

THE BLUE SCREEN OF DEATH

excerpt

12 April

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The first thing I noticed when I woke up was that, for the first time in forty-eight hours, I no longer had a headache. I carefully opened my eyes. The room was dark and gloomy. The little daggers that had been stabbing my eyes over the same period were also gone. I got up and opened the curtains, and the light of the day came flooding in. I opened the window, letting in a blast of fresh air along with the biting cold of the morning and the noise of the city. I gulped it down like a fish on dry land.

The last two days and nights came back to me like a nightmare. The hallucinations (or was it reality?) I'd suffered the first day, which I'd decided to call the Blue Screen of Death and which I could still remember in all their terrible detail, hadn't happened again, but the pain came and went in giant, sluggish waves, attacks followed by intervals of comparative respite, and the painkillers I was taking regularly at eight-hour intervals played a large part in this. Once I got home, I closed all the curtains and switched off all the lights except the one by the front door. After that I spent most of the time in bed. At some stage I put on some music, thinking it might help take my mind off it, but it just ended up annoying me. I tried as hard as I could to force myself to eat something now and again. I only went outside once, and then only to the pharmacy to buy some medicine. I spoke to Lizi twice. The first time I phoned her and told her I thought I'd caught flu and I'd be back as soon as I felt better. My voice sounded so weak I think I

must have scared her. The second time she phoned me and asked me how I was. And that was it.

Never mind, though—what happened happened, and now I was feeling a lot better. To tell the truth, the word “better” didn’t really cover it. I felt strong and full of energy, and as hungry as a bear. My only problem was that I was all out of groceries.

Half an hour later I was out on the street. Every now and then the sun would peek out from behind the clouds and pierce my eyes, but I didn’t feel any pain. I definitely didn’t feel like driving and getting stuck in endless traffic jams, so I set off on foot. I had only gone a few hundred metres when I happened upon my favourite, cosy café, a place I had spent many happy hours.

The waitress looked somewhat surprised as she greeted me, probably because she had never seen me there so early. I ordered enough to feed a man who has just escaped from a concentration camp and then sat down to wait, pulling out my smartphone and diving into the whirlpool of social media.

“Funny that,” I thought as I sipped my coffee after a delicious breakfast. “All you wanted was a little timeout, just to get some distance, and it ended up nearly killing you.”

It had worked, though—being so sick had allowed me to get some emotional distance from the ups and downs of the last few days, and as I suspected I would, I felt much better for it. I could see everything more clearly, and it was obvious to me that what I needed now was to take a systematic approach.

I started thinking things through:

First of all, let's define the task at hand. Okay, so I've got a puzzle that needs to be solved—apparently they're calling it a “puzzle” in Georgian too—and I've got some fragments of a picture, and now what I need to do is piece those fragments together in order to get the whole picture.

Admittedly, it wasn't an exact analogy. For one thing, when you do a jigsaw puzzle, you usually know in advance what picture you're going to get, whereas in this case, the problem was that I didn't actually know what the picture was.

Never mind, though—that makes the task harder, but not impossible. As long as those fragments contain enough data, and as long as I assemble them with enough skill, I can still do it.

I've got three different types of information, or more precisely information from three different sources: the information Loria supplied; the information I found myself; and Jesse's answers to my questions. It doesn't add up to much, to be honest—just about enough to fill in the outline of the picture, and maybe not even that. There will still be chances to get hold of more data, of course, but only after the outline has become clear and I know which direction to look in.

And that brings us to the main problem: the process is already difficult enough as it is, and if I want to have even the slightest chance of success, I've got to assume that the information I have available to me is of good quality. Incomplete, perhaps (and at this stage, I can't rule out the possibility that it might have been wrongly interpreted), but factually correct. If not, there'll be so many unknowns in the equation that the chances of solving it, even theoretically, will be close to zero.

So what should I do now? Let's suppose all the information is correct. As for the info the choir master came up with and the stuff I found myself, that would seem to be a simple enough assumption to make. But what about Jesse? Could he be deliberately feeding me disinformation? Would he really do that? Did he have any choice in the matter?

When Jesse and I talked, we made two deals, or to put it more precisely one deal and one offer of a deal. I was the initiator of the first, the essence of which was that I would tell him everything I knew and in return he would answer my questions honestly.

Did he break our agreement? Or did I break it before he'd even had a chance to?

I went back over the details of our conversation in my mind and concluded that no, I hadn't broken the agreement. I didn't tell him everything, of course. I didn't let him know that his phone had been hacked, for example. I'm not sure why I didn't tell him, to be honest. I suppose because I find such methods unethical and it's easier just to pretend they don't exist. I guess that was a bit childish of me. Never mind, though—it's not that important; it doesn't change the basic facts of the matter. What's more important is that I didn't lie. I didn't deliberately feed him disinformation.

Does that automatically mean Jesse acted the same way, though? Of course it doesn't. And yet I don't have any proof that he told the truth either...

Okay, so what I'm going to do now is list all my assumptions and consider them one by one:

1. Jesse Kakabadze is truly a man of phenomenal talents, and he displays these talents over a wide range of endeavours.

This seems to me to be the easiest assumption to make, not least because it is based on information acquired from multiple sources.

2. Is it possible that he might have ambitions to change the world? To somehow reorganise or restructure it?

Of course it's possible, but Jesse is far from the only one with such ambitions. Even my downstairs neighbour Lamzira has them.

3. What lengths would a man of his intelligence go to to achieve his ambitions?

The methods he could use are well known to everyone and as old as the universe. We usually refer to them as "politics". And yet Jesse assured me that a career in politics—in its classical sense—was of no interest to him. Fair enough on that score: a political career can be long, and you have to make so many compromises along the way that you often end up forgetting why you went into it in the first place. But that doesn't mean he hasn't made use of some of the mechanisms politicians typically employ.

Basically, what you need to do is either find some like-minded people and set up some kind of organisational structure, or join an existing one. Then you establish communications networks with your associates (or comrades-in-arms, as the case may be). Then you set your goals. Then, in order to achieve your goals, you need to locate resources, and if you can't locate them you need to create them. And that's just the beginning. If your ambitions are too big to be contained within the borders of a single

nation state, the mechanisms you use to realise them need to be on a corresponding scale—global, even.

4. Does such an organisation exist?

And if it does, must we keep the organisation and its goals and objectives secret? I didn't have a clear answer for this one. It mostly depends on the goals and objectives.

Okay, let's say we must. There are probably thousands of these types of organisations throughout the world, and it's fair to assume that the vast majority of them are terrorist groups, fundamentalist religious groups, and two-a-penny crime syndicates. Does that mean we're not allowed to use the same mechanisms they use? Even for a worthy cause?

I was lacking expertise in this particular field, and yet on an intuitive level I knew that those terrorist and fundamentalist religious organisations were also motivated by goals they considered "great" and "worthy". In general throughout history, all of the most evil acts have been carried out on the pretext of worthy causes. I knew nothing about the objectives of this organisation (if it did indeed exist) or the methods it was using to achieve them, nothing except Jesse's vague pronouncements, and they could just as easily have been the product of his fantasies.

...So what I need to find are the connections, the channels of communication. Without them it's useless. And yet they can't be all that easy to hide. Which means I must be missing something. But even if I'm not and there aren't actually any channels, that

would still be a good result because then I could confirm that the village teacher is just an eccentric type, seized by a mania for self-aggrandisement and living in his own warped imagination, and the foreign special services' interest in him is just a silly misunderstanding, some kind of weird coincidence that has led to a significant deterioration of Jesse's mental health.

I wasn't entirely convinced by this final assumption—I was pretty sure I wasn't dealing with a simple individual. For the time being, though, I left it up for debate.

There were more questions, but when I got back home, I decided I would stop coming up with questions for a while and switch from theory to practice. I inserted the memory card Sergo had found for me into my computer and sat down to re-examine material I had already looked at so many times it was practically burned into my memory.

This time I focused mainly on the websites Jesse had accessed from his phone. There was an ocean of material, logs loaded with technical details, and the mere sight of it made my head spin. Strangely enough, though, this time around, the mass of data started making sense to me much more quickly. It seemed I'd finally got a handle on it.

Before long I came across something interesting that I hadn't seen before—something that surprised me. I noticed that on one day in particular, Jesse hadn't been able to connect to the VPN server he always used. For some reason it had stopped responding for a while. I was struck by a sudden thought and decided to delve deeper into that day's online activity. Jesse had several browsers installed on his mobile phone, but only one of them—Firefox—was connected to the outside world through a VPN. The logs showed that he had tried to access the server again five minutes later and once again two minutes after that, but the server hadn't responded either time. He'd then installed

the same VPN on Opera and tried one more time, but the server hadn't responded to Opera either. Meanwhile, he'd been able to use Google Chrome normally, albeit not through a VPN. He also had other apps on his phone that used an internet connection in standard mode. I decided to take a look at that day's Google Chrome activity, which was something I hadn't paid any attention to before as he only ever used Chrome to access trivial websites.

And Eureka! I seemed to have found what I was looking for.

A URL. Not just the domain name, but the full URL. A long magic spell—abracadabra with slashes. He must have typed it all out by hand.

Everything was clear. He was trying to access a specific resource, and he must have been in a hurry because otherwise he wouldn't have made such a meal of it. At some point he had obviously panicked, logged out of the VPN and typed the address of the site he was trying to access directly into Google Chrome. I copied the address, pasted it into the browser on my computer and entered the site. A plain white background appeared on the screen, completely blank except for two boxes: "User Name" and "Password".

My intuition had been correct—I'd found what I was looking for. It was the place where they communicated with each other, presumably the organisation's website, the internal corporate network or something like that. The only problem was I didn't have the most important thing—the data I needed to enter the site.

I stood up, put my coat back on and went outside. As I stepped out of the entrance hall I noticed it was raining, and pretty cold too. I looked at my watch—it was nearly six. I ran across the street and ducked into a supermarket on the other side. My fridge was

empty and I still had lots of work to do, so I decided to stock up on strategic supplies: coffee, soda, beer, some processed foods that only needed to be warmed up in the microwave, a bunch of bananas... I hardly even glanced at the groceries as I threw them in my basket. In five minutes I had completed a full circuit of the supermarket and was standing at the cash register.

“Oh wow, Lasha, is that you? How are you?” I heard a voice from behind me.

I would have recognised that affected drawl anywhere—it was my old friend Niako. We’d had a mild flirtation with each other once upon a time, which at one point had looked—from her side, at least—like it might develop into a full-blown romance. I mentally prepared myself, pasted a smile on my face, and turned around.

I was right, it was Niako. She looked like she’d just stepped out of the nineties—as thin as a rake and suntanned, probably from a sunbed. We said hello, I think I might have paid her a half-hearted compliment, we exchanged a few standard phrases, and then we said goodbye. Normally it was impossible to get away from her so easily. As I was thinking about our meeting on the way home, I couldn’t help but compare her with Lizi. There was a yawning chasm between them: Niako was hysterical, false, obsessed with herself; Lizi was relaxed, self-confident, tactful... I wondered what on earth had made me get involved with her in the first place.

“Mummy, what does Zakara want?”

“He’s hungry, my child. He wants some cabbage.”¹

¹ 1] In the cartoon, Zakara the jay is wooing a female jay. A bunny sees that and not understanding what is going on, asks his mother and the mama rabbit glosses over the truth.

I smiled as I remembered the famous lines from “The Jay’s Wedding”, an old cartoon from my parents’ time. It occurred to me that Niako had been looking at me a bit strangely, as if she was scared or shocked, and as soon as I got home, I ran into the bathroom and examined myself in the mirror.

It was easy to see why she reacted the way she did: I was a mess. I hadn’t shaved in days, my hair was sticking up all over the place, and my eyes were shining wildly. I looked like a madman, and I wasn’t sure whether it was due to the illness I’d just recovered from or my emotional state.

I needed to rest, and so I decided, categorically and finally, that for a short while at least, Jesse and his secrets could go fuck themselves.

Instead I got up and made myself an enormous mug of coffee and a pile of sandwiches. Then I sat back down at my computer and got to work.

I was making slow but steady progress. I worked out that the URL was owned by an organisation called NWSV. The abbreviation meant nothing to me and I couldn’t find anything that seemed to fit. Later it was discovered that NWSV was some kind of international non-governmental organisation, or more precisely a group of organisations, and before long a list of the legal entities and individuals involved with it on one level or another started coming to light.

I was slowly piecing together the scraps of material: electoral rolls from various countries; news articles and opinion pieces published in many different languages; social media; rumours floating around on the Darknet; posts gathered from forums dedicated to all different kinds of topics. I waded onwards through this giant, murky swamp, sometimes stumbling and other times striding purposefully. I compared

different sources with each other and grouped them like-for-like. My intuition didn't let me down, and I was able to locate all the resources and materials I needed without too much trouble. The hours flew by like seconds. I gradually worked my way through the sandwiches and all the crap I'd bought at the supermarket, washed down with gallons of coffee and several beers. The strangest thing was that, despite the superhuman effort I was expending, my brain was working at full capacity and with unbelievable precision, absorbing long written texts not word by word or even sentence by sentence, but page by page. Time and again I told myself I should stop, take a break, recharge my batteries, but I was like a man possessed, more inanimate machine than human being.

It was only when my eyes, red and dry from the glow of the screen, started to shut down on me that I knew I couldn't go any further. I lay down on my bed and instantly passed out.

Translated by Philip Price