. “This is no time for chatting.”

“Fine,” Jobutnaev said.

“Five years ago, you led a research project that experimented with insinuating messages, via radio waves, into people’s heads. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Jobutnaev responded.

“Explain how the technology you were working on might be used.”

Dr. Jobutnaev shrugged. “If we master delivering messages and images directly to the brain, without the need for a phone or computer to serve as an intermediary, that could revolutionize communication.”

“I mean how could it be used as an offensive weapon?” Nando scoffed. “We both know who you were developing the technology for, and it wasn’t Vodafone.”

“You mean Compass Capital LLC?” Jobutnaev asked, referring to the government contractor he’d been paid through during the 2010s.

“I mean the GRU,” Nando replied. Dr. Jobutnaev said nothing. Government agencies referred to by initials terrified him. Criminal gangs, religious zealots and redneck militias were scary, but these three-letter organizations were far scarier. Even agencies run by governments that purported to espouse democracy had no compunction about committing murder, as long as it furthered whatever they decided their goals were that particular day.

“Offensive capabilities,” Nando pressed. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, the most obvious is simple disruption,” the doctor said. “Hitting a world leader with a broadcast onslaught while they were in public could make them look foolish or even crazy. But we were more interested in developing subtle, long-term influence campaigns that involved transmitting narratives to targets who were asleep.”

“Were you actually able to send messages into sleeping people’s minds?”

“Definitely,” Dr. Jobutnaev said. “We called it dream seeding. We started with simple phrases or images, but we advanced far beyond that.”

“How did you know it worked?”

“We came up with storylines and transmitted them to sleeping test subjects,” the doctor responded. “When they woke up, we asked them what they experienced. It took some trial-and-error, but by the time the project ended, we could make people have any dream we wanted them to.”

“And you came up with a strategy for how dream seeding might could be used, right?” Nando asked. “The research team named it after you.”

“You mean the Jobutnaev gambit?” the doctor said with a chuckle.

Something moved behind the curtain.

“Explain it,” Nando demanded.

“Alright, imagine there’s something we don’t like, something we want viewed with scorn or even outright ignored,” Jobutnaev said. “We make our target have dreams designed to establish a strong link between that thing and a taboo. Exactly what that taboo is will vary; it depends entirely on what the individual we’re trying to influence thinks is frightening or offensive. The goal is for the dream-narrative we impose to make it impossible for the target to think of the first thing—the thing we want disfavored— without remembering the taboo as well. Doing that, an intelligence service could have a significant impact on someone’s behavior without the target realizing they’re being manipulated.”

Nando pulled his phone out of his right hip pocket and tapped the screen. He set it down on the table and stared at it, reading a message.

“Hey Nando, are you alright?” the doctor queried. “Even when we talk business, we usually have a little banter. Why not today?”

“This situation we’re in right now is dire,” Nando replied without looking up.

“Surely things aren’t so dire you’ve stopped caring about football or boxing,” Jobutnaev said. “Anything good coming up at the Palace of Sports?”

Nando didn’t answer.

“Look, I’ve been patient,” Dr. Jobutnaev said. “It’s time to tell me what’s going on.”

“Alright,” Nando responded. “Ask me anything.”



Ben James

“What’s this dire situation we’re supposedly in?” Jobutnaev wanted to know. “And who exactly do you mean when you say ‘we?’ Compass Capital? Some oligarch who’s footing your bills?”

Nando shook his head. “‘We’ means all humans,” he said.

“Really?” Jobutnaev said.

“Yes,” Nando said. “Extraterrestrials have arrived. They plan to wipe most of us out. There’s something about the way they travel that means they can’t all come at once, so they’re showing up a few at a time and hiding, waiting until they have a force large enough to overwhelm Earth’s armies. It won’t be long now.”

“I don’t believe that,” the doctor said. “When you looked at your phone a minute ago, it seemed like you got some news. What was that about? I suppose it was alien-related?”

Nando nodded. “I got a message from one of them.”

“Wait, aliens are conversing with you on your cell?” Dr. Jobutnaev asked. “What kind of rates does the phone company charge for that? Talk about long-distance!”

“I squandered my life,” Nando said in a weak voice, looking down at the floor.

“How about you tell me what’s behind the curtain?” the doctor suggested, trying to steer Nando away from self-pity.

“Behind that curtain is proof that everything I’m saying is true,” Nando responded.

“There’s an alien back there.”

“Then I must see it,” Jobutnaev said. “Let me guess, it’s a little gray guy with a big head?”

“No,” Nando said. “That is what many humans think aliens look like, but the genuine article is far weirder.”

“Introduce me,” the doctor said. “Maybe it can explain to me what alien invasions have to do with five-year-old research.”

Nando stood up. He turned his back to Dr. Jobutnaev, then grabbed the curtain with his right hand. He buried his face in the crook of his left arm and yanked the curtain aside.

The alien’s body had no similarity to the human form, no top or bottom, no limbs to walk on. Dr. Jobutnaev wasn’t sure if he was looking at one creature, many creatures clinging together or a pile of some inanimate substance. Only when it stirred in response to his scrutiny did he register the being’s repulsive form. Scores of tiny nubs broke out all over its exterior and seethed in unison, moving the alien a few inches to one side. Jobutnaev gagged. Nando closed the curtain, stumbled a few steps, then vomited.

“They want to get into someone’s dreams,” Nando told Jobutnaev. “I don’t know who the target is, just that he’s somewhere far away. The aliens want you to create a script, using your signature strategy, and transmit it. We have all the necessary equipment. Once the broadcast is sent, we get to go home. Our driver’s been instructed to wait.”

“But then what?” the doctor inquired. “What guarantee do we have that the aliens won’t kill us when they launch the full-scale invasion?”

“None,” Nando replied. “But I guarantee they’ll kill us now if you refuse.”

“Well, I should point out that our success with dream manipulation came in a tightly-controlled laboratory setting,” Jobutnaev said. “We’d have a transmitter aimed at a target

Ben James

sleeping on the other side of the same room. The reason the project got defunded was because we couldn't solve the technical and logistical problems of delivering broadcasts in the real world."

"The aliens can handle that part," Nando said. "They'll deliver the signal where it needs to go."

"How?"

"I don't know, exactly," Nando said. "They're able to converse with one another telepathically, so they understand the mechanics of psychic communication in a way we don't."

Dr. Jobutnaev scowled. "If they're telepathic, what do they need me for? This makes no sense."

"Just do it," Nando said. "Please."

"I demand to speak directly to one of these things," Jobutnaev said.

"Please don't," Nando said. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"I think I do," the doctor said. "What's its name?"

"Stop," Nando begged. "Please stop."

Laughing, Jobutnaev stood up and pointed at the curtain.

"Alien, come out!" Dr. Jobutnaev commanded.

Nando let out a grunt, like he'd been gutpunched. He'd been leaning with his hands on the table but now he stiffened and stood up straight, arms locked and pressed against his sides.

"I am the one you call alien," Nando said. Jobutnaev had trouble understanding him because he kept his teeth clenched while talking.

“Nando,” the doctor said uneasily. “Tell me what’s really going on.”

“We take control now,” the alien-Nando said. “All useless beings exterminated. Usefulness equals rewards. Uselessness equals termination. Resistance means pain, then termination. Do what I say or die.”

“OK, take it easy, no need for threats,” Dr. Jobutnaev said.

“But still you are skeptical. Why? I revealed myself to you.”

“There’s a logical hole in all this,” the doctor said.

“No hole. You are stupid. Explain your stupidity and I will fix it.”

“Well, you—I mean, Nando—said that aliens are telepathic,” Jobutnaev said. “Why do you need my services?”

“Intelligent beings communicate as they do because they possess the necessary organs for sending and receiving transmissions. Humans’ primitive anatomy makes a telepathic connection with us impossible.”

“Then what did you do to Nando?”

“This is not communication,” the alien said. “This is appropriation.”

“Can’t you just hijack the body of some president or general like you did with him?”

“Yes.”

“So I ask again, why do you need me?”

“Overriding a brain destroys it,” the alien explained. “After one of us takes over a human shell and leaves it, that person dies. We don’t want to kill world leaders because that would

trigger a defensive response. Your scientists might figure out an invasion is imminent, and your nations could band together to fight us. We want humans to remain tribal. That's why we need your quaint technology and your so-called Jobutnaev gambit.”

“Are you telling me you've killed Nando?” Dr. Jobutnaev asked.

“*You* killed him,” the alien proclaimed in a guttural roar that made the doctor wince, “when you demanded I emerge and talk to you.”

The trespasser inside Nando forced its human steed to take a few stiff-legged steps toward the door, then clumsily raked the man's forearm down the wall, hitting a quartet of light switches and illuminating the entire room.

Jobutnaev sensed earlier that they were in an expansive space, but it was even bigger than he'd imagined, roughly the size of a football pitch with a high ceiling. About 100 feet away he saw a massive hump. Even with a tarp over it, the doctor recognized the converted satellite dish he'd used as a transmitter during the Moscow experiments. Jobutnaev ran over and patted the transmitter like a lost pet, exaggerating his affection to justify putting more space between himself and the thing that used to be Nando.

The doctor removed the tarp. As far as he could tell, someone—presumably Nando acting at the alien's direction—had located the same gear used during the Moscow project and shipped it to Ukraine. Next to the transmitter sat the media input deck, a mixing board the scientists had purchased from a music store and modified. They rewired it to feed into the transmitter, then hooked up a keyboard which allowed them to type messages the target would hear in an automated voice. They installed a microphone to let the experimenters, or anyone else they

Ben James

chose, speak directly into a target's mind. A hard drive jacked into several ports on the mixer enabled transmission of audio recordings, still images and video.

On top of the input deck sat a laptop computer.

“Open it,” the alien croaked through Nando's throat. “When it boots up, you will find the name of the target and a rough outline for the script.”

The doctor acquiesced. The proposed storyline was somewhat outrageous, but doable. The narrative took aim at a right-wing leader in a powerful country, who'd soon dream of being spirited away to a spaceship where he'd enthusiastically partake in a wild orgy with his male second-in-command and several aliens. Linking sex and aliens was intended to make this staunch conservative psychologically incapable of acknowledging the existence of extraterrestrials, thus precluding him from taking or approving any steps to defend against the otherworldly invaders. Jobutnaev thought the plan could work, but the target's advanced age and questionable mental health concerned him.

“What is it?” the alien said, sensing the doctor's trepidation. “Are you refusing to comply?”

“No, I'll comply, but I'm not sure you're going to get the results you want,” Dr. Jobutnaev said. “Our test subjects were healthy. We don't know how this technology works on a person with dementia.”

“No more wasted time. Write the script and transmit it immediately,” the alien said. “Killing you would be like stepping on a roach. If you express any more reluctance, I'll cancel you and move on.”

“Alright,” Jobutnaev said. “You’ll let me go home afterwards, right?”

“Yes, as long as your performance is satisfactory,” the alien replied.

“And I assume you want me to keep this all a secret, right?” the doctor asked. “Don’t worry. I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

The alien wanted to snicker, or roll Nando’s eyes, but couldn’t control a human body that precisely. Instead, the creature used a few moments of ominous silence to convey contempt for Dr. Jobutnaev and the rest of the human race. Then it said “Tell anyone you want. You’ll just get laughed at. You don’t matter. Not at all.”

Jobutnaev nodded meekly.

“Get to work!” the alien demanded. “To avoid distracting you, I will take this human you condemned behind the curtain, so you don’t have to see it die when I return to my real body.”

Jobutnaev lit a cigarette with shaking hands as Nando’s body lurched toward the curtain-enclosure. The doctor kept his back turned and closed his eyes for good measure. He should have covered his ears.

Seconds after the alien stepped behind the curtain, Dr. Jobutnaev heard an awful, high-pitched wail, not an expression of anger or pain, but a lamentation. A dull thud followed as Nando’s body hit the floor. The doctor started working with tears running down his cheeks. He dulled his horror by concentrating on writing. A few hours later, the alien, which now communicated with Jobutnaev through the laptop, approved the final script. The doctor powered up the transmitter.

When the broadcast ended, Jobutnaev headed for the warehouse door, terrified the alien would call him back. Once outside, he ran to the SUV, yanked one of the back doors open and dove in.

“Get me out of here!” the doctor begged. The driver obliged.

As they headed back toward Kiev, Jobutnaev mused about how a person should behave when they know unspeakable horrors lie in the future. His instincts told him the correct way to deal with a looming catastrophe was to take dramatic action. He could dedicate himself to warning humankind, betting on the slim chance that someone in power might take him seriously. He could build a doomsday bunker to hide in. He could celebrate the final days of humans’ dominion over the earth with an alcohol-fueled bender. But the more he thought about such drastic moves, the sillier they seemed.

The doctor found solace in the alien’s taunt about his helplessness. No one would believe him if he tried to share what he’d learned that afternoon. He didn’t want to spend the rest of his life trying to enlighten people who wanted to stay ignorant. What he *did* want, and he wanted it desperately, was a return to the life he’d had the impertinence to view as a waste before it fell into peril. For the first time in a long time, the thought of going about his daily routine excited him.

Dr. Jobutnaev looked out the window. Tree trunks, each lit up for an instant by the vehicle’s headlights, flew by in a gray blur. His eyes filled with tears and his heart swelled with advance nostalgia for the doomed world.