

# Feudal

Parallel Planes, #3

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# Chapter 1

## Tournament of Candidates

### Three Hundred Forty-One Days Before the GRC's Investigation into the Air Division's System Breach

Heads were rolling. It was the third round of layoffs this fiscal year, and there was still a quarter to go. Private equity investors had committed hundreds of millions of dollars to the company's future and were looking forward to a successful public offering, yet the numbers weren't quite there. But that didn't stop the continual round of hiring.

Along with securing land to be exchanged for labor and services, acquiring workers had been a central tool for achieving and holding on to power, position, and territory for centuries. From vassals to artisans to tradespersons, laborers had been the foundation of progress while an assortment of the charismatic and ruthless ruled at or near the apex. Through the Middle Ages, and even after feudalism gave way to capitalism, the social and economic hierarchy continued to be an unbreakable system laden with an uneven mix of inequity and reward.

Controlled by a few anointed to dictate the customs and manage the institutions that the many depended on for structure and survival, a new wave of feudalism emerged within the fabric of the modern economy. Wielding power like medieval axes indiscriminately carving out the fate and form of everything under their purview, those at the top of the economic food chain vied for dominance over systems and resources, and this was how agencies and corporations engaged in the ongoing transformation required for the advancements necessary to keep society evolving. As well as managing costs, cycling through personnel was how the most competitive organizations and their leadership claimed victory.

This was why Colin Smith was excited about the latest resume to come across his desk. There was only one open position for the thousands of

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resumes that have been submitted. The resume in front of him stood out in particular—the applicant had an interesting combination of skills and qualifications. Including an MBA from a top-ten business school and a liberal arts degree in art history, this candidate had the well-rounded background that Colin was seeking. However, his manager, Heather, had her eye on another candidate with a very impressive list of corporations and titles filling the pages of his CV. Heather Martin was Tech Chroma Global Systems Director of Special Programs, and Colin was the senior manager beneath her, so he had little doubt that Heather’s candidate would be chosen over his.

“I don't know, Colin. I really like this guy, Douglas Glass. He has six years leading large projects at the number-one theme park in the world. And I like the way he interviewed. He was quite charming and had tons of confidence to spare,” said Heather.

“Yeah, he seemed like a nice enough man—a bit high on himself, but I think he would be a good match with the team. But I still want to bring in one more person. This Gemma Matthews has a fascinating background, and I always find individuals with a mixture of liberal arts and science to be more creative thinkers than those with just straight business backgrounds. And she interviewed well. Everybody on the panel really liked her. I think it's worth you meeting her before you make a decision,” said Colin.

“All right. I'm good with that. Besides, I still don't love the way Tim shows up to meetings. Every video call, he looks like he'd rather be somewhere else. The VPs are looking for more names to put on the chopping block to make next quarter's numbers, and I wouldn't mind getting rid of Tim and maybe edging out Beth at some point. If I can make those moves, and if I like your candidate, Gemma, we might be able to find a place for her. I'll see if I can squeeze in a little time during my breaks at the conference, and perhaps I'll schedule a lunch interview with her,” said Heather.

It was a quiet Monday morning when Gemma got the first call: the recruiter from South Blue Consulting, letting her know that she'd gotten the job. The salary wasn't what she'd been expecting and was actually quite low for her background and experience. It would be a full forty thousand less than she was making in her current position in management consulting, but no travel would be required, meaning she could finally put her road warrior

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status aside and sleep in her own bed. But no sooner had she hung up than her phone rang again. This time, it was a recruiter from Tech Chroma Global Systems extending an offer for a Principal Program Manager position. Again, the salary offer was disappointing and actually five thousand less than the previous offer. Now came the hard work of negotiating. While Gemma had no difficulty advocating for others, asking for more money for herself just felt downright impolite.

Her stomach twisted into knots as she dialed the first recruiter back. “Hi, Suzanne. This is Gemma Matthews. I just wanted to confirm that one hundred fifteen thousand was the top offer. I’ve received another offer that is competitive, and I want to have all the figures before I make my final decision.”

“Hi, Gemma. Thanks so much for the return call. I’ll have to discuss the starting salary with the hiring manager. May I check back in with you this afternoon?” asked Suzanne.

“That sounds great. Thank you so much. I’ll look forward to your call,” said Gemma nervously before hanging up. She quickly searched her recent call log for the Tech Chroma Global Systems recruiter’s number and dialed before she lost her nerve altogether.

“Hi, David. This is Gemma Matthews. Thank you again for the great news on the position. I’m just calling to follow up to see if one hundred and ten thousand dollars is the top offer. There’s another opportunity that I’m considering, and I want to have all the numbers on hand as I compare the total compensation and benefits for both positions.”

“Hello, Gemma. I’m not certain, but I believe this may be in the highest range for this position. You do remember that we have a very competitive bonus structure?” asked David.

“Yes. However, bonuses are never really guaranteed income. I’m making my decision on base pay. I’m sure you understand.”

“I do. I’ll follow up with the hiring manager and get back to you as soon as I can,” said David, putting a checkmark next to the one-hundred-thirty-thousand-dollar offer he had noted next to the much lower starting offer beside Gemma’s name.

“That sounds great. I truly appreciate it,” said Gemma as she hurried to disconnect the call. Her hands were shaking. She wasn’t sure if her uneasiness

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stemmed from the fact that she was about to accept one of two starting salaries—both well below her current income—or from the reality that, after submitting over a hundred resumes in the last four months, only two companies had extended invitations to interview. After hearing nothing from either company in weeks, both had followed up with job offers on the same day.

Gemma knew that her six-figure salary was well above the average U.S. income, but the knowledge that she was making significantly less than her classmates from business school left Gemma feeling like she'd failed in some way. While she was industrious and dedicated, she lacked the fierce competitiveness that would have made her effective in the corporate waters in which she was swimming. Based on her midyear performance review, she knew she would not be promoted. She'd failed to impress the right people in the right ways, and her preference for working with the kindest people over the smartest ones meant she hadn't sought the most visible projects or taken on the most high-profile opportunities. This also meant that in her company's up-or-out culture, she'd be looking for a new job within the next two months, anyway.

The sound of the key turning in the latch brought a smile to her face. Her roommate was home, and now she'd have an opportunity to run her new employment options past Becca. She and Becca Bauer had graduated from NYU four years ago. After meeting in the media, technology, and entertainment club, Gemma and Becca had become good friends. Becca's specialization in finance and Gemma's specialization and strategy meant that their paths didn't cross often at school. But their shared love of the arts provided many opportunities for them to connect during their free time. It was on one of their many tours of the SoHo art scene that they met their close friend Austin Katz, an up-and-coming painter who had no use for business or the corporate world.

“Hey Gemma, we're back,” called Becca as she and Austin lugged armfuls of groceries over the threshold into her and Gemma's small but beautiful Battery Park City apartment.

“Hey Gem, would you believe we got the last tofurky roast? I'm glad we didn't wait until Thanksgiving Eve to do the shopping,” said Austin.

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“Hey, Becca. Hey, Austin. That was fast.” Gemma reached for two of the paper sacks tucked under Becca’s arm. “We’ll probably need some extra potatoes and some other kind of veggie roast because I doubt one tofurky is going to be enough for all of us,” said Gemma.

“Just as long as you don’t make that homemade roast thing that you made last year,” said Becca. “It was like sawdust with sauce.”

“I liked it. It tasted wholesome,” said Austin as he placed five bags stuffed with fresh bread and produce onto the kitchen counter.

“Like tree bark tastes wholesome,” said Becca with a smile. “But I can’t talk. I’m the one who made the gelatinous macaroni and cheese that’s stuck to the plates like industrial glue.”

Gemma laughed. “You put so much margarine, salt, and garlic in it that it was still one of the most popular dishes on the table.”

“Yeah, I left last Thanksgiving with diabetes and high blood pressure,” said Austin. “And what I was most thankful for was not having a coronary before I got back to Brooklyn.”

Gemma smiled broadly. “So, what’s the final count for Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Six,” Becca replied. “Is something up? You looked like you were about to burst when we came in.”

“Oh. I can’t believe I forgot that fast. I think that I’m trying not to think about it. Do you remember those two interviews I had in September? Well, the recruiters from both companies called back with offers,” said Gemma.

“That’s wonderful, Gem. Congratulations,” said Becca.

“Yeah, Gemma, that’s fantastic. I hope you’re finally getting out of the rat race and maybe doing some nonprofit work or something worthwhile. No offense, Becca. I know you enjoy making rich corporations richer.”

“No offense taken. Look at where we live and then look at where you live. Helping make companies run more efficiently pays the rent, whether or not I enjoy it. But yes, I do actually enjoy it quite a bit,” said Becca with a smile.

“Well, that’s the thing. The salaries that both companies are offering aren’t so great. But I figure the pay cut is worth it if I can work somewhere a little more mellow—maybe get some work-life balance and not have to travel four days a week,” said Gemma.

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Becca raised an eyebrow as she stacked boxes of organic oatmeal and cornflakes into the pantry. “Whatever are you going to do without all the frequent flyer miles?”

“If I never get into another one of those germ-infested cattle cars they call airplanes again, it’ll be too soon,” said Gemma.

“Oh please. You get the first-class upgrade ninety percent of the time anyway,” said Becca.

“The air in first class isn’t any fresher,” said Gemma.

“What you struggle with is the guilt of facing the less fortunate masses that have to pass you on the way to coach,” Austin said mockingly.

“You know that’s not what I’m saying. First, coach shouldn’t be so crappy. Regardless, first class, business class, or coach—you think those seats or trays have been cleaned since the eighties? It’s gross for everybody,” said Gemma as she unpacked organic fruit juice and cases of sparkling water and placed them into the refrigerator.

“Gemma, I know you’re changing the subject. You started by telling us about the salary, so how bad is it? And regardless of how bad it is, you can always negotiate for more or stay where you are,” said Becca.

“The highest offer is about forty thousand less and—”

“Forty thousand less? You can’t accept that. No way. Where was the offer compared to the range that was posted?” asked Becca.

“Right in the middle,” said Gemma.

“Just tell them you want the top end of the range, or like Becca said, just pass,” said Austin. “You can’t sell your soul for pennies on the dollar. With your background and experience, you better make sure you’re earning just as much as everyone else—and definitely more than I do. It’s been months since I’ve sold a painting. And giving art lessons barely pays the bills. I’d be a starving artist if I didn’t have well-off friends,” said Austin with a smile.

“And wealthy parents,” said Becca as she began rinsing the five pounds of organic Russet potatoes.

“But seriously, forty thousand is a lot of money. Some people don’t earn that in a year, and that’s your negotiating range? Count your blessings,” said Austin, looking at his phone. “One hundred thirty million workers in the U.S. are earning below a hundred thousand dollars a year.”

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“Austin, you should have gone into economics or social work instead of art. What’s your degree in? Isn’t it computer science?” asked Becca.

“Yep. Did Gemma tell you about the app that she and I have been working on?” asked Austin.

“You know, the one I was telling you about. It’ll help us organize and raise money for the worker rights demonstration I want to do next year. Somebody’s gotta speak up more loudly about wage stagnation and the growing income gap,” said Gemma.

“You should be focused on your own growing income gap,” said Becca.

“Speaking of that, Austin, I wish that you would have let me sign you up for the Battery Park Art Festival. Your latest collection is nothing short of pure creative genius.” Gemma smiled as she washed the three pounds of organic seedless grapes that she’d retrieved from the bottom of the last bag.

Becca raised her eyes, folded the last paper bag neatly, and dropped it into the recycling bin. “Why haven’t I seen this collection?”

“It’s on exhibit at school as part of my Master of Fine Arts thesis,” Austin told Becca, and then he turned to Gemma and gave her a curious look. “You’re not just saying my work is genius because we’re friends. Are you?”

Gemma smiled. “No. I’m not. Thank goodness you’re talented because, if you weren’t, I wouldn’t know what to tell you.”

“I’m just hoping some major art critic discovers me so I can afford to keep living in my duplex in Brooklyn when I graduate,” said Austin.

Becca began cutting several slices of the freshly baked bread. Before she’d even started, the buttery-sweet scent had filled the kitchen. “Austin, hope is not a strategy.”

Gemma smiled as she retrieved three square glass plates from the shelf. “I beg to differ, Becca. Hope *is* a strategy for the idealistic and the desperate.”

Just then, Gemma’s phone rang. She set down the package of organic dairy-free chocolate and checked the name flashing on her cell phone screen. It was the recruiter from Tech Chroma Global Systems. Gemma tensed, which was a source of amusement for Becca and confusion for Austin. Becca knew that whoever hired Gemma would be getting a deal at just about any salary, because Gemma was brilliant, pleasant, hardworking, and humble to a fault. Austin believed that all the deference and formalities wrapped up in

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corporate culture were nonsense, and no one— especially his kindhearted friend—should walk on eggshells to get or keep a job.

“Hi, David. How are you? Thanks so much for the callback,” said Gemma as she awkwardly rambled her way through a greeting.

“Hello. I talked with Colin, your hiring manager. And the first thing he said to me was, ‘Why is the salary so low?’ I’m not sure where the offer guidelines came from, but he wasn’t pleased. So he insisted I come back to you with an offer of one hundred fifty thousand dollars, plus a ten percent bonus based on performance. Will that work for you?”

Gemma was so thrilled—this new offer was now only five thousand dollars below her current base salary—that she disregarded the fact that the difference was more significant when factoring in her current position’s twenty percent bonus structure. But then again, as far as Gemma knew, her current position would go away in a few months. “Thanks so much, David. Yes, this will work for me. Please tell Colin I said thank you?”

“Absolutely. I’m glad we could make this work. Welcome to Tech Chroma Global Systems and have a great Thanksgiving. I’ll be sending the offer letter for you to sign within the hour,” said David.

“Thank you. Happy Thanksgiving, David. I’ll sign it as soon as I get it and send it back,” said Gemma. Her relieved smile quickly disappeared as she hung up.

Next, she would have to call South Blue Consulting back and decline their offer, unless they came back with something significantly better. Gemma was not at all disappointed when the consulting company could not match the software company’s offer; Tech Chroma was a global growth enterprise with promises of considerable opportunity for advancement, while the options for career growth at South Blue Consulting would be relatively limited.

The last thing to pause the smile on Gemma’s face was the task of resigning from her senior consultant position at the prestigious McNeil Consulting Group. Once that was done, Gemma, Becca, and Austin got to work preparing for their Thanksgiving get-together and enjoying the holiday week off.

By the time Gemma joined Tech Chroma Global Systems three weeks later, a fourth round of layoffs had been completed. Gemma stepped off a

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busy, snow-covered Midtown Manhattan street and into a toasty warm lobby filled with modern art, lush tropical plants, and a black granite reception desk that stretched a third of the way across the brightly lit atrium. Her new employer's headquarters was not much different from most of the offices of the global and national corporations located in Manhattan. It was modern and expensively decorated.

Gemma took the elevator to the eighteenth floor, home of Tech Chroma's New York office. The only and most obvious sign of the reduction in force was the series of empty cubicles that Gemma passed as she made her way to the human resources office to check in for her first day.

It only took half an hour to complete the new hire paperwork and locate the small conference room where she would watch the orientation video with the two other new additions to Tech Chroma's New York office. After a two-hour introduction to the company's history, vision, mission, and products, Gemma was ready to meet Colin and someone named Darlene for her welcome lunch. But before she could do so, there was one more video to watch: the welcome from Tech Chroma Global Systems' new CEO, Raymond Van Buren. Raymond was a wispy man with thinning straight blonde hair, combed in a shaggy West Coast tech CEO style that must have cost an average person's daily wages. As he began speaking, it immediately struck Gemma how corporate VPs often went by first names, like contemporary pop stars. He wasn't "Mr. Van Buren" or "Raymond," but "Ray," and Gemma quickly learned that any mention of "Ray" sparked reverence and intrigue within the walls of Tech Chroma. He was going to take the global software corporation public in overnight-billionaire-making fashion. Gemma looked at her watch and sat back to hear what the enigmatic Ray Van Buren had to say.

"Welcome to Tech Chroma Global Systems. We're happy to have you as part of our global family. You are joining us at a momentous time. Tech Chroma leads the industry in offering integrated data protection and recovery solutions. Through our partnerships and innovation, we will carry our customers and employees into a new era of security and reliability. As we embark upon an extraordinary journey filled with technological challenges and advancements, we will continue to lay the groundwork for the most competitive and scalable software solutions around the world. And each

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and every employee is a vital part of our plan to exceed expectations and break superficial boundaries in our pursuit of excellence and versatility in the software space.” The video concluded with the confident, bright smile and twinkling gray eyes of Tech Chroma’s chief executive fading into the materializing company logo.

As she gathered her laptop and headed to meet Colin and Darlene, Gemma considered whether or not the employees involved in the last four rounds of layoffs had been a vital part of Ray’s momentous plan.