

DEATH AND THE GORGON

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Greg Egan's latest novel is *Scale*, and his latest collection is *Sleep and the Soul*. The author can be found on the web at <https://gregegan.net>, on Twitter at @gregeganSF, and on Mastodon at @gregeganSF@mathstodon.xyz. His latest novella unravels the dangerous mystery of . . .

DEATH AND THE GORGON

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When the vault in the abandoned coal mine collapsed, it took four days for the engineers to complete their inspection and certify that it was safe for law enforcement personnel to enter the site. Beth drove out from town with her deputy, Ken Osgood, and the county medical examiner, Helen Myers.

Vitrosophy had bought the mine eleven years before, and though their business had attracted a degree of notoriety at the time, Beth couldn't recall the company generating any kind of fuss during her tenure as sheriff. In the days since the cave-in, she'd gone over all the original applications and permits, and everything seemed to have been done by the book. The mine itself had been worked for more than fifty years, with its fair share of accidents from various causes, but not one miner buried in a rock fall. Vitrosophy's advertising had boasted about the stability of the geological formation they'd chosen for the vault, and maybe that was true, but a lack of seismic activity and groundwater incursion, however advantageous, was not in itself sufficient to preclude any number of more mundane structural issues.

When Beth and her colleagues arrived at the site, the entrance, bored into the hillside long before any of them were born, appeared undamaged; if not for the hazard tape stretched across the gate, she would have struggled to spot anything amiss. They put on full anti-contamination clothing—jumpsuits, booties, caps, gloves and masks—before donning safety helmets.

As they approached the gate, Ken asked Beth, "Is it okay if I bring Sherlock in now?"

"Sure," she replied, trying to sound indifferent. She'd given in to pressure from the board of commissioners and agreed to a six-month evaluation trial of the software; the company behind it, Learning Re Enforcement, seemed to have embarked on a campaign to foist it on police forces all over the planet.

Ken put on his AR glasses to share his view with Sherlock and receive its annotations, but he couldn't resist a short vocal exchange. "Hey Sherlock, at the start of every case, you need to throw away your assumptions. When you assume, you make an ass out of you and me."

"And never trust your opinions, either," Sherlock counseled. "That would be like sticking a pin in an onion."

Ken turned to Beth; even through his mask she could see him beaming with delight. "How can you say it'll never solve a case? I swear it's smarter than half the people I know. Even you and I never banter like that!"

"We do not," Beth agreed.

She unlocked the gate. The entrance was wide enough for four trucks to drive in side-by-side, but with the power out it took all three of them to roll the gate open far enough to enter single file. Vitrosophy had their own generators—four, no less, including a fallback source based on radioactive decay, of the kind they used on space probes that flew too far from the Sun—but those that hadn't ceased functioning when the ceiling fell on them had had their output cables severed.

They switched on their headlamps and advanced slowly into the gloom. Beth took out her notepad and watched the group's position markers shuffle across the map toward their first, and saddest, target. The search and rescue robot sent in on the day of the collapse had found the security guard, Carl Hesse, half-buried in rubble and exhibiting no vital signs; judging from how much his body had cooled, he'd almost certainly bled out from his injuries several hours before he'd been located.

The powder-blue wall that had once partitioned off the chamber and presented an elegant face to arriving visitors had been reduced to a pile of bricks. Beth had watched the videos of VIPs and influencers taking the tour before signing up for the service, or at least offering their fulsome endorsements.

The engineers had cleared a path through the debris, so it wasn't a struggle now to reach Carl's body. The search and rescue robot had taken photographs, but Beth took her own. Carl had been a couple of years ahead of her at school; as a teenager he'd worked in her father's garage for a while. He and his wife had run the cake shop together, but Cheryl had told Beth that business had been tight, and he'd applied for the job here to try to make ends meet. It must have sounded like the safest night shift on the planet, guarding things that no one would want to lay their hands on.

When Beth was done, Helen began her *in situ* examination. "He suffered a major skull fracture," she reported, cradling Carl's head in one hand. "It might not have been the cause of death, but he would have been unconscious for everything that followed."

"That's a small mercy," Beth replied. Pieces of a coffee mug were sitting among the ceiling tiles and chunks of stone strewn across his body.

"It must have been tough staying awake down here," Ken remarked. "But he told me they let him stream shows on the computer."

Beth wasn't sure why Vitrosophy hadn't just monitored the place remotely when the technicians were absent. But maybe the presence of a guard in the flesh was a matter of prestige, a way to make their clients feel more valued.

Helen listed Carl's other visible injuries, including a severed femoral artery. When she was finished, the three of them worked in silence to free the body and place it on the stretcher they'd brought. Carl's trousers were stiff with blood, and there was a dark dried pool on the floor where he'd lain.

While Ken and Helen carried the body out, Beth started putting the shards of the coffee mug into an evidence bag. When she was done, she turned and looked across the interior of the vault. Now that Carl had been removed, the strongest smell that remained was like an organic chemistry lab, with a sickly sweet note of ethers woven in among the solvents. A couple of shattered computer displays glinted among the

broken furniture, and some dented metal tubes shone dimly. But then the beam from her headlamp flared back at her, as if she'd caught herself in a mirror.

Beth walked over to the toppled storage units; one of them had fallen straight toward her, exposing fragments of silvered glass inside the stainless steel tube. A dozen or so human heads had spilled out onto the floor: wrinkled skin, hair gathered in tufts, eyes sewn closed.

She photographed the scene, then walked around the center of the vault, capturing images of the overturned units. Every one of them had ruptured to some degree, and the contents would have long since departed from the desired temperature. Vitrosophy's full inventory for the site came to over one hundred heads. Beth had expected the town to be besieged by relatives coming to claim these remains for burial, but as far as she knew no one had shown up yet.

She heard Ken and Helen returning.

"Have you brought the bags?" she called out to Ken.

"Yes."

"Then let's get started." Beth suffered a moment of resentment: *how was this her job?* But who else did she expect to do it? Did she want Pete Miller, the town's mortician, traipsing across what might yet turn out to be a crime scene? Or Vitrosophy's techs let loose on the site, to tidy away anything inconvenient to the company? "One hundred and seven need to show up at the morgue," she said, "so let's not leave anyone behind on the first trip."

* * *

2

When they arrived at the morgue, there was a large refrigerated-storage truck sitting in the parking lot.

"Did you arrange that?" Beth asked Helen.

"No. Where would I get the budget?"

Three people were standing by the truck: two men in white coveralls and heavy rubber gloves, and a third, in jeans and a T-shirt, with the preternatural glow that suggested collagen modulators had swept a few decades under the carpet of his implausibly taut skin.

"How do you figure out someone's real age these days?" Beth wondered. "Are there blood tests?"

"You could carbon date those tattoos to the Late Pretentious," Helen suggested. "Or maybe the Early Try-hard."

"So what do you call mine?" Ken asked bravely.

"Peak Conformist," Helen replied.

Ken laughed, unoffended. "Sherlock says that's Gideon Figg, by the way. CTO of Vitrosophy."

Beth approached the casually dressed man and introduced herself; Sherlock turned out to have identified him correctly. Maybe the tattoos helped.

"I have a court order instructing you to deliver our clients' remains into our custody," Figg said, holding up his notepad to show her the document.

"That's fine by me," Beth replied. "They would have taken up an awful lot of space anyway." She was annoyed that Jim Rusko, the county attorney, hadn't bothered to inform her that there'd been a hearing on the matter, but if he'd asked, she would have told him not to contest the application.

The men in coveralls set about moving the bagged heads into the truck, while Ken and Helen carried Carl into the morgue.

"What will happen to them?" Beth asked Figg.

"It will depend on the terms of their contracts," he said. "Some will be buried or cremated, but some opted for ongoing cryonic storage even after an interruption like this."

Beth bit her tongue, but Figg seemed to feel compelled to justify the practice. "Recovering information from a vitrified brain is always going to require highly sophisticated algorithms to fill in the gaps where the structure has degraded," he said. "A period of thawing will certainly make recovery more challenging, but when there's no time limit at all on the opportunities for progress in the field, there's no reason to give up at the first hurdle."

Beth was pretty sure the thawed brains now carried about as much information as liver pâté, but she gathered that Vitrosophy's claims for their services never quite veered into outright fraud, and it was all beyond her jurisdiction anyway.

"Do you believe anyone might have had a reason to target your company?" she asked.

"No." Figg did not seem perturbed by the question. "Have you found any signs of foul play?"

"We haven't," Beth admitted. "But you must be surprised that after all the experts told you this vault would last for millennia, it just caved in one day, for no apparent reason."

"I'm horrified," Figg replied. "By the death of Mr. Hesse, and by the setback this represents for our clients. Once we have access to the site, we'll be bringing in our own consulting engineers to try to discover what went wrong. If the original design or construction was faulty, we'll certainly be pursuing damages in court. But I can promise you that Mr. Hesse's family will be compensated immediately; we accept our obligations to them unreservedly, and we'll leave it to the consultants and the courts to allocate the ultimate blame, if and when that's possible."

"Well, that's something." Beth was glad that Cheryl and the kids wouldn't be left high and dry, but she still wanted to know if she was investigating a homicide, negligence, or an act of nature. "You really have no hunches?" she pressed Figg. "We're almost certain that it wasn't a tremor, because the closest seismometers picked up the cave-in itself with nothing beforehand."

"Maybe the initial survey of the rocks above the vault was flawed," Figg suggested reluctantly. "But I need to be careful; I can't go throwing around aspersions with no evidence."

Beth said, "I understand."

The men had finished moving the heads; they closed the back of the truck and stood by, waiting for instructions. "Why did you think you'd need a court order for the remains?" Beth asked Figg. "It's not as if I was going to want to autopsy them all and reestablish the causes of death."

"We just wanted to get them back in the right conditions as soon as possible," Figg replied. "It was already far too long, and if you'd decided to treat them as evidence, it could have stretched on for months."

"Fair enough." Beth shook his hand. "I'll call you if I have any news."

"Thank you."

"Or any questions."

"Of course."

She hesitated, then gestured at the glowering snake-haired woman on his forearm. "Medusa, right?"

Figg said, "No, it's her eldest sister, Stheno. But almost no one's heard of her."

"Why any of those creatures, if you don't mind me asking?"

"To remind me every day not to fear them," he said. "Being turned to stone might seem terrifying, but it's really not the same as death."

"If you got a terminal diagnosis tomorrow," Beth asked her husband as she climbed into bed, "would you have your head frozen?" It had struck her earlier in the day that they hadn't thrashed out the question when Vitrosophy bought the mine and everyone else was talking about it, probably because they'd only just started dating and weren't looking for things to disagree on.

Gary put down his book. "Not if I was going to end up in a rock fall."

"Obviously. But if someone did it properly?"

He grimaced. "Depends what you mean by 'properly.' If there was a decent chance that I'd wake up while you and Sophie were still alive, with all my memories and personality intact, of course I'd do it. New body, robot body, disembodied . . . as long as I was still myself, it'd be crazy not to. But when even the people peddling the service admit that my brain would be full of cracks, and some crucial molecules involved in storing memories would be damaged by the antifreeze . . . no thanks."

"People forget things all the time," Beth countered. "People's personality changes just from aging."

"That's true," he conceded. "And if I had a stroke, say, that did that kind of damage in one hit, whether I'd want to go on living or not would depend on exactly how much I'd lost. But even the most charitable spin on the state of the art for brain preservation puts the damage way beyond the equivalent of a stroke. I know the company line is that there'll be autocorrect for curdled brains one day, but if the information isn't there at the start, you can't autocorrect a few keystrokes into a million-word autobiography. Do I really want some fool in the year 3000 to take a template for a generic person with my background, and tweak it with a few hints from what remains of my denatured brain, just to create someone a bit like me? Millions of people *a bit like me* are going to be born eventually, anyway, purely by chance; why should I throw away money just to muddy the waters and give one of them my name?"

Beth smiled. "That's pretty much my own verdict. Of all the things where a half-assed version might be good enough, resurrection would be at the bottom of my list. If you can't do it right, don't bother."

"But you think someone targeted the heads, don't you?" Gary asked. "Someone took all this horse shit seriously enough to want to 'kill' a stack of frozen brains?"

"Maybe." Beth switched off her bedside lamp and settled in. "It could just be faulty construction. But even if the whole sales pitch is hokum, I can't see them cutting corners on the vault."

"Maybe one of the heads was from a murder victim," Gary suggested, "and the killer only found out later that the result wasn't quite as final as they'd hoped."

"I checked the death certificates," Beth said. "No homicides. But if the murderer was able to make it look like an accident the first time . . ."

Gary winced. "And you've got how many possible victims?"

"One hundred and seven," Beth replied.

"Good thing there's no other crime in this place," he joked.

Beth pretended to bristle. "Are you saying I have too much time on my hands?"

"Never," he protested. "But if there's a killer out there who was counting on no one making time to find a needle in a haystack, they could be in for a shock."

Beth sat in her office and worked her way through the list of Vitrosophy's clients. The court order had actually made her job easier, since it included details of all the next of kin, but they were scattered across the country, with a few overseas, so she needed to be mindful of the time zones. She offered her condolences to each spouse, sibling, or child, promised a thorough investigation of the crime, and then listened sympathetically to any grievances, worries, or suspicions they wished to air.

Some of the relatives were clearly true believers in cryonics, though only a small fraction thought the thawed departed still stood a chance. The rest were going through a kind of second mourning, and Beth tried to deal with that as tactfully as she could. Apparently Vitrosophy's generosity to the family of the one actual victim didn't extend to the doubly dead; whether anyone's storage fees would be refunded now lay in the hands of an insurance company which was unlikely to pay out until they'd reached their own conclusions on the cause of the event.

"We thought Marcus was so lucky!" his sister Veronica told Beth tearfully. "He won the lottery right after his diagnosis. Who could believe that?"

"It's amazing," Beth agreed. "How much did he win?"

Veronica didn't answer for a moment, and Beth was afraid she'd offended her, but then Veronica explained, "I don't mean some ordinary lottery, with prize money. He won *the OG lottery*; the prize was that he got to be preserved."

Beth was fairly sure that whatever might count as the "Original Gangster" among lotteries would not have involved corpses being frozen, but this wasn't the time to quibble about the shifting meaning of the phrase. "So Vitrosophy give a certain number of places away for free?" she asked.

"Not Vitrosophy," Veronica corrected her. "OG. Optimized Giving. The charity."

"I see. So your brother got his diagnosis, then put his name down for the lottery that this charity runs?"

"Yes."

Beth didn't know what to say now; for Marcus's family to think he'd been granted a one-in-a-million chance of cheating death, only for the winning ticket to prove worthless after a couple of years, was about the cruelest sequence of reversals she could imagine. "I'm so sorry," was all she could offer. "If we learn anything more about what happened, I'll be sure to let you know."

A third of the way through the list, she still hadn't come across anyone whose relatives found their original deaths suspicious. The samples from the chamber had all returned negative for explosives residue. Carl's autopsy, and the tests on his coffee mug, had yielded no evidence that he'd been sedated or otherwise put out of action prior to the cave-in itself. And even if a killer happened to share their victim's belief that Vitrosophy had rendered death reversible, how many murderers had the resources to make part of a mine collapse without leaving any trace of their intervention?

Ken knocked on her open door.

"Can I help with anything?" he asked.

Beth was reluctant to split the phone calls with him, in case he delegated half his share to his erratic digital buddy. Though the current version was unlikely to say anything racist, sexist, or homophobic, the etiquette for discussing frozen heads with the relatives of the decapitated was probably not well covered by its training data. "What does Sherlock say about the case, so far?" she wondered.

"He thinks it was probably a commercial rival of Vitrosophy," Ken replied.

"Interesting hypothesis. Did he give you any evidence to support it?" Beth caught herself; they were calling this piece of software "he" now? But it wasn't

worth quibbling over.

"Not really," Ken admitted. "He showed me all six companies' financial statements, and they're all doing okay, though Vitrosophy gets a fair bit of help from some charitable foundation."

"You mean Optimized Giving?"

"That's the one."

"So why would one of Vitrosophy's rivals want to bury them?" Beth mused. "Which company will get the charity cases now?"

Ken shrugged.

"Maybe you and Sherlock can look into that?" Beth suggested.

"Okay." Ken hesitated. "Sherlock wrote a rap song about me and him, while we were on our break. It's like a celebration of our partnership, and how we'd take a bullet for each other if it came to that. Do you want to hear it?"

"Absolutely not," Beth replied firmly. "Just find out what you can about OG's plans after the cave-in."

When he left, she steeled herself and resumed calling the next of kin. Other people mentioned the lottery; Beth couldn't share their astonishment at their loved ones' timely wins—since she was unlikely to have ended up talking to them otherwise—but the sting of having their hopes raised against the odds and then dashed was still palpable.

On her fifty-third call, the deceased's father, Angelo Caruso, sounded angry and distrustful. Beth tried to calibrate her tone; some people just didn't like interacting with law enforcement. And some people probably found a call like this intrusive, her sympathy fake, her concerns condescending. But she persisted, and as the encounter grew ever more abrasive, she finally asked flat out, "Did you ever think your son's death might not have been due to natural causes?"

"It wasn't," Angelo said bluntly. "He killed himself, long before the cancer would have taken him."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know that." The death certificate had referred to a cardiac arrest, with no further attribution, and the family hadn't wanted an autopsy.

"They made him do it," Angelo added. "The fucking lottery people."

"What do you mean?"

"Aden won a place in that stupid crypt, but then they said he only had a three-month window to take it before they gave it to someone else."

Beth was speechless for a moment. How could that possibly be legal? "Who told him that? Vitrosophy, or Optimized Giving?"

"OG."

"Did they say why?" she asked. Vitrosophy might have been eager to receive the funds, but why would OG be so keen to dispense them?

"They said there were people who'd be dying while he hung on to his ticket. That he'd be blocking the way for them, when they needed it more urgently than he did." Angelo sounded as revolted and confused by this argument as Beth was. And if they really had felt that way about the ethics of charitable freezing, they could have just narrowed the criteria for entering the lottery in the first place, instead of springing it as a surprise on the winners.

"I'm very sorry for what your family has been through," Beth said. "I hope we can at least find out what happened here."

Angelo laughed bitterly. "No offense, but I honestly don't care. There was never the slightest chance that my son would be brought back to life, and I hope those worthless conmen go out of business as soon as possible."

When he hung up, Beth sat pondering his disturbing claims about the three-month time limit. She found Optimized Giving's website, and dug down to the section on the

lottery. The terms and conditions had more than three hundred clauses, but while applicants needed to document a terminal diagnosis, she could see nothing about the winner losing their place after three months.

Still, that didn't prove that what Aden had told his father hadn't happened; it just proved OG weren't foolish enough to announce it as an official policy. Beth couldn't imagine what their motive might be, but then, it wasn't easy placing herself in these people's shoes. The website listed research topics for the academic fellowships they were offering for the coming year. Some of them started out sounding like worthy causes, until you hit the strange last clause: "Improving Food Security [After a Geoeengineering Catastrophe]," "Pandemic Preparedness [Against Belief-Altering Viruses]," "Minimizing Casualties [in Third Wave Interstellar Wars]." Others just put the weirdness upfront: "Densest Packings of Sentience Compatible With the Holographic Bound," "Maximizing the Ecstasy-Energy Ratio in a Matryoshka Brain." The worth of any of this grandiose high-tech-prepper pamphleteering was a matter between OG and their donors, but since they'd insisted on sticking their nose into the here-and-now of terminal cancer patients, she was going to have to come to terms with what made them tick.

She got up and stuck her head out the door. "How's that line of investigation going?" she asked Ken.

"OG haven't put out any press releases since the cave-in," he said.

Beth had already noted as much from their website. "So what's Sherlock's next move?"

Ken looked embarrassed. "We've been brainstorming new ideas, but nothing's really come together yet."

Beth returned to her desk and started tracking down Aden's social media posts. The accounts she found had been switched into memorial mode, and maybe others had been deleted completely, but plenty of what he'd written over the last ten years of his life remained public.

Prior to his diagnosis at the age of thirty, he'd sounded like an ideal candidate for one of OG's fellowships, engaging in numerous online discussions about equally remote prospects for humanity. He'd alternated between bouts of enthusiastic optimism for his favorite hoped-for technologies—life extension, mind uploading—and frustration at their actual rates of progress. A few times, he'd mentioned that he would have happily paid the required five hundred grand to have Vitrosophy's collection team on standby with their private jet to whisk him off for processing in the event of his death anywhere on the planet, but in the real world he'd gone from a low-level software developer position to episodes of unemployment and minimum-wage hospitality jobs.

When he'd been diagnosed with advanced multiple myeloma, he'd applied for a ticket in OG's lottery immediately. It cost nothing, so he'd had nothing to lose, though if you met the eligibility criteria and entered the draw, you only had one chance; you could not apply again.

From what his father had said, Beth had expected to find Aden upbeat at the news of his win, shocked when he'd been hit with the three-month deadline, and then bitter but grimly resolved to proceed.

But there was no record of any of that. The last thing she could find from him had been posted on a cryonics discussion group about a month after he'd entered the lottery, but still three weeks before the winner was due to be notified.

I knew it would be tough to lower my shield and meekly hand my sword to the Gorgon, he'd written. But it turns out it's both harder than I imagined, and also more glorious. I know I will be making this fucked-up world a slightly better place with my departure, and only returning to it once it's reached its true potential.

Call me Suesrep.

See you in the future.

Beth walked out to Ken's desk; he was conducting an imaginary orchestra, but he stopped as soon as he saw her.

"Can you get Sherlock to monitor some online forums for me?" she asked.

"Of course." Ken was ecstatic. "Which ones? What are we looking for?"

Beth gave him a list of the forums Aden had posted to. "We're looking for anything about the OG lottery, and anything about the Vitrosophy cave-in. I want to know what these people think."

"We're going to crowd-source the investigation?"

"No." Beth didn't know what she was hoping might turn up, but Aden had belonged to the subculture most invested in the whole matter, and reading their take on it had to be worth something. "Maybe the cryonics fans know what really happened, maybe not," she said. "But in the end, they're Vitrosophy's customers, and what matters the most to any company is how their customers see them."

* * *

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Beth spent another day phoning the remaining next of kin. No one took the opportunity to suggest that their relative had been murdered, and no one repeated Aden's father's claim about pressure from OG, but she did end up with a total of fifteen names on her list of lottery winners. OG didn't publish any names at all, for privacy reasons, and she had no grounds to compel them. But the timing of these fifteen deaths refuted the notion that you needed to die within three months for the prize to be honored; in one case, the winner had lived for almost two more years.

She was about to leave for the night when Ken announced that OG had finally issued a press release about the cave-in. The lottery would go ahead as scheduled, and the winner would be free to nominate any cryonics company they liked, to provide the service that Vitrosophy was currently unable to offer.

In the morning, Sherlock emailed her its first report on the response in the forums. People had welcomed the continuation of the lottery, and used it to debate the merits of Vitrosophy's various competitors. As for the cave-in itself, the consensus seemed to be that it was an accident, with a few people pushing a theory that "jealous normies" had bribed Carl to bomb the mine, and he'd either killed himself through sheer incompetence, or hadn't actually died in the blast.

Beth spent the day on administrative work she'd been neglecting since the incident. In the afternoon, Sherlock's summary showed no change in the overall sentiment, but seven people had talked about lodging applications for OG lottery tickets.

Feeling more hopeful than ever, one applicant wrote. Always knew that report from my oncologist "putting an end" to my future might also be my shortcut to the post-scarcity world. I've done the math, and I figure that by the time they wake me, I'll be allocated seventy-two habitable Earth-sized planets for my physical avatars to use, plus a pro rata share of runtime in the galactic consensual VR. Maybe later I'll turn those worlds into computronium, to get more experiential bang for my buck, but why not indulge in a little nostalgia first?

Not all the posts were as florid as this, but if whoever had caused the cave-in shared even the primary fantasy of resurrection itself, then not only had they murdered Carl, on their own terms they had slaughtered *one hundred and six other people* along with their intended victim. Beth had never really faced up to how horrifically callous that would be. But maybe she needed to take the toll even more seriously. Maybe *all* the thawed heads had been targets, and only Carl had been collateral damage? Instead of a one-time murderer finishing the job, an act of

mass vengeance against the whole community?

She asked Ken to send Sherlock trawling through the old posts in the forums, looking for anyone displaying a grudge. Maybe someone thought they'd truly deserved to win the lottery, and couldn't bear the thought of all the happy winners—along with the rich assholes who'd paid their own way—waking up in a utopia they'd never see. Sherlock came back with a long list of people airing grievances, but no one really stood out; if there was a sociopath among them, they'd been careful enough to conceal the true extent of their rage.

So what were the alternatives? Sherlock's theory of industrial sabotage still seemed far-fetched; even if the competitor was indifferent to the fate of the heads, would they really risk a homicide charge by killing Carl, just for the sake of a dubious commercial advantage?

According to the forums it was all just an accident, down to poor construction or a geological flaw, and as for the fringe theory about "jealous normies," if you didn't believe cryonics worked, what was there to be jealous of? Beth supposed that defrosting a few frozen plutocrats might count as edgy performance art, if that alone had been the whole act—but again, Carl's death shifted the balance, from desecration of remains to something more like terrorism.

Ken appeared, looking troubled. "Sherlock just found a post that reads a lot like Aden Caruso's last one."

"Who is it from?"

"One of the lottery entrants, going by 'Héritier.'"

Beth said, "Show me." Ken emailed her a link.

In the old myths, Perseus turned monsters and villains to stone, traveling home after he'd done the deed, Héritier wrote. But if we choose to look upon the Gorgon and surrender, handing her our sword so we can live again, it must be on our trip to meet her that we show our courage and earn that prize.

The echoes of Aden's language were eerie, but Beth didn't want to read too much into that; the whole Gorgon thing seemed to be popular with everyone—and unlike Aden, Héritier wasn't talking about making the world a better place by departing. She couldn't flag the post for a welfare check when there was nothing in it that even hinted at self-harm.

Still . . . *we show our courage and earn that prize*? At the risk of being over-literal, wasn't the whole point of the lottery that the prize didn't need to be *earned*?

"What do OG get out of all this?" she mused.

Ken frowned. "Would you ask that about the Make-A-Wish Foundation?"

Beth said, "Maybe not, but OG paint themselves as the opposite: instead of sentimental, feel-good philanthropy, they claim that every dollar they spend will have the greatest possible impact on humanity. If that was your goal, why would you throw money away on preserving the brains of random people?"

Ken looked distracted for a moment, attending to something Beth couldn't see.

She said, "Don't tell me Sherlock has a theory?"

Ken shook his head. "But he found someone who's writing a book about OG. Some professor at Tulane University. So maybe you can ask this OG-ologist what the lottery's all about."

* * *

6

"I was surprised that anyone stumbled on that work in progress," Professor Dwyer told Beth, settling into her chair for the video call. "I only put one sentence about it

on my web page, and it doesn't even have a publisher yet."

Beth smiled modestly. She wasn't going to heap praise on Sherlock for this; she might easily have found a consultant like Dwyer herself, if she'd set her mind to it.

"Most of your work has been on de-radicalization," she noted. "Islamist extremists, white supremacists."

"Yes. But in the last few years I've come across so many apostates from OG that I thought it was worth a closer look."

"Apostates?"

"I know, the term is usually applied to people renouncing a traditional religion," Dwyer conceded. "But I think it's apt for anyone who escapes from a totalizing world view. OG claim their goal is to maximize the amount of happiness that humanity and its descendants experience, from now until whatever distant moment when the Universe can no longer support any form of sentience. I don't think they're coy about that; it's up front in all of their literature. But then the fine print comes down to exactly what we can do right now to further that objective. Starting with not wiping ourselves out."

"Really?" When she'd looked at their website, Beth had found their grab bag of interests oddly selective. "They don't seem to be spending anything on climate change."

"OG consider that solved. They don't see it as an existential threat, so they believe there's more utility in research that could lead to things like earlier interstellar migration."

"What . . . in case Earth gets hit by a meteor? Wouldn't it be easier to nudge a meteor than to send people to another star?" Beth recalled the first successful tests tweaking an asteroid's orbit taking place when she was still a teenager.

"Of course it would," Dwyer agreed. "But OG view any delay in spreading humanity at as close to light-speed as possible as the equivalent of murdering all the people who won't have a chance to exist in the future, because of the resources we'll fail to secure. If you shave even a tiny fraction off a total future population of ten-to-the-fifty-sixth, then you're effectively slaughtering trillions of times more people than have lived throughout all of human history. Of course Tolstoy might quibble as to whether you can *have* ten-to-the-fifty-something happy families that aren't so alike that you might just as well have made do with a billion or two, but OG are deadly serious, and they believe that all of our choices, right now, have consequences of that magnitude."

Beth had actually wondered if these aspects of the doctrine might have been tongue-in-cheek, like Pastafarian theology, but Dwyer seemed convinced they were sincere.

"When I was about six or seven," she said, "someone told me that nothing traveled faster than light. And I thought about that for a while, then decided: if you gave me a very long rope, I could swing it around my head, and if it was long enough I'd be able to make the end go as fast as I liked. Take that, Einstein! Yee-hah!"

Dwyer smiled. "I love it how kids come up with these thought experiments. How old were you when you started to realize there were flaws in it?"

Beth said, "There's two answers to that. It wasn't until I was a senior in high school that a physics teacher explained why it wouldn't work, even in principle: however much energy you put into the rope, and however thin and strong it was, no part of it would ever move faster than light. But it was only a few weeks after I came up with the idea that it struck me that anyone thinking they could control a rope a million miles long was just fooling themselves. And if OG imagine that they're in control of how much happiness there'll be in the next trillion years, they're really not much different than a child twirling one end of a million miles of rope, who hasn't yet realized that it's either just going to trip them over, or end up wrapped around their throat."

"Humanity will only be free once we've strangled the last longtermist with the entrails of the last antinatalist," Dwyer declaimed.

"I'm sorry, what?" Beth wasn't advocating strangling anyone.

"It's a quote from one of the apostates," Dwyer explained. "A play on something Diderot didn't quite say about the *Ancien Régime*. But don't worry, they're not actually into disembowelment."

Beth had let the conversation drift off target. "I wanted to hear your take on the lottery," she said. "Four times a year, OG pay for someone with a terminal illness to have access to cryonic preservation."

Dwyer said, "That's right."

"But why would they do that?" Beth pressed her. "The winner isn't chosen because they're going to cure aging, or build a faster spaceship. They just pull the name out of a hat, or whatever. How does that fit the agenda?"

"I think it's just well crafted PR," Dwyer replied. "It targets their general constituency, but with all the bad press about eugenics that the movement as a whole has suffered from, offering a prize with no utilitarian function, and no barriers to entry, gives them something they can hold up as evidence that they're not just amplifying inequality."

"By sticking four frozen skulls a year into a cave where nothing will ever happen to them, unless the ceiling falls down?" Beth could still see the heads whenever she closed her eyes. "While they hold conferences in Bavarian castles about orchestrating interstellar colonization."

"A little tokenistic, you might say," Dwyer observed dryly. "But the winners believe those conferences are rolling out a thousand years' worth of red carpet for them, reshaping the world for the day of their resurrection. They get to die happy."

"Do you think OG would ever pressure a lottery winner to . . . die on schedule?" Beth asked. "Have any of your informants talked about that kind of thing?"

Dwyer appeared genuinely shocked. "No! I mean, I gather that they vet the diagnoses to make sure they're not getting healthy people just wanting to hoard the prize to use in their old age. But pushing a young cancer patient to hurry up and face the Gorgon would be a PR nightmare. Why do you ask? Have you heard something?"

Beth said, "Nothing firsthand. And I can't tell you the details, I'm afraid."

Dwyer hesitated. "I did hear one claim about the lottery. Much less disturbing than yours, but . . . it might not actually be random. My source said the winner was sometimes known before the application round had even closed."

"How were they chosen, then?" Beth asked.

"That wasn't clear," Dwyer admitted. "Maybe OG was trying to ensure that the demographics told the right story; they were afraid that if they left it to chance, there'd be some bias that crept in from the self-selection of the applicants that undermined the whole point of the exercise. Or it might be that they wanted to do some screening of the provisional winners that was more intensive than anything that would have been practical for the entire pool."

"Like what?"

"Maybe weeding out people who might change their minds and not actually use the prize. That's not just a matter of how loudly someone's endorsed the practice; when Timothy Leary got a terminal diagnosis he became the greatest proselytizer for cryonics in the world, but when it finally came down to it he chose cremation instead. It would probably require a face-to-face interview with a psychologist to be reasonably sure."

Beth pondered this. "So the winners themselves might actually know that they've been picked, much earlier than the official timetable would suggest?"

"That's what my source believed," Dwyer confirmed.

Which meant that Aden might have already known that he'd won when he posted his final message. But that still didn't explain why he'd told his father that the prize might be snatched away from him.

Dwyer was starting to look restless; they were getting close to the time limit Beth had promised for the call.

"One last question," she said. "What kind of grudge do you think these people you spoke to who left OG would hold against them? Metaphorical garroting with entrails aside?"

"Not the kind that would make them bomb your cave," Dwyer said firmly. "What they're angry about is the hubris, the deception, and the waste of money. Those frozen heads—let alone the guard who died there—wouldn't be their target at all."

* * *

7

"Nothing new from Hérítier?" Beth asked Ken when he returned from his lunch break.

"No," Ken replied. "Sherlock would have told us."

Beth was starting to feel queasy. She had no evidence that this person was in danger, but for them to go silent in the same way as Aden was troubling. "Sherlock's looking for the same handle on other forums as well, right? Not just limiting the search to that list we started with?"

"Sherlock's looking everywhere," Ken assured her. "And not just under that handle. He found some posts under her real name, from eight or nine years ago. At least, he's 99 percent sure that she left a clear trail linking the accounts, in the language used and the people she's hung out with."

Beth rested a hand on Ken's desk and thought for a while before continuing the conversation.

"Are you saying Sherlock's de-anonymized Hérítier?"

"I guess you could call it that." Beth was trying not to give anything away, but Ken must have noticed a strain in her voice. "Is that a problem?" he asked.

"We're not really meant to do that without a warrant," Beth admitted.

"Sherlock wouldn't *break the law*, though," Ken scoffed, as if she'd just accused Santa Claus of stealing candy from her daughter.

Beth said, "Sherlock might have read all the statutes, but it doesn't follow that it knows what they mean, or what its own actions amount to in relation to the law."

"But they would have taught . . . or they would have programmed. . . ." Ken was scowling angrily now, his face flushed, as if she was attacking him personally.

Beth said, "Calm down, no one's in any trouble."

"So do you want me to tell him to forget that he knows who Hérítier is? Wipe it from his memory?"

"No." Beth resisted an urge to joke, *they never get you for the crime, they get you for the cover-up*. "We'll just have to document it as part of the assessment. Can you send me a report on everything Sherlock found?"

Ken nodded, slightly mollified. Beth was starting to wonder what he'd do if the county didn't renew the software's license at the end of the trial.

She scanned the report, telling herself she was just making sure she understood the full extent of the privacy breach. And what could she actually do with these ill-gotten details, anyway? She still had nothing that would justify a welfare check.

Beth read the old posts by Anna Grasso, a fifteen-year-old at the time, writing enthusiastically about astronomy and space exploration, computers, books, movies, and playing the cello. Her words crackled with an unselfconscious energy that made Beth think of Sophie at her most exuberant.

But at some point she'd started hanging out on forums with names like cheesy self-improvement books, whose hosts claimed to promote the art of thinking more rationally and avoiding the pitfalls that confused the addled masses. The trouble was, they interspersed all their actual debunking of logical fallacies with much more tendentious claims, wrapped in cloaks of faux-objectivity. They seemed especially prone to an abuse of probabilistic methods, where they pretended they could quantify both the likelihood and the potential harm for various implausible scenarios, and then treated the results of their calculations—built on numbers they'd plucked out of the air—as an unimpeachable basis for action. Super-intelligent AIs conquering the world; the whole Universe turning out to be a simulation; humanity annihilated by aliens because we failed to colonize the galaxy in time. Even if it was all just stale clichés from fifty-year-old science fiction, a bright teenager like Anna could have found some entertainment value analyzing the possibilities rigorously and puncturing the forums' credulous consensus. But while she'd started out healthily skeptical, some combination of in-forum peer pressure, the phony gravitas of trillions of future deaths averted, and the corrosive effect of an endless barrage of inane slogans pimped up as profound insights—all taking the form "X is the mind-killer," where X was pretty much anything that might challenge the delusions of the cult—seemed to have worn down her resistance in the end.

Héritier, as she now called herself, subscribed to OG's vision of the future in every detail. Omnipotent AIs would rule the Universe and usher in an epoch of unprecedented bliss, but only if present-day humans took up the fight to ensure that no malevolent rival came to power first, while fending off a dozen other equally unlikely "existential risks" and shepherding technology and space exploration along the One True Path. Beth's ten-year-old daughter played far more sophisticated computer-game fantasies than this, but the OG fellowships churned out a regular supply of "academic" papers, propping up all the nonsense with a veneer of pseudo-scholarship.

By the time Anna was diagnosed with bladder cancer, it had invaded her muscles and lymphatic system. Héritier documented all her tests and treatments, focusing on the biology of the disease and the mechanisms of each intervention. As the results grew worse and her options dwindled, she did not shy away from the likely outcome—or at least, the likely outcome for her current incarnation. Between the sober reports on her latest round of chemotherapy, she announced a GoFundMe page for her cryonic escape route. When Beth checked, it had reached a total of seven hundred dollars.

If Anna had in fact won the lottery, Beth didn't begrudge her whatever comfort that gave her. But it was hard to set the whole thing aside as a private matter of a dying woman's beliefs when it was still unclear exactly how OG was treating the applicants. If they picked a winner while other people were still signing up for tickets that was fraudulent, even if they weren't gaining money from the deception. But if they were pressuring winners to end their own lives as rapidly as possible, they needed to be exposed and prosecuted.

And if Anna was facing that pressure, right now? What did Beth owe her?

Over dinner, she listened to Sophie talking excitedly about the shapes of the sand grains she'd examined under a microscope in her science class. Beth nodded and smiled, and wondered, *what would Anna's mother want her to do?*

Sherlock, scarily, had deduced all of Anna's contact details from scattered public sources, with no need to hack anything or ask a court's permission. She was living in

a shared house in Austin, Texas. Beth spent the evening picturing herself picking up the phone and calling her, rehearsing what she'd say initially, planning for different ways Anna might react. The link with the cave-in would give her an opening, at least.

But she couldn't do it. Every scenario she played out in her head eventually landed on the questions *How did you know I applied for the lottery?* and *How did you find my real name?* before Anna lost all trust in her and hung up.

"What's wrong?" Gary asked, as Beth finally joined him in bed.

Beth said, "What if I fly to Texas for the weekend?"

She explained the whole situation. Gary knew better than to start quizzing her about the worst-case scenario; he understood that she'd weighed up the risks and thought they were worth taking.

"One thing I don't get, though," he said. "Why would this charity want her dead? You said they don't publish anything about the winners, so it's not like they need a smiling photo of the little angel they've sent to cryonic heaven just to make their donors feel warm inside. Seriously, what's in it for them?"

Beth said, "I do not have a clue. So either Aden was lying to his father and I'm flat out wrong that there's anything amiss here, or . . ."

"Or what?" Gary pressed her.

"Or he wasn't lying, and the only hope I have of finding out what's going on is by talking to Anna before it's too late."

* * *

8

Beth flew into Austin on Saturday morning and took a ride share out to the house. A young man opened the door and regarded her quizzically, as if he suspected that she had the wrong address. She was in plain clothes and she hadn't shown her badge, but maybe she looked a bit too old to be a friend of any of his housemates, and their forty-something aunts weren't in the habit of dropping by.

"Could I talk to Anna?" Beth asked.

"You just missed her," he said. "She left for the station a few minutes ago."

Beth glanced at her watch and sighed in self-reproach, as if she'd known about the journey but been confused about the time. "You don't know when . . .?"

"When her train's leaving?" he asked. "Not exactly. You want me to call her?"

Beth shook her head. "No, I will. Thank you for your help!"

She walked away, raising her phone to her ear and calling another ride. On the way to the station she checked the schedule; the northbound *Texas Eagle* was leaving at 9:30, and nothing else was a better fit for when Anna had left. Beth bought a ticket that would take her all the way to Chicago, though she was hoping it wouldn't come to that.

She made it to the platform with about a minute to spare, and boarded before the itch to reassess her whole plan grew strong enough to stop her. Her coach seat was on the train's upper level; they were already pulling out of the station as she climbed the stairs.

She took her seat beside an elderly man. "Did you want the window?" he asked. "If you do, you're welcome to swap." Beth smiled and declined the offer, hoping he wasn't secretly coveting the aisle.

There were only two coach cars, and she was hoping Anna wouldn't have splashed out on the cost of a sleeper berth. She took out her phone, disabled caller ID, and waited until the passenger beside her was looking out the window before she called

Anna's number. If it didn't ring nearby, she could try again in the other car.

The call went straight to voicemail. *Who switched their phones off at this time of day, on a train?* Beth tried not to read too much into it, but she was going to need another strategy. The latest pictures Sherlock had found of Anna were a couple of years out of date, but Beth had stared at them long enough that she believed she could still make a match. Unless Anna had chosen a very short trip, there ought to be plenty of opportunities to run into her.

And then what? Admit that she was a law enforcement officer, out of her jurisdiction, who'd tracked her down to Austin and then *followed her onto the train?* If they'd met on the porch of Anna's house, she might have got away with the claim that other leads in the case had brought her to Texas, to explain why she hadn't just phoned. But now she'd have to find a different way to engage with her, and maybe tell an even bigger lie.

Beth slumped into her seat, feeling a mixture of shame at her transgressions and a stubborn insistence on the justness of her cause. If Anna was on her way to an assisted dying clinic, no one had the right to talk her out of that decision, but OG had no right to make it a condition of her win. Even if there was some quasi-medical justification—like a claim that cryonic preservation of the brain would be jeopardized if the disease progressed much further—it was beholden on OG to make that clear to every applicant upfront, in whatever language their lawyers were happy with. Discussing it in secret with one prospective winner at a time was unconscionable.

Beth waited an hour, then went to the bathroom, and used the return trip to walk the whole length of the car, stretching her legs and pretending to be looking out at the view to the east as she scanned her fellow passengers. No one struck her as a candidate for Anna, so she waited another hour and a half before doing the same thing looking west, but again she had no luck.

A message announced that the dining car was open for lunch; Beth made her way there, and soon found herself sharing a table with a family who were traveling from San Antonio to visit relatives in Dallas. Beth claimed she was headed to Little Rock for a great-aunt's funeral, hoping that the somber purpose of her journey would discourage further questioning, but she ended up having to concoct a backstory about her life as an office manager in Tucson.

She'd been eating deliberately slowly to prolong her stay, and as the family departed she noticed a young woman at a nearby table, who the father had been blocking from her view. The woman was gazing pensively out the window; she had the whole table to herself, perhaps because she'd guessed correctly when the lunchtime peak would end, or perhaps because she had an air of fierce melancholy that discouraged other travelers from disturbing her.

Beth felt sure that it was Anna even before the woman turned away from the window to speak to a waiter, and the features now visible confirmed the match. But what could she actually do now? Try to make small talk—across the gap between their tables—in the hope that she could steer the conversation somewhere useful? Claim that her great-aunt in Arkansas had passed away from cancer and expect Anna to open up about her own prognosis, her cryonic ambitions, the lottery, everything?

"Are you done, ma'am?" the waiter asked her, glancing at the almost empty plate that she hadn't touched for ten minutes.

"Yes, thank you," she said. He took the plate, and Beth rose and left the dining car.

Back in her seat, she forced herself to reassess the whole situation. The trip to Austin might have been worth it if things had worked out differently, but getting on the train had been a mistake. All she could do now was try to cut her losses.

She took out her phone and opened the journey planner, searching for options for

making her way home before she'd wasted the whole weekend. Dallas would work; Beth was embarrassed at the thought of the Dallas-bound family catching her out in her lie, but the train would stop for a full twenty minutes there, so she could disembark and pretend to be getting some air. She booked a flight home, cursing herself for all the money she'd wasted, the rules she'd flouted, and her whole half-assed plan.

It was twenty past three when they pulled into Union Station. Beth got out and stood on the platform; she waved to the family when they left, then lingered to give them time to be clear of the place.

Anna emerged from the train and paced for a while, stopping to do neck rolls and triceps stretches. Beth resisted the urge to call out to her, "Got much further to go?" or some other ice-breaker that would lead nowhere. But she still couldn't bring herself to walk away. After a couple of minutes she noticed another passenger—a dark-haired man wearing a blue plaid shirt—standing nearby gazing intently at his phone, but sneaking glances at Anna.

The staff loaded baggage onto the train, and new passengers started boarding. Anna headed for the exit; Beth noticed her go before Plaid Shirt did, but when her absence registered he looked around with some agitation, and it was all Beth could do to keep herself from staring right at him. But she saw him leaving in her peripheral vision, and after a few seconds she went after him.

Beth lost sight of both of her quarry as she weaved through the crowd in the station building, but when she emerged onto the street she spotted Anna, walking past a fountain in a small, tree-lined square directly ahead. Beth crossed the road and veered left, sticking to the sidewalk and maintaining a measured pace. She noticed Plaid Shirt, on the other side of the square, a little ahead of Anna. It seemed obvious to Beth that he was tailing Anna, but was it obvious to Anna? She might have been dawdling on the platform in order to throw off potential pursuers, or she might simply have been working some kinks out of her muscles after six hours on the train, entirely oblivious to how many people had taken an interest in her movements.

Anna took a shallow flight of stairs up from the sunken paving of the square, then turned right. Plaid Shirt had already crossed the street at the end of the square and continued on his way. Beth also kept walking in the same direction, but she took out her phone and checked the map. She was heading east on Wood Street, but it actually veered south and converged on Young Street—the street Plaid Shirt was on—after three more blocks. If Anna didn't show up at that intersection, Beth would have to double back and go looking for her, but for now it seemed prudent not to dog her footsteps too closely.

After she'd walked one block beside a tall white building, the next block separating the streets was filled with trees and some kind of small park enclosed with low stone walls. Beth was tempted to peer between the obstacles to try to catch a glimpse of exactly who was walking down Young Street, but she disciplined herself and waited for the greenery to give way to a parking lot, where a single glance told her that Plaid Shirt was still there, with Anna a dozen paces behind him.

The final, triangular block before the streets merged was another verdant park. Beth slowed her pace a little, and made sure that she'd be out of Anna's sight whichever way Anna looked as she crossed at the intersection. Once Beth was behind her on Young Street, she adopted a neutral gaze, keeping Anna in view without staring at her fixedly. Plaid Shirt was not much further ahead.

As the three of them continued east, Beth finally gave some time to the question of why on Earth anyone else would be tracking Anna. Had OG sent this man to observe her death and ensure that her remains were properly collected? Was Plaid Shirt a kind of cryonic helmsman, whose presence Anna was perfectly aware of, and who was merely keeping his distance out of tact? But why would Anna come to *Dallas* to end

her life? Assisted dying was illegal throughout Texas, but Austin seemed a more likely place to find illicit help. Anna had no family here that Sherlock had dug up, but maybe she had a friend—someone in whose company she'd feel safer than she would have with her housemates.

Anna took a left turn; Plaid Shirt continued down Young Street. Beth broke into a slow jog, hoping she just looked like she was late for a bus.

When she reached the corner she caught sight of Anna again, walking by the Presbyterian Church. If Plaid Shirt had doubled back, Beth couldn't spot him. She stopped running and forced herself to relax. Maybe she'd been wrong about everything: Anna's impending suicide, Plaid Shirt's sinister presence. He might have just been checking Anna out at the station because he couldn't help himself, but then left in a hurry for some entirely different reason.

Anna continued north, past the church, crossing a side street. Then she stopped and turned to look through the window of a bar, clearly searching for someone inside. She was meeting a friend in a bar. There was no reason to think this was a prelude to suicide. Beth could already imagine sheepishly recounting the whole ludicrous pursuit to her husband, as he stifled his amusement and listened sympathetically to her justification for each step she'd taken along the way.

Anna rolled her neck, did one more stretch, then reached into her jacket and took out a gun. Beth's skin turned icy, and she bellowed at the top of her lungs, "Police, drop your weapon, get on the ground!"

Anna spun to face her. Beth repeated the words, arms outstretched, holding up her badge. Anna stared at her and burst into tears, then knelt down on the sidewalk, trembling, still holding the pistol.

Beth approached, took the weapon from her and ensured that it was safe. "Lie face down and clasp your hands behind your head," she said. Anna complied, sobbing more loudly now.

Beth called 911, explaining what she'd seen and the current situation.

"How will I get there?" Anna asked. She sounded like a bewildered child, asking for directions in a desolate forest.

Beth hesitated. But she was not the arresting officer; it wasn't her place to read Anna her rights.

"Get where?" she asked.

"The future," Anna replied. "How will I get to the future now?"

* * *

9

"Her lawyer's saying she was in fear of her life from you," Detective Hodder told Beth. "That's the only reason she drew the weapon."

"From me?" Beth tried to read his face, wondering how seriously he was taking this claim. "From an unarmed woman walking down the street twenty yards behind her?"

"You did follow her from the station," Hodder pointed out.

"I did, but I don't think she even recognized me until after I confronted her," Beth said.

"Maybe," Hodder replied. "But that's not what she's arguing."

"She was planning to shoot someone in that bar," Beth insisted. "If Ms. Grasso noticed me at all, she just assumed I was a civilian too far away to react in time to bother her."

"So when you did confront her, why didn't she just shoot you?" Hodder countered.

"Because she hadn't planned for that," Beth suggested. "She had some picture in her mind as to how it would all play out, and I wasn't part of it." Or maybe Anna had been so confused at that moment that she thought Beth was pointing a gun at her—as any local officer shouting "drop your weapon" most likely would have been—but Beth had no intention of saying anything now that fed into the notion that Anna had been afraid of her.

"If you wanted to interview her in relation to a mine collapse in Colorado, why didn't you go through the proper channels?" Hodder asked.

"That was a mistake on my part, absolutely," Beth admitted. "She wasn't a suspect, just a possible witness to a peripheral matter, and the whole link was such a stretch that I thought it would be hard to justify taking up Austin PD's time. But that's no excuse; I should have done things by the book."

"So what are your thoughts now?" Hodder asked. "Who did she want to kill in that bar? And why?"

Beth shook her head. "I was hoping you might have the answer. You didn't find anyone with a connection to her? Old boyfriend? Old boss?" Anyone she might want to settle a score with before the cancer took her.

"No."

"Any luck with the man I saw following her?" They'd only given Beth ten minutes with the identikit software, but she was sure she'd arrived at a pretty good likeness of Plaid Shirt.

Hodder said, "He was probably just a traveler going about his business. You're the only person Ms. Grasso noticed following her."

"Are you going to charge her with anything?" Beth asked.

"We'll decide that in due course," Hodder replied. "And if we need to speak to you again, we'll be in touch."

* * *

10

"I have a theory," Beth told Ken reluctantly, after she'd recounted the events of the trip. "But it's still pretty tenuous."

"I'm listening," he said.

"OG picked Anna to be the next lottery winner, so long as she passed an interview with their psychologists. But when they screened her out, that made her so desperate to pay her own way that she went on the dark web and offered to do a hit. That's what 'earning the prize with courage' meant."

"And Plaid Shirt was the customer, making sure it went down the way he'd paid for?" Ken suggested dubiously. "If I put a hit on someone, I wouldn't hang around to supervise the killer. I'd be out of town all day with a rock-solid alibi."

"Yeah, I really don't see where he fits in," Beth confessed.

"So what do we do now?" Ken asked.

"Keep monitoring the forums, and see what comes up."

Beth returned to her office and sat down to review the tenders for repainting the station. There were three, all from locals with good reputations, but two were identical bids, and she had no idea how to decide between them.

She stared at the screen of her computer, her head fuzzy from a lack of sleep. She still believed she'd been right to pursue the thread she'd grabbed onto when she learned of Aden's suicide, but could she honestly say she was any closer to finding justice for Carl? That might yet all be down to some corner-cutting contractor who'd skimmed on materials in the vault.

A handset icon flashed at the top of her screen, beside a verified address ending in *fbi.gov*. Beth tapped the green button to answer.

"This is Sheriff Andersen."

"Special Agent Linda Castillo. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you. And you?"

"Fine." Castillo paused—smiling amiably, maybe just gathering her thoughts—but Beth had time to wonder if her pursuit of Anna, springing from a violation of federal privacy laws, was about to deliver its comeuppance far more swiftly than she'd imagined.

"I believe you completed an identikit image for a man you encountered in Dallas on Saturday, close to the scene of a firearms incident involving a woman named Anna Grasso?"

"That's correct," Beth replied. But why was she leading with Plaid Shirt?

Castillo said, "The individual you saw is known to us. I can't disclose his name, but I was hoping you could provide some context that . . . maybe goes beyond what we were supplied with by Dallas PD."

"You've read my statement?"

"Yes. But I'm trying to understand why this individual would have an interest in Anna Grasso, and what role he might have played in the incident you witnessed."

Beth said, "I've been puzzling over that myself. Is there anything you're able to tell me about him?"

"He works for a criminal syndicate," Castillo replied. "If I had to give him a job description, it would be one part low-level muscle, nine parts private investigator."

"So he might have been tailing Ms. Grasso, like I thought?" Beth felt a glow of vindication.

"It's possible. But I'm wondering why."

"If she was paid to kill someone in the bar, he might have been . . . monitoring her attempt." Beth explained why Anna could have been willing to go to such extremes for the money.

"The trouble I have with that theory," Castillo said, "is that there was no one on the list of patrons who makes sense as a target for his organization. No one who'd be of interest to them at all."

"All right." Beth pondered this. "But he didn't actually follow her there. He seemed to want to know where she was going, but in the end he just let her go, and walked away."

Castillo frowned. "So what are you suggesting?"

Beth said, "What if he knew, or suspected, that Ms. Grasso had come to Dallas to kill someone, but it wasn't a hit his own people had arranged, and he didn't know who the target was? What if his job wasn't to watch her make the hit, but to make sure that whoever she shot wasn't anyone his bosses cared about?"

Castillo didn't seem persuaded. "How would he know about this hit, without knowing who the target was? This woman's not some professional assassin who sets the whole underworld quaking with fear every time she leaves town."

"No," Beth conceded.

"Why were you tailing her in the first place? Your statement's a bit confusing on that point."

Beth said, "I thought she might have been given an ultimatum, pressuring her to end her life so she could go into cryonic storage. I just wanted to talk to her and find out if that was true. On the train, I decided I hadn't really acted in a way that would inspire her to confide in me, but . . . then I saw that man go after her, and I thought she might be in some kind of danger from him."

Castillo looked more bemused than ever. "Why did you think she was being

pressured to kill herself?"

Beth explained what Aden's father had told her.

"Give me a minute," Castillo said. She switched off her camera without breaking the call.

Beth sat and waited, trying not to let any signs of impatience creep onto her face.

Castillo reappeared. "Aden Caruso was questioned in relation to a shooting in Baltimore," she said. "A couple of months before his death."

"As a witness?" Beth asked. "Or as a suspect?"

"He was placed in the area, and some witnesses described the shooter having similar build and clothing. But he had no criminal history, and no apparent motive."

Beth struggled to make sense of this. "He won the lottery," she said. "He didn't need to turn amateur hit man to get the money for the vault."

Castillo gazed back at her in silence for a moment. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Sheriff?"

Beth said, "Can I give you some other names? Other lottery winners?"

She emailed Castillo the other fourteen names she'd collected, then took her lunch break, eating at her desk.

"I can smell those pickles from here!" Ken called to her.

"Sorry."

"It's just making me hungry, that's all."

Beth replied, "You can eat now too, if you want." They'd had a system for years where they staggered their breaks, but if they both had their mouths full when an emergency call came in, she'd consent just this once to Sherlock answering.

It was almost two hours before Castillo called back. "Six of those lottery winners were associated in some way with unsolved shootings," she said. "Either as witnesses or potential persons of interest."

Beth was still reluctant to spell out where this was heading; let the FBI agent who hadn't stalked a dying woman from Austin to Dallas take the risk of sounding crazy.

Castillo said, "The 'win' has nothing to do with luck, and nothing to do with charity. It's payment for carrying out a hit. OG are raising funds by selling the services of terminally ill assassins. Cleanskins, with no criminal record and no connection to the victim."

Beth felt some relief that they'd reached the same conclusion, though it was so repugnant that she would have been happier to be wrong. "I saw an interview with a Taliban commander once," she recalled. "He was boasting that during the insurgency, in the right madrassas in Pakistan he could find an endless supply of suicide bombers: boys so ignorant and impressionable that they really did believe they'd go straight to paradise if they did whatever he told them. OG have found their own fundamentalist madrassas: forums full of people who believe they can die, and be frozen, and wake up in paradise, so long as they've done what it takes to book a ticket."

Castillo said, "There's more. My mob guy's not into cryonics, and I don't think his people ordered any of these hits . . . but they were on the receiving end at least twice."

Beth understood now. "They must have figured out who the killers were, eventually, but by then they were just frozen heads. So they triggered the cave-in to send a message that nobody who messed with them would make it to paradise."

"And it looks like OG got the message," Castillo added. "They didn't stop playing the game, but they got more careful; whoever Grasso was hired to kill in that bar had no mob connections at all. I don't know how my guy knew she'd been chosen, though."

"The same way I knew something was up with her," Beth guessed. "They unleashed their own software on the forums. They looked at all the patterns and picked up on the cues."

"Ha." Castillo hesitated. "This is all conjecture, though. How are we going to prove

any of it?"

"Can't you interview Anna Grasso?"

"Sure. But do you think she'll talk? Dallas PD aren't charging her with anything, and I don't have anything more on her than they do. OG might even hold up their end of the bargain just to buy her silence."

"If they kept going after the mob bombed Vitrosophy," Beth reasoned, "that little setback in Dallas won't stop them."

"Probably not," Castillo agreed.

"So we just need to find the next assassin as soon as possible, without cutting it as fine as I did with Anna."

"And then what? We can try to stop them, but that doesn't mean they'll talk. And we're not going to get warrants for surveillance from any of this crazy shit."

Beth fell silent. She could hear Ken talking to Sherlock; they were arguing about the best gangster movies of all time. Sherlock had absolutely no conception of what a movie was, but it had digested enough random internet chatter to pass for someone with a passionate opinion on the correct ranking of the *Godfather* trilogy.

"Okay," she said. "We don't identify the next assassin, then. We provide the next assassin. We create the next assassin. We fake the next assassin, by giving their employer exactly what they want to hear."

* * *

11

"I have a favor to ask you," Beth told Professor Dwyer. "A request I'm hoping you can pass on to your contacts."

"Okay," Dwyer replied warily. "What kind of request?"

"You've been in touch with a lot of apostates," Beth said. "Do you think any of them would be willing to let a law enforcement agency take over their old accounts on the forums—in the service of bringing down their enemy?"

She explained what she was looking for: a longstanding, pseudonymous online presence, with a history of support for OG's dogma, that had ended in silence—or maybe just a hint of doubt—rather than an emphatic recantation from which there'd be no coming back.

"And what would you do with the accounts?" Dwyer asked.

"Operate them with a chatbot that imitates their original style," Beth replied, "but dials the fanaticism up to eleven. Pretend that the hiatus was due to some bad news on the medical front, but now that they've accepted the diagnosis, they're absolutely committed to facing the Gorgon. Basically, act like a perfect lottery winner, and see if OG takes the bait."

Dwyer laughed. "Is this all about them rigging the lottery?"

"No, it's more than that," Beth admitted. "I can't tell you exactly what the investigation is trying to establish. But I can promise that if it works out, it will be about as close to strangling OG with their own entrails as the law allows."

* * *

12

"Sherlock can do all three at once," Ken insisted, peering at Beth through the bars of the jail cell. The painters had taken over her office for the day, so she'd moved her

desk into the cell, where the Wi-Fi was actually better. “ZonesOfOught, DarkCardinal, and BayesianBae; he won’t mix up the characters.”

“I’ll want to see every post before it’s sent,” she said. “You know these programs can spit out nonsense sometimes?”

“I’ve told him it’s important, and to be careful,” Ken replied.

“I’ve told my cat how much my couch cost, but that didn’t save the upholstery,” Beth retorted. “Run everything by me.”

The three donated personas had all passed the test that neither Sherlock nor the FBI’s software, when limited to public sources, had been able to identify their real-world counterparts. They’d all dropped out of the scene abruptly, without renouncing its fundamental tenets. And while they might not have been ideal lottery applicants in the past, Sherlock had examined all the posts by the fifteen known winners, and would morph its version of the new candidates’ language toward the patterns the winners had shared.

Castillo called. “Bad news,” she said. “My boss nixed the use of undercover operatives. We don’t have anyone we can spare.”

“Oh.” Beth had half been expecting the decision, but it was still a blow. Even if one of their sock puppets became a potential winner through rhetoric alone, it was impossible to anticipate whether a meeting in the flesh would be needed to seal the deal. On the one hand, OG might prefer a purely virtual recruitment, with no one whose actions they could be held responsible for ever setting foot in the same room as the would-be assassin. On the other hand, a few text messages and a video chat seemed like an awfully thin basis to weed out people who might screw up their first attempt at a contract killing. And so far, the actual lottery winners didn’t seem to have screwed up.

“So what do we do?” she asked. “Just use synthetic faces on the lottery applications, and hope one of them can get the gig without showing up for an interview in person?”

Castillo nodded glumly. “That’s about it. I’ll talk to our ID lab and make sure we get people on the driver’s licenses that they can also do in realtime video, but, you know . . . the shape-shifting robot agents they promised us are always fifty years away.”

When the call ended, Beth looked up to see Ken standing by the vending machine. It was meant for prisoners and their visitors, but it didn’t get much use that way, so he always dutifully consumed the stock he’d put into the machine before it expired.

“Did you hear any of that?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s disappointing, but we’ll still try.”

Ken said, “I can do it.”

“Do what?”

“Play one of the applicants. In case OG want a meeting.”

“You can’t play all three,” Beth said. “We can’t afford a Hollywood make-up artist . . . and even in those weird comedies where the star does extra roles in drag or a fat suit, you can always tell it’s the same person.”

Ken smiled. “But isn’t it better to have a one-in-three chance than none at all?”

Beth was on the verge of delivering a lecture on how much training an undercover agent needed. But he wouldn’t be joining any criminal gangs, or even going through the motions of the hit itself. He’d just have to make it through one interview, up until the point where he was offered an inducement to commit a premeditated homicide.

“You’d need to move out of state for a couple of months,” she said. “An applicant within a hundred miles of the vault would just look suspicious, and so would someone who moved house the day before.”

"I know," Ken replied. "It'll be hard to be away from Loraine and my folks for so long . . . and I know it won't be easy talking like I believe all that crap. But Sherlock can keep up the act for as long as it takes. I just need him to be ready to feed me my lines."

* * *

13

Castillo organized an apartment in Boston and a three-day training course for Ken that covered the basics of maintaining his new identity. DarkCardinal, aka Randal James, was a freelance video editor resurfacing on the forums after a diagnosis of liver cancer. Beth still had some misgivings about the whole thing, but the FBI assessed the risk as low, and when she drove Ken to the airport, he was as keen, and as focused, as she'd ever seen him.

The winner of the lottery round that Anna had entered outed herself on the forums as a German man who'd opted for cryonic interment in Greenland, but Beth supposed that didn't preclude some other arrangement that kept Anna onside with OG. In any case, there was no point leaning on her now; any sign of ongoing interest from law enforcement would only push their target into adopting more stringent precautions.

Beth's days took on a surreal edge, with the occasional bar fight or DUI requiring her presence, interspersed with her new job of vetting Sherlock's posts to be sure they maintained the right tone and didn't veer off into complete *non sequiturs*. ZonesOfOught needed to keep up his history of advocating for a new galactic order, where everyone's moral worth would be determined by their count of potential informational offspring, and people would fight duels of wit and strategy while represented by tornado-like avatars comprised of their swirling, exponentially blossoming future family trees. BayesianBae was simpler; she just had to talk about her "priors" ten times a day for everyone to know that she was back.

When applications opened for the next lottery round, the FBI supplied the necessary identity documents, complete with two ghost addresses that showed up in all the online databases despite having no physical counterparts. Beth looked over the three submissions carefully before they were sent; it was eerie to see Ken's face—with no fat suit, but enough strategically injected filler to stop algorithms matching him to past photos on the web—beside the false name on his driver's license and his actual location in Boston, while knowing that the other two impostors were entirely virtual. It was like fishing with two feathers for bait, and one live, wriggling worm.

* * *

14

Beth was woken by a call from Castillo an hour before dawn. "They've just told Lawrence that they want to interview him to confirm his eligibility."

"Lawrence" was ZonesOfOught. "In the flesh, or video?"

"Video," Castillo replied. "If you want to watch, it's in half an hour."

Beth said, "You bet."

Gary stirred without opening his eyes. "Go back to sleep," she whispered, hoping the words would act on him subliminally. Then she rose, dressed, and drove to the station; her computer at home wasn't authorized to access the FBI feed.

She logged in just as the video call went through. The FBI software was handling the

avatar's mannerisms and tone of voice, while Sherlock was supplying the words. Beth was starting to wish they'd found a way to have the real ZonesOfOught puppet the avatar for this part; the technology could have managed it easily, but Castillo's superiors had vetoed any further civilian involvement beyond the acquisition of the accounts.

"Hello, Lawrence, I'm Dr. Fleischer," a cheerful middle-aged woman declared.

"Hi. Nice to meet you." The synthetic Lawrence seemed amiable but suitably apprehensive.

"I'm a clinical psychologist, and the Optimized Giving Foundation has asked me to talk to you about your application for the Cryonic Lottery. Is that okay with you?"

"Sure. They told me you'd be calling."

"That's terrific," Dr. Fleischer enthused. "Okay. I believe you've been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer?"

"Yes."

"And your life expectancy is something like fifteen months at this point?"

Lawrence nodded and lowered his gaze.

"So how do you feel about that?"

"Not great," he said. "But I'm hoping the lottery can turn things around."

"If you did win the lottery, how do you think things would change for you?" Dr. Fleischer asked.

Lawrence looked up, smiling slightly, as if he'd just stumbled on the easiest question in a test. "Completely," he said. "For a start, I'd get all my energy back, 100 percent. I'd finally have something to look forward to, apart from all the side effects from the drugs and all the pain."

"You'd still have the disease, and you'd still be taking the same medications," Dr. Fleischer pointed out.

"But they'd be robbed of their power over me," Lawrence declared. "It's about having a purpose, having hope for the future. If I won the lottery, I'd bet you anything I could run . . . maybe not a marathon, but at least a mile."

"And if you did win the lottery, how do you see your situation a couple of years from now?"

"I'd be waiting for what I've been waiting for my whole life," he replied. "But a lot more easily, because time won't be passing for me at all."

Dr. Fleischer smiled. "And are you confident that the cryonic process will take you somewhere you want to be?"

"Absolutely," Lawrence assured her. "I already know that world like the back of my hand. And I know this sounds immodest . . . but I think I've already played a big part in shaping it. My ideas have had a lot of traction in the community; even after I've gone, they'll just keep gathering new adherents. You could say I'll be leaving behind a memetic virus that will spend the next millennium setting the stage for me."

"And how do you feel about what happens in between?" Dr. Fleischer pressed him. "You have a clear vision of the eventual outcome, but your body will still need to be legally dead before it can undergo the cryonic treatment."

Lawrence said, "Let me put it this way. If you strew broken glass on the road, and ask me to walk barefoot toward a city a billion times more beautiful than anything Earth has ever seen, where I'll be a trillion times more wealthy, and where I can live the most fulfilling life imaginable until the end of time . . . would I be happier if the glass wasn't there? Sure."

"But given that it *is* there, and there's no getting around it, will I stop walking halfway and bury myself in the dirt instead, because the pain is too much to bear? The fuck I will. I'm in this to the end."

* * *

A week on from the interview, Beth found the silence from OG hard to take. She believed the synthetic Lawrence had done well; Sherlock had given him a cockiness and grit that it had found in all the past winners, and short of actually volunteering to do the job he wasn't meant to know he was auditioning for, what more resolve could poor Z have shown? She might not have hired him to carry out a hit without some further, more hit-related conversation, but if you wanted a shining-eyed fanatic ready to do whatever it took to reach paradise, Lawrence was clearly your man.

"Could they have spotted that he was synthetic?" she asked Castillo.

"No," Castillo said firmly. "We have the best detection tools, and he passed them all."

"What about the phony street address?"

"That's not really suspicious in itself; you can buy them in bulk on the dark web, and it's become a kind of libertarian trend to use them whenever you can get away with it. If OG wanted a visit in person, they could have just called him out on it."

"Could he have . . . deviated too much from the old ZonesOfOught posts? Could Sherlock have pushed him too far toward the winners?"

Castillo remained adamant. "His actual vocabulary and syntax stayed consistent, but the cancer diagnosis was *meant* to have shaken up his thinking, clarified things for him, changed the emphasis. Honestly, it looks to me more like they're just taking their time and interviewing several candidates."

Two days later, when the message came, Beth was checking out a reported break-and-enter at the antiques shop, but she forced herself to complete the inspection properly and not rush the job.

"I'm pretty sure now it was a raccoon," she told Mr. Kline. "A human burglar would have taken something more than those painted eggs."

"But why would a raccoon take a hundred-and-twenty-year-old egg?" he asked.

"Is it possible that the person who sold them to you exaggerated the age a little?" she suggested.

She arrived back at the station a few minutes into Ken's interview with Dr. Fleischer.

"Just look at me," he said, spreading his arms. The yellow tinge in his eyes was straight from a bottle, but there was nothing fake about his newly gaunt frame. "Do you honestly think I'd waste your fucking prize, if I won it?" It was shockingly direct coming from Ken, but entirely in character for DarkCardinal, who'd been less grandiose and narcissistic than ZonesOfOught before his apostasy, but a whole lot pricklier. "I've been tortured and humiliated by this body for more than three years now; the last thing I'd ever do is lie down and give in to it."

"You see yourself as distinct from your body?" Dr. Fleischer asked. "Battling it, like an enemy? But where are you in that fight?"

Ken sighed. "Let's not get bogged down in the philosophy. Right now, I *am* this failing body. But another body, built to mimic the first without the disease, would also be me. And another that mimicked it without all the same frailties, and so on. If you're asking whether I'm afraid I'll be revived in too healthy and robust a form to still be 'myself' by some weird purist's definition . . . seriously, that's the least of my worries. Here's my message for Stheno: if that which kills me makes me stronger, bring it on. I've got nothing to fear from you."

He stared into the camera defiantly. "Randal" might not believe he'd be heading for a future as opulent as the one "Lawrence" had painted, but he looked as hungry for a second chance as a starving prisoner dragged before a firing squad, refusing a

blindfold because he planned to halt the bullets with the sheer contempt of his gaze.

"Thank you for speaking to me," Dr. Fleischer said.

"Don't thank me," he replied. "Just tell me I jumped through all the right hoops for you. Tell me I'm still in the draw."

Dr. Fleischer hesitated, maybe on the verge of spouting some official line about the date when the winner would be notified.

But something in his performance must have got under her skin, enough to compel a little more honesty.

She said, "Yes, you're still in the draw."

* * *

16

Beth's phone buzzed just as she was sitting down to dinner. "I have to go," she said, rising from her chair, then leaning down to kiss Sophie on the cheek. "Sorry."

Gary nodded at the stew already on her plate. "I can put that in a container, if you want to take it with you to microwave."

Beth shook her head. "I'll have it when I get home."

When she logged in at the station, she brought up a transcript of the encounter so far, and skimmed it as she listened to the live audio from Boston. A man calling himself Hermes had knocked on Ken's door and said he wanted to speak to him about his lottery application. "Right now you have a lot of competitors," Hermes had told him, "but there might be a way to get ahead of the pack."

Hermes had asked Ken to leave his phone and watch behind, patted him down, and run a radio-frequency detector over his body. Beth gathered that the implant sitting beside Ken's eardrum interacted with ambient Wi-Fi and cell phone signals in much the same manner as ordinary human tissue, and it would have taken days' worth of measurements to show that any communication was occurring, let alone reveal the content. In any case, the two of them had left the apartment together, implant intact, and now they were walking down a quiet street nearby.

"There's a job you could do for us," Hermes said. "It would help advance the goals we share, but it would involve some risk, and it would require real courage."

"What kind of risk?" Ken asked, not sounding fearful, just impatient for clarity.

"The kind you could mitigate with attention to detail," Hermes replied.

"Oh, I'm all about the detail. Do you want to see my meds schedule?"

"Before I brief you," Hermes said, "I need to know that you're serious."

"What, your shrink didn't believe me?" Ken probably didn't need to amp up his own exasperation much to match DarkCardinal's. "I'm drowning, you asshole. Just toss me a lifeline and tow me to the nearest iceberg."

Hermes said, "Sometimes people kid themselves that they can hang on a bit longer, and a cure will show up. It's only natural to hope for that."

"I follow the research," Ken replied firmly. "That boat's not coming."

"You believe, without a shred of doubt, that you'll be dead within a couple of years?"

"Yes."

"So if I asked you to do something that would guarantee the same outcome, you'd have no reason to refuse?"

Ken paused; Beth could imagine an irritated scowl. "What's this job? Cleaning up radioactive waste?"

Hermes said, "The job won't burn you, if you do it properly. But I can't tell you anything more if you don't commit to this. We can't have loose ends hanging around for

decades."

"Do I look like I have decades ahead of me?"

"Remissions happen," Hermes said flatly. "If you want to gamble on a remission, that's your right. But if you want to commit to a clear path ahead, you can do that right now."

"And then you'll tell me what the job is?"

"Yes," Hermes promised.

"Then I 'commit to a clear path ahead.'" Ken added, *sotto voce*, "Whatever that means."

"It means injecting this," Hermes replied.

Beth said, "No, no, no, no, no." On the map, they were standing beside a bus shelter; at this time of night, that might be all they needed to avoid being seen or interrupted.

She picked up her phone and called Castillo.

"What's in the vial?" Ken asked.

"Does it matter exactly what it is?"

Ken laughed incredulously. "It does if it kills me on the spot. It does if it's a brain-eating amoeba."

"It's a strain of drug-resistant hepatitis," Hermes replied. "Given your existing condition, the symptoms won't attract any suspicion, but it should speed things up, and it will certainly take all the miracle cures off the table."

Castillo finally picked up. "Are you listening to this?" Beth asked her.

"Yes. Just . . . stay calm. Deputy Osgood will work out the best way to deal with this."

"You get someone there to arrest this fucker," Beth demanded. "A syringe full of virus is enough to charge him."

Castillo said, "Please, Ken knows how to signal for help if he needs it. Just let him handle it."

Ken and Hermes had been silent for a while. Then Ken said, "Yeow, that was cold."

Beth was light-headed for a moment, unable to speak. "Get him help," she pleaded. "There must be something they can do if they reach him fast enough."

Castillo said, "I'll make a call."

Beth leaned on her desk and stared at the words of the transcript, flowing across the screen a second or two behind the audio. But Sherlock was writing half this script, a second or two before it was spoken.

"Now I've passed your initiation," Ken said, "are you going to tell me what I have to do to get frozen?"

"Shoot this man for us," Hermes said. "His name is Sanjay Seth; he's going to be in Chicago eight days from now."

Even if all the cloak-and-dagger precautions had prepared DarkCardinal to expect the worst, this would still be a shock that would take time to absorb. Ken let the silence stretch on for fifteen or twenty seconds, before raising, not a moral objection, but a practical one.

"I don't own a gun," he said.

"We'll provide the weapon. We'll tell you how to travel to Chicago, where he'll be, how to come back safely. How to deal with the police if they question you. Everything you need."

"And if I do this, I'll win the lottery?"

Hermes said, "That's guaranteed."

Ken fell silent again, then asked tentatively, "What did Seth do, to deserve this?"

"That's complicated," Hermes replied. "You'll just have to trust us that you'll be making a better future for everyone, as well as yourself."

"Everyone?"

Hermes said, "Everyone to come. This will make the future bigger by a fraction, but you know that even the tiniest fraction of our whole future light-cone is like—"

In the distance, someone bellowed, "Police! Show your hands! Get on the ground!"

Beth could hear the rustling sounds of their clothes as they complied. Ken whispered to Hermes, with the faintest hint of sarcasm, "Is this part of the test, or did someone see me shooting up?"

"Don't resist," Hermes replied. "Don't talk back, and don't answer any questions. We'll have a lawyer here ASAP."

As the officers moved in, shouting commands, Beth knelt down on the floor and bowed her head, then started rocking back and forth slowly.

* * *

17

Castillo said, "We've checked out the vial and the syringe. It was just saline."

"Saline?" Beth echoed, not quite willing to believe her.

"Sterile, medical grade, isotonic . . . harmless."

"Can I talk to Ken?"

"Not right now," Castillo replied. "He's still with the doctor, but my colleagues there tell me he's fine."

"Why did he accept the injection?" Beth asked her.

"He said he knew it was a bluff. Some lottery winners lived for years."

It was two years, maximum, from the data they had, and that particular case hadn't been linked to any shooting; for all they knew it had been a genuine random win tossed in among the contract killings to throw people off the scent.

Beth said, "Make sure they look after him."

"I will."

It was almost midnight, but Beth couldn't bring herself to leave the station. If she went home, she'd just lie tossing in bed, keeping Gary awake as well.

Finally, she sat down and logged into the administrator account that Ken had created for her when the Sherlock trial had been set up. It was only her third login; she'd left the program pretty much entirely in his hands.

She felt like a trespasser at first, invading his privacy, but that was absurd; if anything, she'd been derelict in not supervising the trial far more closely.

It took a while to get the hang of the interface, and find the lines, and stage directions, Sherlock had been feeding Ken during his encounter with Hermes. She brought up the surveillance transcript in a second window, and went through them together. Ken had improvised now and then, but most of the time he'd repeated the computer-generated script word for word.

And it had worked, hadn't it? Sherlock had merged the old DarkCardinal with enough pre-digested essence of lottery winner to fool OG into recognizing a prime example of what they were looking for, and offering him the same deal. Ken could never have faked it on his own, responding like a genuinely dying, genuinely deluded cryonics cultist; only Sherlock could truly channel this chimera it had created in its own statistical tables.

But when Ken had asked Sherlock to tell him what DarkCardinal would do, it had no real conception of what might happen if its words were acted on. Beth had stood by and let him treat Sherlock as a "friend" who'd watch his back and take a bullet for him, telling herself that he was just having fun, and that no one liked a killjoy. But whatever Ken had told himself in the seconds before he'd put the needle in his vein,

Sherlock had been whispering in his ear, "DarkCardinal would think it over for a while, then he'd go ahead and take the injection."

* * *

18

"The FBI says it could be five or six years before the investigation is complete," Beth told Cheryl. "I'm sorry I don't have better news, but they're working their way through a giant rat's nest. They still don't know how many hits this 'charity' arranged, but it could be as many as forty. Then Carl's death is a whole separate thing; they need to prove that the cave-in was payback."

Cheryl nodded understanding and continued adding pastries to the bag.

"Six is plenty, please!" Beth told her.

"Ken's back, isn't he? He'll eat at least four."

"Probably," Beth conceded. "He needs to get his weight up."

"Thanks for dropping by," Cheryl said. "I know it will take time, but it's good to hear that things are in motion."

Beth left the shop and walked over to the station.

"Morning, partner," she said, waving the bag under Ken's nose, then putting it down on the interview table.

"If I eat those, who'll eat the vending machine candy?" he complained. "You didn't take any of it while I was gone."

"I'm getting rid of that machine," Beth decided.

"I just talked to Special Agent Castillo," Ken said. "She's been looking into Aden Caruso again . . . and it turns out he never had myeloma."

"Huh." Beth stood pondering this.

"He faked the blood tests and PET scans and everything," Ken explained. "All his friends and family thought it was real, but when the FBI got a warrant to look at his medical records, he'd never actually been to the clinic whose name was on the reports he'd been showing people."

"All to get into the lottery," Beth assumed.

"Looks that way."

"So did he kill himself after he'd done the hit because he thought he'd die from OG's injection anyway?" she wondered.

"Maybe he was afraid he *wouldn't* die from what they'd given him, because he wasn't as weak as OG thought," Ken suggested. "And if he hung around as a loose end, things might get messy for him."

"Either way . . ." Beth said.

"Yeah," Ken agreed. "What a waste. Dying like that, and taking another life with him, all for castles in the air."

Beth had been trying to decide on the right time to tackle the subject of what had happened in Boston; she hadn't wanted to harangue him the minute he came back.

"I think the people who built Sherlock gathered together a lot of useful tools," she said. "But the way they're all tied together and packaged . . . isn't so great. It all needs a lot more safeguards, and they need to drop the half-baked imitation of it being some kind of colleague. We both tripped up on things it handed to us; my mistake might still cost me a month in federal prison, and what you did—"

"What I did might have cost me my life," Ken said bluntly. "Do you think I don't know that?"

Beth was relieved; at least he wasn't still in denial. "Okay. So what are we going to do about it? Just wait for LRE to start putting out press releases saying Sherlock

cracked the case of the frozen assassins?”

Ken said, “We’re meant to write an assessment at the end of the trial.”

“Yeah, but that’s just feedback that goes to the company and stays in their hands. I’m thinking we should write something for a criminology journal, making clear what worked, what didn’t, and what the pitfalls are.”

Ken seemed taken aback. “A criminology journal?”

“Why not?”

“Won’t it be tough describing everything that happened, without violating anyone’s privacy, or saying anything that would prejudice the OG prosecutions?”

Beth said, “There are protocols for dealing with that.”

Ken thought it over. “All right,” he decided. “I’m in.”

Beth smiled. “That’s good to hear. Maybe wait a few weeks to gather our thoughts first.”

“Sure.” Ken hesitated. “And maybe Sherlock could write an introduction to the article? Or a few lines of poetry . . . like an epigraph?”

It took Beth a moment to realize he was trolling her. “Absolutely,” she replied. “A few lines of poetry, on the epic struggle to make computers competent enough to help bring down the fools who believe that they’re going to be omnipotent.”