

REDCROSSE

a novel

by

Brad Berens

**“DOWN, BUT NOT OUT”
THURSDAY, APRIL 27, 2023, MORNING**

“Many thanks for your application,” read the text scrolling down the floppy monitor, a disposable plastic sheet that pulled multiple duties as virtual newspaper, email screen, place mat, and—in a pinch—handkerchief. There had been a lot of pinches lately. “We regret to inform you that we do not have a position available at this time.” Polite and worded to avoid any hint of lawsuit-worthy discrimination, the email joined a chorus of electronic voices crooning one song: at twenty seven, Diana McNight was broke, desperate, and unemployable in the city of Los Angeles.

Not quite. She had a standing offer from Lucky Larry Lieber Investigations, but Diana could not admit that her star had fallen so low. How could a former top police detective work for sleazy Uncle Larry, whose corporate motto read *quality surveillance at discount prices*? She had lost her job on the force because of her principles, and could not—would not—abandon those principles now. Another part of Diana’s mind interrupted her reverie to mention the negligible nutritional content of principles. She crumpled the monitor into a little ball and stuffed it into her sweatshirt pocket.

Diana reached to her throat to turn off her computer: the CPU was the largest faux pearl in a short strand looping her long pale neck. It was an expensive machine: not as pricey as the new implanted models, but Diana did not like the idea of wires in her head. She was old-fashioned, that way. She had purchased the necklace when she got her promotion, and chose the pearl chassis because it dressed up a business suit and could still work with formal wear. She had little cause to wear either, recently. Hiding at a corner table in the Peet's Coffee on Santa Monica's Main Street, the weight and look of the necklace especially given her current grungy sweats made Diana self-conscious. It beeped. At last, she thought, a lead. She spread the wrinkles out of her monitor and muttered "go."

"Warning," said a relentlessly upbeat voice. "Your internet service account balance is overdue. You will lose access if your balance is not paid in seventeen hours, six minutes, eight seconds, user time." Accompanying text showed on the rumpled screen, next to her name and account number, as well as an hourglass graphic with sand hemorrhaging out of broken glass. Cheerful voice. Grim picture.

"Delete message. Sleep," Diana said, louder than was necessary, shutting the machine off to conserve access time. She was alone in the crowded coffee house: everyone else had their CPUs up, merrily flitting between cyberspace and the physical realm where the decaff coffee steamed in front of them. She felt beached: stranded and gasping on a blind and deaf island of meat, surrounded by the sunlit sea of data.

This was no way to live.

Diana's credit was sprinting towards red, net access nearly gone, and rent due in a week. At least her Silver Shield health credit account would not expire until the end of the quarter: she did not have to worry about becoming Uncertain for another seven weeks and three days. Each year, she mused, health care got more expensive and more intrusive while service declined. And she was one of the lucky ones: healthy, non Suffering and, at least for a little while longer, Certain. She was past due for her monthly physical, but she could continue to defer the trek back to the

clinic inside of the Bratton/Parker headquarters of the LAPD for another week or so without paying a fine. She couldn't face going back— the endless lines and questions from ex colleagues. Not yet. And if she didn't find a job soon she'd have to drain her savings to COBRA her benefits and transfer to somewhere else within the Visa/Shield family of plans. She hadn't spend this much time thinking about her coverage since... ever. She'd become a cop right after college and hadn't had to worry. Now she saw the world through new eyes.

Looking around the coffee house where she sat, Diana noticed slightly frayed clothes on most people. Men went longer and longer between haircuts. Some women were going without makeup— even the Great Depression hadn't done *that*, she remembered reading. Nobody could afford non-essentials and still make their insurance payments. Nothing was worse than losing coverage, especially if you came down with one of the CyberPlagues. Although dressed shabbily, everyone looked well-toned and fit: with most insurance plans a gym membership resulted in a coverage discount, but only if you went four to five times per week. Diana's gym membership had lapsed three days before.

Diana sipped at her bland latte: caffeine free, fat free, taste free. Her muffin, the chief ingredient of which seemed to be cardboard, was no better. When was the last time she'd had *real* coffee? It was the same for just about everybody sitting in Peet's: on the genetic scans that the big three health credit providers required most people tested positive for the gene linking caffeine to heart disease. In the old days, this had not posed a problem for Joe junkies because it was difficult to find proof of coffee intake from the required monthly blood tests alone, and no insurance company could not afford to run a complete urinalysis and chem panel for every Subscriber every thirty days.

Then, in a brilliant move by Southwest Health Network CEO Stewart Vincente, the health insurance company allied itself with Visa, forever condemning most of its subscribers to decaff. After Southwest, a dozen other regional and national insurance providers followed and the

new company became Visa/Shield. MasterCard jumped into the game with WellPoint and BlueCross, among others, to become Mastercare. Discover changed its name to Discover Wellness. Across the board, to get affordable credit and health care one had to give your carrier access to all purchase records. Fair, Vincente had argued in a memorable series of video commercials, was fair. The Federal Reserve couldn't tweak an anemic economy any more than it already had. For the greatest number of people to get health care in the midst of an epidemic of CyberPlagues individuals had to act responsibly or suffer the economic consequences when they didn't. Watching the ads at the time, Diana agreed with Vincente. A year later, Vincente was named Secretary of Health and Human Services, but he soon left that position to create the InterHealth Alliance that managed health care and financial data, oversaw a national research program, lobbied the Federal government for funds and made sure the big three providers played nicely together. Credited with saving U.S. health care, Vincente died before seeing the fruits of his labor.

Later, before she had quite realized the implications, a pound of coffee beans bought with her Visa/Shield card prompted Diana's health insurance premium to pole vault upwards. It took her eighteen months of decaff, fake eggs, nonfat milk, horrid chocolate substitute, and zealous trips to the gym to coax her rate back down.

At around the same time that the credit and health care became indistinguishable, the Fed started its still-unsuccessful attempt to return to the gold standard. The United States became a cash-poor nation as the Treasury Department withdrew more and more hard currency from circulation. Financially speaking, the single Washington was up in relation to the Yen and the Euro, but nobody could find cash dollars to spend. Only the wealthy and criminals—and wealthy criminals—could get non-networked private credit. Truly obscenely rich people paid cash, always, and got a hefty discount for doing so. They also kept their privacy. Everyone else lived under constant network scrutiny. "Visa/Shield," read that week's slogan in her email inbox, "is watching out for you." Oh, it was

possible to buy full fat dairy in the supermarket, if you could find it, but that high fat, high cholesterol purchase would be instantly registered with the network. For a Subscriber to take a knowing and foresightful health risk was a no-no, one that inexorably raised a monthly premium with each lick of a strawberry ice cream cone.

Diana made a face at her drink. No amount of sugar—it wasn't even real sugar—could make it tasty. She remembered two years before when her uncle Miles was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Told he had only weeks to live and denied an experimental treatment that fell outside of his particular plan, Miles decided to go out in style. He spent a ludicrous sum on a pre-mortem wake for himself, and invited trusted friends to a glutton's paradise of junk food: fatty hamburgers with cheese and bacon, pepperoni pizza, milk shakes, chili, fries, real coffee, beer, and apple pie with ice cream for dessert. Diana's mouth watered at the memory. Each guest was sworn to secrecy, agreed to arrive on foot (so the traffic network would not record their movements), and vowed to leave all CPUs at home so that nothing would be recorded. What did Miles care if his premium went up because of one kamikaze run to the grocery store? He was a corpse already. If, she thought, it were possible to measure decadence by a quantitative cross-cultural standard, that sybaritic party would have made Caligula blush. Eight pain-wracked days later, Uncle Miles died with a smile on his face.

Visa/Shield standardized the denied experimental treatment after six months.

"Fuck it," Diana said. Recognizing her voice, the CPU hummed itself into activity, automatically logged her into the net, and announced that she had three new email offers to switch her coverage. Instant messages started to appear on her monitor. Another few seconds of access lost. "Sleep," she said, and hit the manual power switch hidden in the clasp of her necklace. Now the computer would not wake up until she turned it back on. She reached into her running shoe and found the treasure concealed beneath the lining: a tattered, smelly, dollar bill. She

had discovered the Washington in an old book of her grandmother's, a much-thumbed copy of *Huckleberry Finn* that had been willed to her with a box of other favorites. Subsequent meticulous investigation showed that Nana had not made a habit of using currency as bookmarks.

Diana looked for face recognition cyber-eyes and saw none. She pulled her fraying sweatshirt sleeve over the spot on her wrist where the infrared bar code tattoo was invisibly inked on her moon pale skin: when the net was down the tattoo would take the place of her CPU, linking purchases to her account and queuing up the records for subsequent transmission to Visa/Shield. Tattoo concealed and computer inactive, Diana was invisible to the cybernetic eyes that ordinarily recorded her every move.

She threw her latte in the recycling bin and walked to the register. A bored barista looked up from a 3D-glossy Mastercare-agent-recruiting brochure. Diana paused with quiet drama and said "I'd like a triple latte, caffeinated, with full fat milk."

She felt the room grow quiet behind her. "Are you joking?" he asked.

"No."

The barista looked confused, and called back over his shoulder, "Bill, I need an approval up here."

Bill the manager came forward with a curious glance. The barista nodded at Diana. "She wants a triple latte, caffeinated."

"With full fat milk," Diana added.

"Really?" asked Bill the manager. From the nervous look on his face, it seemed clear that he thought Diana was having a psychotic episode.

"Uh-huh." She smiled reassuringly.

"That's an expensive item, so I'll have to run a credit check," he said, then looked quizzically at the register terminal. "Miss, your CPU is not transmitting an account number. May I flash your barcode?"

"No," Diana said. At this, the other patrons murmured in the background.

She could see Bill the manager rapidly becoming exasperated. "Well, then, I don't see how I can help you." Having abandoned the notion that she was about to pull a gun and start shooting, he clearly thought that Diana was pulling his leg, or perhaps he was worried that she was a health credit inspector trying to trap him in a code violation.

Diana cleared her throat and swallowed. She leaned close and whispered, "I understand there's a cash discount?"

Except for computer crickets and the sound of a paper cup falling to the ground, the silence was complete. Bill the manager's eyes widened. "How... how much?" he asked. Diana held the Washington in front of his face. Still looking at the tattered dollar, he said, "what did you say you wanted?"

"Caffeinated triple latte with full fat milk."

"Sugar?" Bill the manager asked, smiling.

"One please, real."

"Would you like anything else?"

Diana grinned at him. "Got any cookies?"

"Y'know," he said, "we have two non-diet chocolate chip cookies sitting in the freezer. We don't sell enough to keep them fresh." He gestured at the dollar. "The, ah, amount in question would cover both the beverage and the... confections." Diana nodded.

"Bill?" the barista interrupted.

"Make it for her!"

"But Bill," he whined, "where do we keep the full fat milk?"

Bill the manager glared at his employee. "It's in the freezer." He turned to Diana apologetically. "This will take just a few minutes, so can I bring it to you at your table?" He reached for the dollar but Diana pulled it away.

"On delivery."

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

With a thumping song in her caffeinated heart, a milk mustache

on her upper lip, and the remaining cookie in her backpack, Diana strode happily from Peet's, full fat latte in hand, unemployment woes for the moment forgotten.

"The currency," a gruff voice demanded from behind the door.

Diana sized him up: he was big, just under two meters, powerfully built, but he wasn't all *that* big. Dark hair, dark eyes, a common Cau/Asian mix, nervous, this was no career mugger. He'd had a haircut within recent memory, and his clothes were well-cared for, if old. By habit, Diana began a profile: down on his luck middle-management, let go from one of the big three, maybe. She saw the ring. Married. Probably kids. From the calluses on his fingers he looked like someone who had spent a lot of time wearing keyboard gloves, but the arms were muscular. Just lost his benefits.

She could take him.

Diana missed her badge. In the back of her mind she realized that she needed to adjust how she presented herself to the world without it. As a detective she'd compensated for the force insignia: people knew just how much authority she had, and training. It made them anxious. She learned that they were often more willing to talk to a friendly feminine detective than a hard one. Victims responded better when she wore her long black hair loose around her shoulders, rather than tied in a bun like most policewomen. She'd taken to wearing makeup, although not much, finding that a little lipstick could charm more information than a battery of tough-lady questions. Now, without the badge she might appear weak. She could not afford it.

"Pardon me?"

"You heard me," the man said. He gestured with his left hand so that she could see the cheap but nasty Korean mini-taser concealed in his grip. A lefty. "Give me the currency."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Diana said calmly.

"Lady, everybody in there saw you use hard cash. I want the rest."

"There is no more. Honest. Here, let me show you." She loosened

her backpack from her shoulder.

"No." The mugger said. Okay, he wasn't a complete moron: she might have a weapon in there. "I saw you take it out of your shoe."

"Fine." Diana slowly kicked off her shoes and slid them towards him. She was more comfortable fighting barefoot anyway. He ripped out the linings and felt around. There was nothing to find.

"Okay. Drop the backpack. Slowly."

Diana did not move. Her cookie was in the backpack. "Newly Uncertain, huh?" she said. "Tough break." He didn't respond, so she tried another tack. "I used to be a cop. I don't want to hurt you."

He chuckled. "Are you kidding?" What was it about this day that everybody thought she was joking? "Lady," he continued, "I was a Green Beret. The only one who's going to get hurt here is you, if you don't hand over the damn backpack."

Uh oh. If he was a Beret that would make this harder. "I don't have any more currency." She licked the remaining milk from her upper lip and found her balance on the balls of her feet.

"Horseshit. You expect me to believe that you spent your last Washington on a latte?"

"Why, what would you buy?"

"Wait a minute," he said. "Is that *real* coffee?"

She took a long sip of her coffee. Interesting. He hadn't heard her order the drink. "With full fat milk." He was distracted now, vulnerable, looking at the paper cup with a longing that almost made Diana feel sympathy for a fellow addict. Almost.

"Give me the java."

"No."

"What do you mean 'no'? I'll taze you."

"Oh right," she snorted. "Go ahead, taze me. You think you can catch the latte before it hits the ground? If you make me spill this drink I'm going to get angry." At the police academy, the martial arts instructor taught candidates four permitted ways to disarm a suspect in this type of

situation. The instructor was Uncle Miles. Later, in private, he showed Diana three other techniques, and warned her that the chief of police—her father—frowned on their use. They caused too much damage to suspects and tended to result in expensive litigation against the force. She'd never had to fight while protecting her cup of coffee, she thought, taking another sip. A new challenge.

"Just give me the goddamn backpack," the mugger said.

"No." He wasn't going to fire and risk spilling the coffee. "Look," she made a rapid guess. "Sergeant." He blinked in surprise. Good. "I'll make you a deal. You put down the taser and I'll put down the coffee, and then we'll settle this the old fashioned way."

He glanced at his taser, and Diana attacked. She swung her backpack at his eyes and ducked. The coffee sloshed around in the cup. He fired and missed. The electrified darts flew over Diana's shoulder and executed a bush. She swept his legs out from under him with a kick and scuttled crab-like to the side, where she put the drink down near the brick coffee house wall.

Damn. He really was military: he knew how to take a fall and bounced to his feet, pissed. The mugger threw the taser at her and then the backpack. The taser bounced bruisingly off her left arm, but she caught the backpack and tossed it aside, near the latte.

They faced each other, hands out, ready to fight. Diana saw over his shoulder that the Peet's crowd was watching, presumably not bothering to call the police. Good citizenship in action. He circled towards her left. She kept her distance.

"So much for the old fashioned way," he smirked, confident. "Scared?" He didn't take her seriously because she was female. That would help.

Conversationally, Diana said, "So, Sergeant, what are they teaching at Camp Green Bee these days? Ju Jitsu? Karate? Kung Fu?"

"Yes." He was into it now, flexing his hands and hunkering down. He feinted with a left-legged kick: she grabbed his heel and spun him

around. He nearly clipped her with his right, backhand, but she fell back in time. She felt the wind of his blow pass near her face. She knew that he was a lefty, but did he know that she knew this? She couldn't tell. He made a classic stiff-fingered thrust at her larynx, part of a mid-level Karate kata. No subtlety. She blocked it, and broke his nose.

"Brown belt?" she asked.

He wiped the trickling blood off his face. "Black," he sounded insulted. "Second level." He wasn't really hurt, but his posture was more respectful. They circled some more. Diana worried about her coffee getting cold. "You?" He did a fancy leap-kick from a standing position and missed, but it was just to prove his credentials— a black-level move.

"I lost track." It wasn't true. She held a fourth level black belt in several disciplines, but why not keep him guessing. "So, Sergeant, ever hear of Krav Maga?"

"Israeli street fighting technique." He blocked her punch, but he was slower on the right than on the left. He was used to taking advantage of being left-handed. Bingo. "Is that supposed to impress me?" he asked.

"Oh no," Diana said calmly. "Krav Maga isn't about impressing people." He threw three jabs and another side kick at her. She blocked them all, and tripped him. "Nobody cares what belt you hold in a back alley." He tried a weird crane punch what did he think this was, an old Jet Li movie? She dodged and pushed him off balance again. "It's all about staying alive. Bet you fought in the Hong Kong revolution, right?"

He was up again. Getting angrier and stupider. "Yeah. Estonia, too." Punch, block, punch, block.

"Think that's more complicated than being a single woman in L.A.?"

He got her, hard. A side blow to her left neck with his right hand. Diana felt her whole arm disappear into nothingness. She was talking too much, not paying attention. The Sergeant smiled tightly. He went for the same side again. She blocked with her other arm, and kicked the side of his left knee to distract him. He moved in time to avoid most of the force,

but it hurt. He hobbled back a fateful step towards the wall. "No!" She yelled.

He knocked over the coffee cup. The lid popped off, and Diana's priceless latte spread over the concrete. The Sergeant looked down at his feet, then met her eyes, embarrassed.

She did not often lose her temper. Even during the worst moments of her swift exit from the force, Diana kept her cool. She had to. There were other people to consider. Family.

"God damn it," Diana muttered. The feeling was coming back into her left arm— white hot pins and rusty needles.

He looked abashed. She didn't care. With another kick she finished the job on his left knee and sent him down. His shirt soaked up some of the coffee as he dragged himself to his feet, balancing on one leg.

He held up his hands. "Hey," he said. "I'm sorry."

She knocked him out. It wasn't hard. She feinted a punch to his left and he dropped his guard on his right. There was nothing wrong with her left *leg*; it was the arm that felt like it was going to fall off. She kicked him in the jaw. Unconscious before his head hit her backpack, he crushed her cookie.

10:00am, and it was already a rotten day.

The Discover Wellness paramedic arrived first, with the police showing up later. To Diana's surprise Bill the coffee house manager had called during the fight. The medic's name tag read Tyrone Nguyen. He went first to the unconscious Sergeant and scanned him with a bulky device about the size of a shoebox. Satisfied that he was in no immediate danger, Nguyen straightened the Sergeant's injured leg and bound the left knee in bubble wrap that inflated at a touch and immobilized the limb. Looking at the scanner readout, Nguyen fished the Sergeant's CPU out of his pocket and activated it. "Damn," he whispered.

"I think he's Uncertain," Diana said.

"Yeah," Nguyen sighed. "Regs say I have to stabilize Uncertain then stop treatment."

"That sucks," Diana replied, although it was hardly news.

Nguyen met Diana's eyes. "Can you keep a secret?" She nodded. Nguyen held a finger to his lips, then pulled out a saucer-sized metal plate of the InterHealth Alliance logo: a lop-sided, white, five-pointed star drawn over the grey silhouette of the continental United States. "Hi, this is Ty Nguyen. I'm going off grid for a few minutes. Coffee break." The badge bleeped the computer equivalent of an affirmative grunt. Nguyen hurried to his car, took an ancient black doctor's bag from the trunk, and returned.

"What's that?" Diana asked.

"Private supplies. The bag was my dad's back in Viet Nam. A lot of us carry them, these days." Nguyen staunched the blood flow flowing from the Sergeant's broken nose, then probed the injured jaw until satisfied that it wasn't broken. He removed some topical pain-killer from the bag and sprayed it on the Sergeant's jaw. "Did he hit his head when he fell?" Diana shook her head in response. "Good. So who did this to him?"

"Um, me," Diana said. "He started it."

"You Certain?"

"Yes, thank God."

"Plan?"

"Silver Shield."

"Good, I can treat you. Let me log your CPU and then it's your turn." Nguyen hit his lop-sided star badge again, said, "I'm back" and received another beep in reply. "Request authorization to provide Silver Shield treatment." Another beep. He treated the scrapes on her hand and injected an anti-inflammatory into her aching neck that soothed the pain.

Mercifully, when the black and white LAPD squad car pulled up to the curb Diana did not have to face any relatives. Nguyen left, his presence replaced by that of Pete Mondragon, a good cop whom she'd encountered at plenty of crime scenes. Pete was tough and unflappable, kind to victims

and fair with perps. A family man near the end of his twenty year stint. Seeing him made Diana ache for her old job.

Even though it was against the rules, Pete let her look at the mugger's CPU. She had been right about the Sergeant, now slumped in the back of Pete's squad car. A decorated vet from Hong Kong and Estonia, he had been laid off by Mastercare two weeks before. Cutbacks. He had a wife, two little girls, and expiring health insurance. Pete took her statement and those of Bill the manager, the barista, and one customer who shocked everyone by stepping forward. "I'll keep this as quiet as I can," he promised. "But I'll need to log your ID."

Grateful, Diana let her computer handshake with Pete's. She watched him link her identifiile to the incident record, and cloak it all under the highest level of security he could invoke. The record was secure from auto-databasing and casual access. Internal Affairs would see it, and so would her father, but at least the whole precinct would not know that Diana McNight, late lieutenant heading up the Internet Investigations team, now spent her extensive free time beating up unemployed Uncertain war heroes.

"You actually did him a favor," Pete said. "The state will cover their benefits while he's in jail."

"Some favor. I just hope his wife has a job, and that the kids don't get sick."

Pete nodded. He looked her in the eyes and said, "well?"

"What?"

"Are you going to tell me or not?" He wasn't talking about the Sergeant.

"Pete, I can't talk about it."

"There are rumors. Bad ones."

"Do you believe them?"

"No. Not the ones about you."

"Thanks Pete," Diana kissed him on the cheek. It was a gesture she could never have made when she was still on the job. "If I ever can tell

you, I will."

Pete looked at her tenderly. Why had he joined the force? Diana wondered. He should have been a priest, or a counselor. He put one hand on each of her shoulders and looked her dead in the eye. "Diana," he said. "You were a good cop."

It was the past tense that did it: *were*. Tears came and would not stop. Diana felt like she'd been mugged again. Only this time it hurt.

"I've got to go." She grabbed her backpack, still dripping with coffee, and walked quickly up Main Street towards her bus stop on Pico. Her cheeks were wet. An Uncertain homeless man stared, and offered her a tissue. She tried to smile, but said nothing.

By the time her bus came Diana had sufficiently collected herself to remember that her CPU was still on, and that she was losing precious access time. She checked for new email. There were three more emails from the big three inviting her to switch to a new, cheaper health care plan (the advertised rates were now higher than they'd been an hour before), two junkers advertising real estate reclaimed from the Northridge crater, one message from her landlady asking if she planned to keep the apartment, the umpteenth email from her father asking if she was okay, and a surprise.

It was an audiofile with no identifying name: a neat trick, that. Offhand she could only think of two people who could do it. Both were cyber-lobotomized in prison, cut off from the net. She hit play. "It circulates that you are looking for a job," a precise voice said. "I might be able to help. Would you please meet me at the Café Savarine on Melrose later today? Noon, perhaps?"

It was a voice that Diana had not heard in quite some time. John Drakanis. There was no email address to which she could reply. Luckily, her bus was headed in the right direction.

2

“THE INTERVIEW” LUNCHTIME

She was tired, hungry, and late. Halfway to the café, Diana’s transport account expired. The service computer piloting the bus offered her two options: one, renew for another thirty days, two, get off. It then gave her eight seconds to choose before threatening her with a hefty delay-of-vehicle fine that would, given her finances, prevent her from eating for a week.

She started walking. Her feet were already sore from the fight. Two miles of concrete trudging was about to pain them all the more. A bitter internal voice wished that she had kicked the Sergeant harder.

Melrose looked different during the day: used punkfunk clothing stores sat open beside elegant restaurants serving tasteless health food, along with junk food kiosks run by and selling to Uncertains— people beyond caring if their credit records ratted them out. Diana had mostly seen Melrose in its after hours splendor, arresting the cyberpimps who trolled the street for clients after day faded to endless neon twilight.

One vivid case came to mind. Internet Investigations had teamed with Vice because a cyberpimp who called himself Mister Oscar was

combining celebrity images with prostitution. Hooked into a virtual reality headset, the john (or jane) would receive oral sex from a toothless hooker with the image of his favorite movie starlet or star superimposed. Several celebrities had objected, claiming copyright infringement and unlawful use of their images. The fact that prostitution was still illegal did not strike the celebrities' lawyers as significant: there was nothing illegal about a virtual image performing imaginary sex acts on other imaginary people. Whatever, ahem, supplemental activities Oscar had his so-called sex worker employees perform on the viewers were beside the point. Oscar, the celebrities' lawyers asserted, had either to cease and desist or cut them in for a percentage, preferably the latter.

Oscar chose, instead, to use only the images of dead celebrities, acquiring the rights to those images from the respective estates for a comparatively small fee. Now, his clients could get fellatio from a cheerful Marilyn Monroe, cunnilingus from a blinking Hugh Grant, or both from Madonna. Oscar offered a menu of highly kinkified options: Diana hauled one flamboyantly gay man out of a VR fantasy where he played the millionaire in an orgy on *Gilligan's Island*. The sight of Mary Ann going down on Ginger, not to mention what the Skipper had been doing to Lovey Howell, haunted Diana for days afterwards. Most memorable, though, was the horrified look on the customer's face when he realized that the Professor and Gilligan's non-cyber counterparts were women.

Speaking of professors. Diana had not seen John Drakanis in nearly three years, although updates to his wife's file were copied to her account, or had been until recently. The terse and colorless reports cut off emotion like a tourniquet. There was no room on the form for how happy the missing woman looked in her digital wedding album, or how her herb garden dried to dust in her absence, as if the plants themselves missed her. Late in 2019, Dr. Janice Morson Drakanis, epidemiologist and beloved wife, disappeared, winking out of existence. There were no clues. No ransom notes. No corpse. No explanation.

This was before Diana's transfer and promotion to the Internet

division. She had been working Homicide & Missing Persons, then. The soaring third millennial murder rate had prompted the fusion of the two departments, when conventional wisdom dictated that most missing persons wound up the responsibility of homicide, eventually. She got to know Professor Drakanis as well as one could expect to know a man whose wife and life had just evaporated. During the two weeks that he was a tentative suspect she built a profile: a smart man, obscure literary critic, and famously dynamic English Lit teacher at UCLA. His students did not ordinarily know that Drakanis was also one of the university's most active fund raisers. He had extensive ties to the community, was happily married by universal report, and wrote a passionate weekly column for the campus network. The column ended shortly after his wife disappeared. His once-frequent trips to the station for updates trickled away. The tall figure slouched, broad shoulders hunching into a plaintive question mark. The dark brown hair on his left temple crept into gray. Behind thick spectacles his eyes acquired permanent bruised bags, whites so bloodshot they looked pink.

What would he look like now, she thought, and what did he mean that he might help her find a job? It was hot, and Diana was sweaty, tired of walking and wondering when she would find the café. What sort of job job job job job was an English teacher going to get for a former police detective? Job job job job job job job job, food? She spotted the restaurant up ahead. Definitely food: her adrenaline rush from the fight was long gone, and the smashed cookie she gobbled on the bus had provided little sustenance. The Café Savarine quickly disappointed: empty, too-brightly and fluorescently lit, and not smelling edible. Drakanis wasn't there.

"Are you Ms. McNight?" It was the waitress: cute, a tad plump, Northern Italian blonde; she looked too happy for a woman with an empty restaurant. Her nametag read "Maria." Diana nodded. "Drak is waiting for you in the other room, would you please follow me?"

Drak? Maria led her down a long hallway, through sound-buffering curtains, and around a corner.

Diana stepped into paradise. A patio had been covered, the roof turned into a skylight. Sunshine cascaded into a small, noisy room crowded with happy people chatting and eating what looked and smelled like real food. She inhaled through her nose, hoping that the air might transmit calories. Bacon? Diana felt herself shoot into analytic overdrive: the patrons were all well-dressed—no threadbare elbows in sight—and looked not at all nervous. Not, that is, like they were doing anything that would hike their insurance rates to the bankruptcy level, nor worried about NetFinks earning bounties by reporting abuses unrecorded by the InterHealth Alliance. Instant poverty, she giggled to herself: add whole milk and stir. At a central table she saw Mayor Rick Johansen, scowling at her. Damn, she thought. Rick was the last person she wanted to see, with the possible exception of her father. What the hell was this place?

She almost did not recognize the man waving her to a corner table. Professor Drakanis was fashionably dressed in a dark suit, an *expensive* suit, no tweed in sight. The gray temple was still there but masked by an elegant haircut. He no longer wore glasses, which meant either laser correction or corneal implants. Brown eyes. The whites were intelligent, clear and free of blood. No bags. He looked good, more handsome than she remembered. Relaxed but intense. Drakanis had a cup of coffee in front of him, and Diana wondered if it was caffeinated.

“Professor,” Diana said, standing in front of him.

“Detective,” he looked up at her.

“I’m not a detective anymore.”

“So I’ve heard, and much the point of why I invited you to lunch, no? By the way,” he said, “I’m not a professor anymore.” He looked at her steadily, standing in front of him. “Please. Sit.”

Diana sat, silent.

“So,” Drakanis said calmly. “Why don’t you tell me why I asked you to meet me here today, detective.”

“I just told you I’m not a detective, now.”

“You’re not a *police* detective,” he said. “Does that mean you

checked your curiosity at the deli counter?”

A test, Diana thought. And he thinks he’s stopped being a teacher. Fine. “Okay Socrates, answer three yes-no questions,” Diana said, “and I’ll tell you the rest, or some of it.”

“Agreed.” He sat straighter in his chair, sipped his coffee, and smiled expectantly.

“One,” she asked. “Is that the way you normally dress, these days?”

“Yes.”

That told her a lot. “Two. Do people other than waitresses refer to you as ‘Drak’?”

“Yes.”

Bingo. “Three. Is that real coffee?”

“Yes.”

Diana sagged slightly. “Can I have some?”

“That’s four questions,” Drakanis replied.

She sighed. “I know, I know. It’s just low blood sugar talking.”

His eyebrows lifted apologetically. “How rude of me.” He caught Maria’s eye and she bustled over. “Maria, I hope you and Loui can find it in your hearts to feed another hungry mouth today.”

Maria smiled at Diana, “this is your first time in the back café, isn’t it?” Diana nodded. “We just ran out of roast beef, but there is still quite a bit of bacon and some fresh eggs back in the kitchen. Can I suggest a late breakfast?”

Diana’s hungry stomach twisted in on itself. “I can’t afford that,” she said, seeing her InterHealth rate leap into the stratosphere. “Do you have any nonfat yogurt? Maybe some celery?”

“You didn’t explain?” Maria frowned at Drakanis, then turned back to Diana. “Ms. McNight, there’s no charge here in the back café. You are our guest, and because no money changes hands there is also no record on any credit account. We don’t serve finks here, nobody will report anything. Your health insurance rate will not go up. Try the bacon

and eggs? Or an omelet? My father—Loui, he's the chef—has a way with cheese.”

Cheese! Diana's stomach finished twisting as it caromed into her leaping heart. “Maria, I—” she spluttered. “I can't decide.”

“Ms. McNight, why don't I just get Dad to whip something up for you?”

Diana nodded gratefully, and then found her voice. “Maria?”

“Yes?”

“Please call me Diana.”

“Sure, Diana,” she replied, and then swatted Drakanis on the shoulder with her memo pad. “Drak, next time behave yourself or I won't bring you any more coffee.”

“Yes ma'am,” he grinned at her. “My dear, as long as you *are* bringing me more coffee I think your newest admirer would like some as well.”

“Coming right up.”

Drakanis turned back to Diana, a smile lingering on his face. “So, detective, your analysis.”

She held up her hands. “Hold on, I'm warning my stomach that both coffee and eggs are coming. Okay, given the new wardrobe and new familiarity with, ahem, common folk—a year or two ago you would have insisted that Maria address you as ‘Professor Drakanis’—you've gone into some sort of business where you need to dress hipper and be friendlier with people than when you had tenure and infinite job security.”

“Easy call,” he interjected.

“Of course,” Diana said. “The real question is what *sort* of business. As a literary critic I don't see how you produced anything valuable in the marketplace.”

“Ouch.”

“So,” she continued, “this new business venture must have to do with your other activities, either fund-raising or your column. More probably the former since my cyber secretary has not reported any recently

published words of professorial wisdom.”

“You keep track? How flattering.”

“I monitor all my former cases, or did, anyway.”

Drakanis grunted, non-committal. This was the first time Diana had conversationally waltzed anywhere near his wife's disappearance, and she was watching, attentive. She could trace no emotional response beneath his opaque expression.

“I'd say that you'd gone into UCLA fund-raising full time except that this place,” she gestured around, “doesn't smell like big money. It smells great, by the way. I may beg Maria for a waitressing gig if you can't help me job-wise. But this isn't a super-wealthy haunt. It's too. . . discreet. Not self-congratulatory enough, and the richies like to pay cash upfront for high fat food—just 'cuz they can, I think—so the ‘guest’ thing wouldn't work for them. Those sound baffling curtains on the way in are a big hint.” Diana felt herself gaining intellectual momentum, enjoying herself.

“The proprietors don't want the wrong people to hear what's going on. So there's something slightly shady about this place. Delightfully, deliciously shady—I'm anticipating, I know, I'm hungry—but shady. The fact that Mayor Rick doesn't want to make eye contact could just be because he dislikes me, but on the other hand he could be a tad embarrassed to be seen in a place that sells leaded coffee. I haven't decided which.”

“He likes you,” Drakanis said.

“I doubt that,” Diana responded.

“The Mayor told me you needed a job. Not the sort of thing one does for an enemy.”

That took her back a step. Rick Johansen had been a central figure in the events precipitating her search for a new career. Why would he help her? Did he feel guilty? That went against Diana's notion of politicians in general, and Rick specifically.

“Deliciously shady?” Drakanis prompted.

“Right. Sorry. Shady but not downright illegal, like the gray tech market where people trade for components without getting their

insurance provider involved. No money changes hands, but I'm guessing it's not a strict example of barter economy because the IRS just hates that. The Mayor couldn't risk it politically. Rick's fond of fattening grub but he wouldn't come here just for the food, so there must be some other attraction. I'm betting inf-n-inf. Information and influence."

"There's a difference?"

"Sure. Information is knowing something. Influence is getting that knowledge to the right people and convincing them to do what you want them to do with it. That's also where your new career comes in: inf-n-inf are closer to fundraising than to writing a column. I'm betting that whatever it is you now do depends on the network you built working for the university."

Drakanis' face disclosed little, but Diana felt confident that she was on the right track. Maria walked up with a pot of coffee, real coffee, and a cup for Diana. She freshened Drakanis' cup, pointed at the whole milk and sugar already on the table (Diana had been eyeing it), and left after promising Diana that her meal was coming real soon. Three sips later Diana thought about proposing marriage to Maria, remembered that she was heterosexual and that she had no idea which way Maria swung. Then, Diana wondered if that mattered if a steady supply of java was involved. Would she change her sexual orientation for caffeine?

"You're avoiding the main question," Drakanis said, again breaking her out of reverie.

"The 'why is Diana here today?' question? No. I'm not avoiding it," Diana countered. "I'm juggling data patterns and trying to sneak up on what you—or someone in this room—might want with *le petit moi*. That's the tough part. If you know the Mayor well enough to have him call you, then you—or whoever—don't need someone with connections to the force. Mine were all just severed anyway."

"Not quite, oh daughter of the police chief."

"Hmmm, well, yes. But have you met Dad? He's not the type to pull strings for a mere daughter, especially not lately. Anyway, if it isn't about using me to get to my father, then somebody needs my abilities

rather than my former network. Now those talents are pretty weird and various, mostly detective-stuff: strategy, garden variety investigating, computers, net analysis, martial arts, street psych. I'm smart and I beat people up real good. So the main question is which skill set. And that, 'Drak,' is where I hit a wall, barring new information. So why don't you enlighten me while I wrap myself around the rest of this coffee?"

"Brava, detective," Drakanis said. "You're as sharp as I remembered."

Something unkinked inside Diana at the praise: it had been so long since anyone had approved of her that it felt great. Better watch that, she thought to herself. It could be used against her. "Well?"

"Here's your food," he nodded over her shoulder.

Loui, Maria's father, had prepared a simple omelet: cheddar and eggs with avocado and a lighter cheese she could not identify. Next to the omelet were several meaty strips of bacon, whole wheat toast, and real butter. It took inhuman self-control but Diana stopped herself from squealing with delight. She snatched up a piece of bacon and was about to pop it in her mouth when she realized that Drakanis had yet to be served. Poorly disguising her reluctance, she put the bacon back on the plate and sighed.

"I've already eaten," said her host. "Please go ahead."

"Bless you." In between bites she managed to ask Drakanis how often he ate there, and learned that the back café was open once a week and for special occasions. Loui and Maria spent most of their time running a catering service for the super wealthy, who paid cash and loved to give the big three health care providers the finger. For the first time in her life Diana wanted to be rich.

As she ate, forcing herself to go slowly, Drakanis described his new career. He left the safe world of the university to start Drakanis Consulting, an all-purpose firm that, quite simply, promised that it could help any client solve any problem, or there would be no charge. Although sometimes described as a "taste advisor," he specialized in introductions: matching problems with the best possible solution.

As Diana had guessed, he first had the idea for the firm while he was still working for the university as Professor Drakanis, but not as a fundraiser. Time and again colleagues laboring in disciplines far distant from English lit had asked Drakanis to help them find new faculty members, or jobs for favorite students. Just by booting his computer address database Drakanis was instrumental in hiring physicists, anthropologists, and even a theoretical cyber-engineer. He got used to frantic emails asking his advice about the best hotels for conferences, or the best restaurants to take visiting speakers. Then, the university regents pegged him to chair the search for a new campus Chancellor. In short, Drakanis gradually found himself assuming the role of generalized problem solver for UCLA... all with no extra pay or benefits. His teaching load was still high, his popular classes overbooked, and the expectation that he publish scholarly articles and books was undiminished.

“And then my wife vanished.”

Diana felt herself slowing down as the omelet smashed into her metabolism and oozed around her stomach: she hadn't consumed this much fat in months. She had trouble concentrating on what Drakanis said, and felt like curling up under the table for a nap. Though unsummoned, Maria appeared at that moment and poured fresh coffee. Diana sipped it black, scalding herself back into focus.

“When Janice disappeared I, ah, misplaced all my marbles,” he continued, after Maria left. “Although I was sane enough to keep that private.”

That made sense, Diana thought. Once a psychiatric diagnosis was online with your insurance provider it was nearly impossible to erase. And God save you if you wound up taking any of the Brave New Worldian psycho pharmaceuticals that had been so popular at the start of the third millennium when for one historical moment the world flirted with the idea that the mentally ill were just plain folks.

Now, in 2023, the vogue for Prozac, Paxil, NeoLoft and its medical brethren had passed. It was just too damned expensive to be crazy. Oh,

the drugs were effective. A number of studies that Diana remembered reading in a Police Academy-required psychology course on mental illness (“Psychosis 101: From Depression to Serial Homicide”) showed that the mentally ill were generally happier and more productive, not to mention safer for the public, with the help of psycho pharmaceuticals. But the blurring of the line between credit and privacy made it easy to find out who took what. Indeed, the pharmaceutical company, Pfizer, had immediately filed a class action lawsuit against Visa/Shield for its post-CyberPlague tracking policy-shift because it killed Pfizer's business. Pfizer lost the suit, whereupon Visa/Shield acquired it for pennies on the dollar, which provoked massive consolidation as the big three swallowed big pharma.

Nicola, a middle-aged cousin of Diana's, had found herself unable to get a job because she had taken anti-depressants as a teenager, when her parents went through a nasty divorce. No employer would hire her with depression as a pre-existing condition. Eventually Nicola, who Diana had always found quite well-adjusted and who had an MBA from Penn, emigrated to Mexico to find work as an Acapulco bartender. It was the only job she could get. Focus, Diana, she thought. Focus!

“So what does ‘misplaced your marbles’ mean?” she asked.

It was the first time that Drakanis' elegance faltered. He brooded into his coffee cup for a long moment. “I hope you never find out, detective.”

“I'm sorry,” Diana said.

“Don't be,” he replied, meeting her gaze again. “I didn't invite you here to talk about the bad old days. I need a new assistant, and I thought that your story skills might make you right for the job.”

“Story skills? I can't teach English classes, Professor,” Diana said. “It was never my strongest subject. Criminology maybe.”

“You're not paying attention,” he chided. “I'm an all-purpose consultant: somebody's got a problem, I'll find the answer. If I don't know the answer myself then I'll find the person who *can* find the answer, and I know a lot of people. That's a sort of storytelling. I figure out what kind

of tale the client wants to tell, and then find them a happy ending. This is the sort of thing you did all the time as a detective: match the crime to the criminal, match the character to the story.”

Diana was getting confused. “People aren’t stories.”

“On the contrary,” Drakanis said. “Take away a person’s stories and all you have left is a couple hundred pounds of blood, bone, and goo. Look around you.” He gestured at the people finishing up their lunch. “Everyone here is a walking talking collection of overlapping and conflicting stories. We all inhabit dozens of different contexts, which usually don’t intersect except at weddings and funerals. How many times have you been to a wedding and discovered huge parts of the bride or groom’s life that you never would have suspected? I only found out, for example, that the Mayor was in his college marching band when his best man was another trombone player.”

Diana had already heard that story from her father, as well as from Bobby Johansen, the Mayor’s son and, until recently, an old friend.

“Your father, who I do know, by the way, and who I’ve always found quite willing to pull strings for the right reasons, has a passion for old comic books that people might find an odd story for the police chief.”

“He told you about the comics?” Diana was shocked: at an early age she’d been summoned to her father’s study and sworn to Masonically absolute secrecy about her father’s huge Batman collection, which he kept in a cellar specially guarded against prying eyes and humidity. The elder McNight was convinced—mistakenly in Diana’s opinion—that if his officers ever heard about the hobby he’d lose their respect. She could almost hear him rant, “the beat cops would set up a bat-signal on the roof and my career would be over.”

“I’m a fellow collector,” Drakanis said. “I promised not to tell.”

“Me too.”

“You,” Drakanis continued, “combined a ‘police detective’ story with a ‘police chief’s daughter’ story, a complicated tale I’ll bet. How many people thought your promotion to lieutenant was nepotism?”

“Some,” she replied. “Not the ones who knew me.”

“Exactly. Working with you directly they got to learn another one of your stories: the smart investigator who deserved promotion, maybe even in spite of daddy. This hardly exhausts the list: you’re clearly a coffee achiever as well, for example, a small story but still a story, especially given how hard it is to find the real thing these days. When I first met you I saw another one of your stories.”

Diana didn’t understand: they’d only met when she was on the job, talking about his wife’s case. Part of her went on alert: was Drakanis remembering something that never happened? “What do you mean?”

His eyes crinkled slightly, part smile part grimace. “You were kind to me, detective. You took my calls, never avoided me. You were straightforward about how much you didn’t know and how little hope there was of finding Janice. And when you asked how I was doing you stuck around for the answer, which, I’m afraid, often wasn’t fun to hear. Some of your associates were, uh, brusque.”

“That’s just part of the job,” Diana said, uncomfortable.

“For you, yes, it was,” he replied. “And that’s yet another of your stories.”

Diana was beginning to understand, not what she was doing there but why Drakanis had really left UCLA. “By this logic, Professor, you started your consulting business because you needed a new story to tell about yourself.”

“That’s what I mean by story skills, detective,” he said, smiling. “You might be good at this.”

Diana was getting interested, but she didn’t want Drakanis to know it, yet. “And if I’m not.”

“Then I’ll fire you,” Drakanis replied. “Why don’t we try each other out for a week. If it works, great. I’ll give you a contract. If either of us is unhappy we go our separate ways and I promise to network you into another job, with no consultation fee.”

“HMMMMM.” She said, non-committal. “You said a ‘new’

assistant. Does this mean that there was an old one?”

“Oh yes. Paul Armbridge. He’s a poet who needed a job and wound up helping me a lot. Odd people, poets.”

“What happened to him?” Diana asked.

“He came down with the plastic plague, couldn’t be around synthetics without getting hives. It was ugly and painful, didn’t respond to treatment. Paul needed to move from this lovely city to a more organic locale.”

“Such as?”

“Dairy farm up near Half Moon Bay. Built from wood, glass and metal: no synth. He’s happy, works hard, gets to write his poetry at night after the cows fall asleep. Says he’s working on a mock epic about a milkman, which sounds more weird than funny. That’s milk from his farm that you put in your coffee, by the way. He sends me butter when he can.”

Something clicked in the back of Diana’s mind. “Is that how you found out about this place?”

“The back café?” Drakanis’ eyebrows lifted. “No, it’s the other way round. When Paul needed a new profession Loui and Maria helped me locate a dairy farm that he could buy.”

“So how did you find this café?”

“I didn’t find it, detective. I invented it. Loui was my first client. I met him when his younger brother Aldo was my neighbor a century or two ago. Loui couldn’t buy cheese for love or money, even for cash. He has lots of cash because he’s the most-favored caterer of the filthy rich, who want real cheese and other delicacies at their parties. Anyway, most of the local cheese makers are out of business because of the CyberPlagues and our new insurance-mandated austerity. Mark Nilson, an old grad student of mine, had fled academe’s groves to go into the family business in Wisconsin: cheese. He changed most of his operation to making fat-free—he says it’s a travesty but it pays the mortgage—because nobody in Wisconsin or Minnesota will buy the real stuff. Mark knew that people in California wanted it, but he couldn’t get the necessary permits to sell

here. I convinced several of Loui’s wealthier customers to, um, lean on the Mayor—cash political donations are increasingly hard to find, you know—who got Mark the permits, and then Loui got his cheese.”

“And you got?” Diana asked.

“Breakfast, once a week, in perpetuity, and lots of goodwill. What you call inf-n-inf. Loui invites whomever he wants and always saves a table for me and my guests, which today is you. Oh, I should warn you that a lot of my business involves, umm, non-traditional methods of payment.”

“Meaning no money.”

“Sometimes having the right person owe you a favor can be priceless. Also, I’m a glutton. Something,” he said, glancing at Diana’s empty plate, “that we seem to share.”

Nailed, she thought. Shouldn’t have wolfed down that last strip of bacon. Diana chewed on her index finger and made eye contact with the ceiling. How did Drakanis keep in shape if he ate like this all the time?

“If it’s any incentive,” he continued. “I’m sure that you’d be welcome here as my assistant.”

Like it’s not an incentive, she thought. *Right.* Diana looked across the table. “I’m not answering your phone.”

“That’s what computers are for,” he responded.

“Duties?”

“Various. All my clients are different. It can get boring from time to time.”

“Salary?”

“I’ll match your weekly from the force.”

“Bullshit. You’ll double it.”

“Hah!” he barked out a laugh. “Welcome to the private sector, detective. One and a half.”

“Health credit coverage?” She held her breath.

“Full. For however long you work for me and a quarter thereafter. Not counting the trial week.”

“Done.” Diana allowed herself a small sigh of relief. Now she

BRAD BERENS

could pay her rent. “What about net access, I’m almost out.”

“I have an unlimited supply.”

Now *that* she had not expected. Net time was expensive, even with lots of competition and government regulations. “How’d you manage it?”

“Another satisfied customer.”

Diana leaned back in her chair, fingers interlaced behind her head. “A week, huh?”

“A week.”

“After which either of us can walk away.”

“Yes.”

“I have one condition,” Diana said.

Drakanis waited.

“You’ve got to stop calling me ‘detective.’ That’s an old story, Professor.”

He nodded, and stood up. She followed. “Welcome aboard, Diana,” he said, putting out his hand. “Call me Drak. All my friends do.”

They shook hands.

“When do I start?”

Drak pointed at her sweatshirt. “As soon as you change into grown-up clothes. We have a new client to see this afternoon.”

“What’s it about, boss?”

“Drak. Not boss. And I don’t know yet. All I can tell you is that we have to be in Santa Paula by three o’clock.”

3

“BUT CAN IT MAKE COFFEE?” AFTERNOON

A rabbit collection of tics and twitches, Joel Rose popped his gum and grimaced at his unadorned left wrist, the shape of a missing CPU still etched into the skin. Slight, short and with a pale blond comb over, his skin had the grayish undertone that came from too much time in labs. As he wandered around the living room his small hands felt around inside his jacket pockets, hunting for gadgets confiscated at the Santa Paula perimeter.

Sitting to the side on a hard-backed chair Diana sympathized, but her patience was draining. She felt naked and vulnerable at 111 Mill Street, Santa Paula: the Communicare gate guard had politely taken her interconnected Personal Area Network (PAN): the EMF-generating necklace CPU, watch, floppy monitor, as well as her detective toolkit. By habit, she'd slid the kit into the sleeve of her second-best suit when she changed clothes at home, Drakanis waiting in his lux car outside. Her best suit was still a hostage to poverty at the dry cleaner. On the quick ride up from L.A., he made a sour remark about her outfit and 21st century fashions.

Diana riposted, “you offering me an expense account for clothes, boss?”

He changed the subject.

Drakanis confessed that he knew little about their meeting aside from the fact that they were driving to the home of Doctor Samuel Wilkes in Santa Paula. He knew Wilkes through Janice. “One of her old med school teachers. A brilliant mind, and famously cranky.” Sam was a polymath: physician (pathologist, retired), electrical engineer, computer coder, statistical mathematician, and a few other things on the side. He held a passionate conviction that the extended life span of his boomer generation gave him a moral imperative to have more than one career over ten to twelve decades. When Janice first introduced Dr. Wilkes to her young English professor husband, Sam was in his late sixties. The first thing Drakanis remembered hearing Sam say was, “I’m barely middle-aged.”

Now Wilkes was prematurely dead at 82.

At UCLA Med, Sam Wilkes taught courses on statistics for epidemiology students, helping them design computer modeling programs to track the spread of disease across time, geography, and through different populations. At the dawn of the CyberPlague era computer-driven epidemiology morphed into a fast-growing medical subspecialty. Wilkes found his skills much in demand, making his long middle years financially comfortable. The big three insurance providers snapped up countless freshly minted epidemiology hiccups (from HCP or “Health Care Provider,” the generic term for doctors, nurses, and their assistants) and put them to work, not to mention the research division of the InterHealth Alliance that perched atop the nation’s immense databases of health care information. If these young hiccups had not been in a classroom with Wilkes, then they had seen him on vid or worked with his tutorial programs. He was, Drakanis said, a curmudgeonly genius.

As a med student, Janice Drakanis admired Wilkes. Later, the Drakanises included him at dinner parties whenever their schedules

intersected, which was seldom. Drak had not seen Wilkes since leaving the university. Diana mentally translated: he had not seen Wilkes since Janice disappeared.

Their appointment had been scheduled by Joel Rose, whom Drak had met from time to time in the many social circles he traveled. Drak played the morning’s cryptic vid-phone message on the car’s screen. A jittery Rose re-introduced himself as a medical engineer and Sam Wilkes’ business partner. He asked to arrange an immediate meeting but refused to say more over any electronic medium, “privileged data... tragedy... can only talk in person... surveillance.”

Diana snorted. This sort of precaution was routine, if hopeless. She had yet to find a totally bug-proof room, phone, or internet connection. A data juggernaut slouched inexorably toward electronic-Bethlehem recording everything in its path. On the force, the perps Diana had hunted taught her creative ways to make it inconvenient to trace someone’s movements, although this ordinarily meant shutting down a CPU and dropping off the cybernetic face of the planet. That was easy. But the moment an individual logged onto a computer, made a purchase, or used a phone he lit up like a flare to anyone searching. Most bugs could be disabled by taking a bath in electromagnetic radiation— not healthy on a regular basis, certainly, but a fair price for privacy. That left face-recognition software and the other biometric info-trawlers sifting tirelessly through the electronic and wireless ether for voice, retina, and fingerprint use. With a planet-wide population of ten billion—at least thirteen million of whom were in Los Angeles and its environs at any time—the trawlers were too slow to confirm current locations, but they were efficient at documenting where somebody, anybody, had been.

The only one hundred percent effective way to avoid surveillance was to have a dull life. Diana had yet to master that trick.

Rose continued to pace and fret for fifteen minutes. “It’s a catastrophe,” Rose popped his gum. “Like the big quake. Worse!” He still had not told them what happened.

Drak made sympathetic noises. Diana tried not to fidget. She was accustomed to taking the lead in interviews, and found Drak's endless patience vexing. Get to the damn point, damn it, she thought.

Bereft of her toolkit, Diana's only clues were contained by the small sitting room in which they sat. She felt trapped in a 2D-TV show: the furniture was wood, the curtains rustled like all-natural fabric, and there were no machines in the room, not even electric lights. About the only thing she knew with confidence was that Wilkes was dead. Old-fashioned yellow police tape lay snarled and tangled in the flower boxes and on the stairs leading to the door. It would not be there if Wilkes had made it out alive. Syringe covers and empty one-use drug ampules lay on the threshold, signs of a failed resuscitation. Wilkes' death had come as a surprise to somebody.

Why were they here?

"What an indictment!" Rose continued, walking faster. "Can't you just see the headlines? 'Death By Research: Noted Scientist Killed By Prototype.' I'm ruined. I'll have to declare bankruptcy."

"Joel," Drak interrupted.

Finally, Diana thought.

"Help me to help you. What happened? How did Sam die?"

The paramedics, Rose explained, thought it was a myocardial infarction—a heart attack—but they could not be sure until they took the corpse for a routine autopsy-MRI. By the time Rose finished dealing with the local sheriff, they had already carried Wilkes to their helicopter perched outside of town, performed a preliminary scan, and flown off to the Fillmore morgue.

It was not a difficult diagnosis: Wilkes had a common heart condition listed in his IH records that the paramedics accessed en route to Santa Paula. He had responded well to an artificial pacemaker. "But then Sam got the third CyberPlague, EMF, which is why he moved here to Santa Paula, where they shield it out."

"That much I already know," Drak said.

"It was a crazy paradox, macabre" Rose explained. "Sam had an implanted electronic pacemaker that kept his heart beating in a normal rhythm, but he could not be physically near electromagnetic fields. So the appliance that his heart depended on was poisoning the rest of him."

In a characteristic technician's response, Wilkes built his own pacemaker, an improved model using the latest EMF buffering tech. The new shielded pacemaker was big and solid—the size of a green apricot when most were tissue-thin and flexi—but had only two pin-prick areas exposed to EMF, the place where the wires made direct contact with his heart.

Drakanis was fascinated. "Did it work?"

Obviously not, Diana thought.

"He had a rash all over his chest. It would spread, then go away, then come back. He couldn't use a derma-patch to treat the rash because the drugs would interfere with the pacemaker. With his doctors, Sam was constantly adjusting the machine. He fooled around with the type of current, the voltage, the frequency. Trying to find a balance between his heart and the plague."

"And it fell out of balance?" Diana spoke for the first time.

Rose jumped. Hadn't he noticed her?

"My associate, Ms. Diana McNight," Drak supplied.

The other man stopped walking. He looked even more uncomfortable, a little dizzy. "Drak, I need this to be confidential. Can she be, uhh..."

"Discreet? Ms. McNight has my absolute trust," Drak replied.

Oh do I really? Diana thought. Well then, let's start hunting for a bottom line.

"Mr. Rose," she interjected, "why are we here?"

Drak gave her an I-was-getting-there look.

"Right," Rose said. "Right right. I called you. This is all just so terrible." He ran desperate hands through thinning hair and resumed pacing.

“Sam and I were working on something... big. Really big, and secret. I’m not talking ‘I grey-traded for a few aspirin without telling my provider secret’ secret. This is the real thing.”

“The Redcrosse Chair,” Drak said quietly.

“You know?” Rose looked stricken.

“I’ve heard rumors. I hear a lot of rumors.”

Diana raised a finger. “Rumors of?”

“From what I understand,” Drak began, “Sam wanted to provide medical care outside the auspices of the big three.”

“Isn’t that illegal?” Diana asked.

“Not at all,” Rose replied. “The big three have an economic monopoly on health care. Economic, not legal. The government still licenses doctors, but if a hiccup doesn’t have an account with Visa/Shield or one of the others he can’t really practice medicine. The big three own or control most of the medical and financial infrastructure: credit, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, even the gauze factories. It’s webbed integration: vertical, horizontal, diagonal. All for our own good and the benefit of all, they say.”

“Right, for me Silver Shield is the spider,” Diana said. “And I always feel like Miss Muffet.”

“Hmmm, or, as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,” Drak said quietly. “They kill us for their sport.”

Rose didn’t get it: he squeezed his bloodshot eyes shut and then opened them again. He rubbed his face. “What? You think somebody killed Sam?”

“No no,” Diana interrupted. “Don’t worry. He’s just being an intellectual terrorist.” She turned to Drak. “Did you really think neither of us had read *King Lear*?”

Drakanis’ eyes lit up.

“I haven’t since college,” Rose said.

“What was your major, Joel?” Drak asked.

“Engineering.”

“Then I’m stunned you read it at all.”

“Gentlemen,” Diana said, “Can we defer an analysis of the engineering curriculum until a later time?”

“Of course,” said Drakanis. His eyes twinkled, and Diana had to make an effort to focus on Rose. That was one nice twinkle: something she had never seen in their previous encounters. She started to understand why Drakanis had been a famous teacher at UCLA.

“Where were we?” Rose asked weakly, collapsing into a chair. It was the first time he stopped moving.

“You were explaining that health care rules the universe,” Diana said. “And this ain’t news. Outside the monthly I don’t go to the clinic unless I’m three quarters dead— nobody does. My premium jacks every time.”

“Exactly!” Rose sat up in his chair. “You said you’re with Silver Shield? Okay. Let’s say your back hurts. You don’t want to see the hiccup from your plan because then you’ve got an orthopod diagnosis and a higher premium. And what if you’re trying to change to another plan or switch from one provider to somebody else? How many emails do you have to read? How much fine print. It’s terrifying! But what if there were a place you could go to get *unreported* medical advice? Someplace where you could cut through all the crazy offers and get help figuring out which plan works for you.”

“This chair thing?”

“The Redcrosse Chair,” Rose looked to Drakanis. “This really is confidential?”

“Sacred as confession,” he said dryly.

“Sam and I designed Redcrosse to provide reliable, private and affordable medical information. With no advertising and no clutter, just facts. It’s a trillion dollar idea. We’ve got a corporate strategy, we’re quietly out to a group of investors, and then Sam *dies in the chair!*”

“Ah-ha.” Drakanis leaned forward, comprehension rising in his face.

Frustrated, Diana asked, “can someone please translate for the slow kid in class?”

Drak turned to her, “PR problem. That’s why we’re here.” He turned to Rose. “Do your potential investors know yet?”

Rose shook his head. “But Sam’s death certificate has been online for hours already. It’s only a matter of time before a data-snake turns it up, and—”

“And then there’s a run on the bank,” Drakanis finished the thought. He saw that she was still puzzled. “Diana, venture capital, particularly with new-tech companies, is all about perception. You convince the investors that Gadget X is the next fabulous thing that people don’t even know they need yet. Nobody will risk their money on a nifty new medical scanner if the first thing it does is kill the inventor like Frankenstein’s creature. My job—excuse me, *our* job—is to spin this so it doesn’t look like a disaster, or to find somebody who can.”

He turned back to Rose. “It might help if we could see it.”

Rose winced. “Is it necessary? I can’t even tell you how secret this is.”

“At Drakanis Consulting we pride ourselves on confidentiality.”

Diana’s head hurt. Accustomed to dealing with puzzles on the basis of their solutions (who killed the victim with what and how?) she now had to deal with political questions of spin. *I hate this. I need the paycheck.*

Rose sighed. “All right. Come on back.” He walked to a heavy curtain at the back of the room and stepped through. She started to follow, but Drak caught her elbow. He put his mouth to her ear; she smelled peppermint.

“Stories,” he breathed. “Remember, we’re finding a story to tell.”

Except for the small sitting room were they’d just been sitting, a kitchen, and a half bathroom, the rest of the quaint blue Queen Anne’s first floor had been converted to a lab. The first thing Diana noticed about the room was the windows. There were lots. One whole wall facing into

Wilkes’ large backyard was glass, and the ceiling had a series of solar tubes that made every surface glow. Tools and machines stood at attention, posed in rigorous order. It was obvious even to Diana’s far from expert eye that there were no unbuffered surfaces. She realized that it was the only way an EMF Sufferer like Wilkes could have worked with machines. Ungainly wires ran from device to device, rubber and cloth smothering EMF as much as possible. As in the rest of the house there were no electric lights. Instead, gas lamps and solar release batteries stood in strategic corners, near work benches and above chairs. A big-screen 2D monitor glowed faintly at the far corner. Diana suspected that if she turned it on she would find letters big enough for an elderly—*excuse me, middle aged*—EMF Sufferer to read them from safely across the room.

In the middle sat a large metal chair. At first glance it looked more like sculpture than furniture: boxy, all flat planes and sharp edges, too wide and tall for the average body’s comfort. Diana flashed to the Lincoln Memorial. Burnished steel caught the afternoon light. More thick wires ran from the sides, connecting to machines. A robotic arm dangled halfway from a slit in the right side of the chair like a seagull’s broken wing. Diana wasn’t sure, but the thing on the end looked like the ultrasound wand the gynecology hiccup used during her monthly checkups. Lines in the chair suggested other metal appendages lurking within. It was grotesque, eerie and beautiful.

Rose opened a window. Birdsong floated in on the fresh air. He turned to look back at the chair, one arm propped on the other, face held in his right hand. “Drak, Ms. McNight,” said Rose. “You are looking at the future of American medicine, or at least the future that *was* until early this morning. The Redcrosse Chair.”

“And?”

Rose walked to the left side and pushed a keypad. The chair hummed to life. The ultrasound wand retracted, disappearing inside. “It’s easier for me to show you than to explain.” He waved Diana towards the machine. “Please sit.”

Nervous but hiding it, Diana sat down. The metal felt cold through the seat of her thin pants. She did not look at Drakanis, but allowed herself to pay more attention to her peripheral vision. She wasn't sure, but she thought he was smirking. Bastard. At her feet, Diana noticed a small metal can sitting on its side, tiny tools spilled out onto the floor. It didn't fit: anomalous disorder among order.

Rose placed Diana's hands on the arm rests and professionally touched two spots under her clavicles to make her sit up straight. The back of her head rested on something padded. He smiled reassuringly, his first real smile. "Don't worry. You'll be fine. We've only lost one patient."

"Out of how many?"

"You don't want to know."

Great, Diana thought. One.

Wilkes had died that morning where she sat. *Why does this bother you? It's not your first death scene.*

Rose touched a panel next to Diana's head. "Redcrosse," he said.

"Good afternoon," a gravelly voice replied. "Welcome to the Redcrosse Medanalysis Chair."

"Please initiate full med-scan."

Diana heard something open next to her left ear, and a retina scanner slid into sight. She looked into the usual orange glow, then it retracted. The voice said, "New patient. Welcome to the Redcrosse Medanalysis Chair. Please choose a username."

"Diana McNight."

"Is that your real name?" asked the Chair.

"Yes."

The Chair sighed. It sounded annoyed. "Deleting. Purging file. New patient. Please choose a different password."

Diana paused to think of one. "Luna."

"Age?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Health credit provider and plan?"

"Silver Shield; I don't remember the name of the plan."

"Did you have to pay extra for dental care?"

"No," Diana said.

"Thank you, Luna, the Chair said. "You are probably on Silver Shield's tier-plus-one plan, it's one of 89 variants of Visa/Shield's top tier. Limited, but you could do worse. Commencing initial scan."

"Diana," Drak said from the corner where he leaned against a wall, arms crossed in front of him. "That was Sam's voice."

"Kinda figured."

A rotating outline of Diana's seated body appeared on the big monitor across the room. Points of light glowed at her ears, left shoulder, and the middle of her waist.

Rose squinted at the monitor. "The chair is searching for metal, which can interfere with signal. There isn't much, I see. Those damned guards took your PAN appliances at the gate, right? Would you please take off your earrings and belt? The buckle is a problem. What's the metal thing in your left shoulder?"

"Bullet," she said, standing up. A gun-shot wound from her early days as a downtown beat cop. Diana still remembered the flash of light from the gun, and the teenaged robber's long blonde hair blowing back as she ran to the end of the alley. Then, fingers cold in the slippery gutter water while hot blood ran up her neck, Diana had passed out. She awoke in the hospital with her father on one side of her bed and Uncle Miles on the other, playing Blackjack. Miles grinned when she opened her eyes. "Hi Pumpkin. Deal you in?"

Diana handed her earrings and belt to Drakanis and sat back down. "Redcrosse beginning full med-scan now," the Chair announced.

A sensor snaked out of the armrest and wrapped around her left wrist. It pressed against a spot below her palm. In the background Diana heard her pulse come out of a speaker. She felt a light pressure through her blouse into her left shoulder blade. An EKG appeared on the monitor across the room. The Ultrasound wand reappeared, described an elegant

arc through the air, and pressed into her blouse over her left breast. Diana felt like she was on a conveyor belt.

Drak gestured to the remaining metal indicator light blinking on the screen, the bullet in her shoulder. “Ms. McNight was formerly a detective in the LAPD. I managed to lure her away with promises of filthy lucre and excitement, and fewer gunshots.”

“Interesting.” Rose’s tone suggested that he found it nothing of the kind. “We designed Redcrosse to compensate. Let’s see what it can do.”

The Chair spoke again, “Please do not move your right hand.” Tiny doors opened under Diana’s fingers, and she felt a mist. Pinpricks lanced briefly into her index and middle fingers, followed by an odd pressure, then a slight tugging sensation. She was proud of herself for not yelping.

“Blood and tissue samples,” Rose said, watching the progress on the monitor. “You’d be amazed at how little it needs.” Something deep inside the Chair whirred.

The Chair spoke again, “Please hold as still as possible.” A cluster of panels opened all over the Chair. Behind them glass tubes glowed for less than a second. Diana felt nothing, and the lack of sensation bothered her. It was a present absence, like the tastelessness of purified water.

“Have you ever had any problems with your vision?” The Chair asked politely.

“No.”

“Would you like an ophthalmological exam?”

“Sure.”

“Commencing.”

The door next to her right ear opened again and a pair of goggles slid out. “Please put these on,” said the Chair. “You might become momentarily dizzy. It is no cause for alarm.”

Rainbow lights danced in her eyes.

“Luna,” said the Chair. “You have 1/64th of a diopter irregularity in your left eye. There should be no effect on your vision, but it will degrade

over the next fifty years or so. Keep your eyes wide open for a glaucoma test.” Diana felt dry puffs of air against her eyes, which teared up. More lights.

“Negative for glaucoma,” said the Chair. “Please return the goggles to the tray.” She did; the tray vanished into the machine. “Scan complete. You may now stand up. Please wait for results.”

The entire process had lasted about two minutes, a far cry from the endless lines and slow service at Bratton/Parker clinic. Diana suspected that most of that time had been eaten up by the machine’s talking and her responses. She reclaimed her belt and earrings from Drakanis and perched on a stool near a sparkling worktable. Her fingertips had little red dots on them, and a small square cut out of the dead skin on the pad of her index finger. Otherwise she was unaffected.

“You just had a complete physical,” Rose announced.

“Your turn,” Diana said to Drakanis in the corner, nodding toward the machine.

“Thank you, no,” he shook his head. “That’s what I pay *you* for.”

Was it too soon to ask for a raise, Diana wondered.

The Chair cleared its virtual throat. “Results of med-scan for patient code-named Luna. Would you like a download or shall I present them verbally?”

“Verbal presentation,” Rose said.

The Chair balked, “patient and patient alone can authorize release of medical data.”

Diana hesitated, then said “authorize.”

“Voice-print confirmed. Med-scan Results. Vision, normal. Pulmonary function, normal.

“Blood type: A-positive, variant 27. As of three minutes ago, the Los Angeles blood bank database records adequate supplies of your variant in this area. There is no need for you to donate at this time.

“Cholesterol, both HDL and LDL, are normal. But Luna, your triglyceride level is 723. Normal is around 150. Did you have an unusually

fatty lunch today?” The Chair paused expectantly.

“Yes, some eggs and cheese,” Diana smiled at the memory.

Rose looked jealous.

The Chair continued, “be sure not to do that the day of your next physical. Elevated triglycerides are associated with coronary artery disease, diabetes, and pancreatitis— a bad score will raise your insurance premium.”

“Okay.”

“Luna, there are trace amounts of caffeine in your blood: have you had coffee today?”

“Yes.”

“That can show up on a blood panel, if Silver Shield bothers to do one, so avoid coffee for at least 36 hours before your next exam. You have traces of the second AIDS vaccine. Please consider getting a booster shot from the fourth, which has shown better results. Luna? Are you paying attention?”

This was getting weird. Diana did not usually chat with furniture. “Yes.”

“Good,” said the Chair. “Just checking in because the following category is significant: you have an elevated homocysteine level. This is a metabolic factor in your blood. High homocysteine can contribute to heart disease. Do you take your minimum daily required multivitamins?”

“Yes.”

“Increase your folic acid to 5.0mg, up vitamin B6 to 50mg, and up B12 to 500 micrograms. A hard copy is printing.” A slip of paper poked out of a slot in the side of the chair. “Changing these supplements should lower your homocysteine level to normal. The folic acid in your blood will go up, but it ought to be still within normal limits.”

“I don’t understand,” Diana said, overwhelmed by all the information.

The Chair’s light flashed. It was the first time the machine seemed like... a machine. After a pause it said, “please restate.”

“Redcrosse,” Rose stepped forward. “The patient does not

understand why it is important for folic acid levels to be within normal limits.”

“Luna,” the Chair asked. “Is this accurate?”

“Uh huh,” Diana replied.

“Please restate.”

“Yes,” she said. “That is accurate.”

“If your folic acid levels are higher than normal it will alert Silver Shield that you are compensating for a high homocysteine level. Your provider will conclude, correctly, that you are hiding a risk factor for coronary artery disease. Then they will raise your premium across the Visa/Shield network. Do you understand?”

Diana nodded, then remembered to speak, “yes.”

“Continuing,” the Chair said. “Superficial genetic scan reveals an old gene splice, common for female patients with a family history of breast cancer. Luna, is this accurate?”

Again, Diana found herself in reverie. Why were her memories jutting up this way, iceberg-like, through the surface of her thoughts? What was it about this cold dissection of her body that made her plunge backward into the past? She stood in a quiet, unhappy place, watching. A shrunken figure lay in the stark white sheets of a hospital bed, too tall for her to see into if her father did not lift her.

Diana blinked rapidly, willing the Chair back into focus. She would not cry. She would *not* cry. “My mother died of breast cancer when I was little.”

“Ultrasound mammogram is negative. The gene therapy appears to have been successful. However, after age 35 you should consult with an oncologist every six months. This will raise your premium, but it is a necessary precaution.”

“I know,” Diana said. Peeled like an onion, layer after layer of herself fell away. She did not make eye contact with Drakanis or Rose.

“There is a healed fracture in your upper left arm, which looks related to the foreign metal object. Otherwise, bones and joints look good.

Luna, you should not experience symptoms of arthritis until your sixth decade. You have 87 days left on your removable contraceptive implant.”

Not information she was thrilled to have shared with the two men in the room. “Thanks.”

“Cardiac exam reveals a blood pressure of 110/70, slightly low. Heart rate of fifty, also slightly low. Luna, are you an athlete?”

“I work out.”

“You have a very mild cardiac enlargement, which is normal for athletes. Please be warned that some hiccups might misdiagnose you with heart disease, which could affect your insurance premium. Be prepared to argue with them about it and to request a consult with an actual M.D.”

“Thanks.”

“Luna,” the Chair said. “Aside from some mild contusions on your left arm, and on the knuckles on both hands, you are in excellent health. Congratulations. You can afford to spend less on your health care than the tier-plus-one plan, but given your family history of cancer I do not recommend dropping below tier two within Visa/Shield or similar Mastercare and Discover Wellness plans. There are 17 plans that will save you between 10 and 17 percent on your annual fees if you stay with them for at least two years. Here is a printout with the plans and providers listed in order of preference.” A longer slip of paper popped out.

“The Redcrosse Medanalysis Chair will store your medical information in the First Navajo Sovereign Cooperative Cryptobank, keyed to password ‘Luna,’ your right index fingerprint, your voice print, and your retina print. Access to your records is only possible in person at the Cryptobank or via the Cryptobank’s secure website. First Navajo Sovereign will not charge you for access. Have a nice evening.”

“You too—” Diana felt stupid. She hated that feeling. “I mean, never mind.”

The Chair powered itself down. Diana’s efficient humiliation was complete. She twisted her left arm to see the alleged contusions. It was the bruise from her fight with the Sergeant, when she had blocked his

thrown mini-taser with her arm. Had the machine missed anything?

“Joel,” Drakanis said tightly. “I think next time you ought to warn the patient about just how *thorough* the analysis can be, before you have her choose the verbal presentation.” He hadn’t moved from his leaning position, but his eyes were narrow. Something hard rippled under the charm, though the smile remained in place.

Rose was mystified. “I’m sorry. Did I do something wrong?”

In that fragile moment Diana would have stepped in front of a bullet for John Drakanis. Abruptly, and with the too-blue transparency of Mojave skies the morning after an unexpected rainstorm, Diana understood why soldiers follow a beloved commander into a hopeless battle. A defender. She had a defender. Her back had someplace to go, someplace besides the wall.

She blinked again. Back to business. “Impressive tech.”

“State of the art,” Rose replied, relieved to get back to business. He patted the Chair, a proud compu-papa. “An automated microlab to do the blood and DNA work— makes the porta-kit the paramedics carry look like a witch doctor’s magic bag. UltraFast CAT scan combined with high-res instantaneous MRI, all as EMF buffered as can be. This was not just so that Sam could build it but also so that he could use Redcrosse himself. Ms. McNight, if you were a Sufferer, Redcrosse would have been able to chart the progress of your individual health against the general and local statistics for the CyberPlague-afflicted population, all with a minimum of exposure and across all the different providers and plans—”

“One moment,” Drakanis interrupted. “How can the Chair do all this when there’s no apples to apples comparison among the big three? They can’t even agree on how many CyberPlagues there are. It’s possible, with a lot of work, to figure out which Visa/Shield plan is the best deal, but when I first set up shop I couldn’t for the life of me figure out how to compare my old UCLA Visa/Shield plan to Mastercare or either of them to Discover Wellness, so I stayed with Visa/Shield.”

“And that’s exactly what Visa/Shield wants you to do,” Rose said.

“Of course,” Drakanis replied. “So, forget the hardware, the most fascinating thing about Diana’s exam was when Redcrosse knew precisely what plan Diana is on.”

“Yes, Sam was excited about that part,” Rose said. “For a while he wanted to call Redcrosse the Rosetta Stone Chair but he didn’t think anybody would want to sit down on it.” Rose held his hands at his chest and rubbed them together. “Drak, I keep forgetting you’re not a scientist. What about you, Ms. McNight?”

“Never claimed to be,” Diana said. “But I obviously know more about databases than my employer.”

“Do tell,” Drakanis replied.

Diana told. As the CyberPlagues tornadoed through the U.S. population, it surprised nobody within law enforcement that an increasing number of crimes had something to do with them. Health care became a motive. Diana had solved one murder investigation when she realized that the killer had cut her employer into paper dolls because he was about to demote her and that would have made her coverage more expensive. As the lieutenant in charge of Internet Investigations, Diana had spent numberless hours sifting through the health credit plans of suspects because she often couldn’t get direct access to their medical records without a court order, which required time and a friendly judge. But an individual’s health credit *plan* was usually on file with employers eager to stay out of trouble with the police. So, Diana had become expert at figuring out, say, that a gold-seven-minus-one-red-plus-two-blue level plan within Mastercare might mean that the Certain had a family history of liver disease, which could lead to smuggling beer in from Mexico to drink without having to pay a bigger premium.

In fact, the LAPD had a human Rosetta Stone named Arnie Fieldler who had turned consultant after 52 years of selling health insurance and who had an unerring knack for sifting through the big three’s many thousands of different credit-plus-health coverage offerings. Once Diana realized that Arnie became more helpful whenever she showed up in

his office wearing a skirt instead of pants, she started keeping changes of clothes in her office and visiting Arnie’s desk with a smile, her latest question and bare legs. What the department would do when Arnie, who was 89, either stopped working for good or died was one of the many things that kept Diana’s police chief father up at night.

“In point of fact, Drak, the big three do agree on the number of CyberPlagues,” Diana said. “There are nine, but where it gets confusing is in how they cover them, what they pay for, what the Certain has to pay for out of pocket, and what sorts of things count as what they call ‘knowing and foresightful health risks.’ It’s not just differences between the big three: each individual plan is different. It’s maddening.”

Every financial transaction, hiccup examination, test, diagnosis and prescription ran through the neutral InterHealth Alliance data network that linked the big three to each other. While the IHA had a profile on every Certain, the Federal government’s Byzantine privacy laws meant that the big three had only limited access to what was called “PII” or “Personally Identifiable Information.” The InterHealth Alliance warehoused all the data and—along with the Federal government, the World Health Organization and scientists in universities—used it to try to figure out where the CyberPlagues had come from and how to cure them. But each of the big three providers only had access to the PII from their own Certains, and they mixed and matched different collections of Certains into groups that they could insure in a cost-efficient way.

As the CyberPlague epidemic got worse and worse, the population of Certain non-Sufferers started to shrink, so the best future customers for any of the big three were already insured by the competition, which is why healthy Certains like Diana were bombarded by “make the switch” marketing messages 24/7/365.

“Redcrosse doesn’t accept advertising,” Rose said. “There’s no spin, no confusing jargon. No using ‘wellness’ instead of health care or that sort of thing. No bias, just science.”

“Sam would have enjoyed that idea,” Drakanis observed.

“He loved it,” Rose said. “Redcrosse gets direct feeds on all epidemiological data from the Federal government’s different agencies—the C.D.C., Health and Human Services, the Census, everything, there are hundreds of them—and it also gets the big feed from the InterHealth Alliance with all the PII stripped out and a huge number of international feeds from the World Health Organization.”

Diana raised a finger, “so this chair—”

“Redcrosse,” Rose interrupted Diana.

“—Redcrosse can translate these data streams so that you can work with a neat barrel of apples rather than a fruit salad?”

“Yes,” Rose continued, “Making those translation tables took months. Redcrosse can compare all the different flavors of medical data and generate detailed on-the-fly longitudinal statistics. Moreover, there’s a tremendous amount of journalism about CyberPlague eruptions that tends to be way ahead of the InterHealth Alliance. Let’s say Amazon-CNN does a piece on a geographic outbreak of Tech-deafness— that’s the, uh, ninth plague, where folks can’t hear any electronically amplified sound. That piece may be in the public discourse long before the medical establishment starts to take the data into account for statistical purposes. Redcrosse factors that into its snapshot of how the CyberPlagues are spreading around the country. Knowing that can have a lot to do with an individual’s treatment, at least that’s what Sam said.”

“So, how does it know which plans to recommend?” Drakanis asked. “I can’t imagine any computer could make sense of all those brochures and blog posts and video testimonials...”

“Well, if any computer could then it would be Redcrosse,” Rose smiled. “But it’s not a true AI—nowhere near passing the Turing test—and we didn’t have to teach it to read marketing materials. Somewhere, down in the bowels of their websites, the big three have a very precise list of what each plan covers and doesn’t cover. And the descriptions tend to follow a precise formula, although each of the three has their own formula. There are thousands of plans, and some of them have tiny little differences from

each other. No human can read all that fine print, but for Redcrosse it’s like doing a basic Google search. And now...”

Something deflated inside Rose. The animation that had dawned on his face while he described the Redcrosse Chair now set to worry.

“And now you’ve called us to help,” Drakanis supplied.

“Redcrosse is such a beautiful idea,” Rose said sadly. “How did Sam put it? He wanted to give sick people a crust of their privacy back.”

“Actually,” Diana interjected, “you want to *sell* it back.”

Rose smiled, eyebrows raised. “Fair enough. But it’s a good value for the customer. Wouldn’t you trade a few dollars for your dignity and privacy?”

“Historically,” Drakanis said, “it’s gone the other way. People happily trade personal information to join a discount club at the grocery store, or to get a better rate for a credit card, or health insurance.”

“Leaving an indelible data-trail online,” Rose said, “with information that later comes back to haunt you. That’s it exactly. We want to write some of that trail in disappearing ink, so the insurance industry can’t track it.”

“Yes,” Drakanis said quietly, rubbing his chin. “that does bring up some interesting questions.” He cocked an eyebrow. “Like just how Redcrosse’s, ah, customers would be able to pay for its services if they don’t have cash and all their credit runs through the big three.”

“Well, just to get us started Sam set up an account with the First Navajo Cryptobank, so even if a patient pays with credit all the health credit charge sees is a cryptobank transaction, which could be anything.”

“Isn’t that expensive?” Diana asked.

“Very. I’m looking at other solutions.”

“Speaking of the big three,” Drakanis added. “If this thing is as advanced as you say—”

“Oh it is,” Rose interjected. “Redcrosse is years ahead of anything like it. Decades, maybe.”

“Then wouldn’t the carriers be dying to get their hands on it,”

he continued. “Especially given how, uh, pragmatic Redcrosse is about rendering clear the cloudy lingo of marketing and subverting any carriers ability to raise premia.”

Premia? Diana thought. Well, you can take the English teacher out of the classroom.

“The big three would have had a collective stroke, especially about Sam’s whole Cryptobank privacy apparatus,” Rose replied. “If they knew about it.”

Diana exchanged a glance with Drakanis. If her new employer had heard rumors of the machine, then why did Rose think others hadn’t? Was he naïve?

“We’ve always known that the competition will eventually find out about Redcrosse and that they’ll be as interested in the technology as they will be upset by how we’re using it,” Rose said. “And since Santa Paula is run by Communicare,” with his index finger he drew a circle in the air, indicating the house in which they sat. “We figured that we had to worry most about Visa/Shield. But our game plan is to get Redcrosse in front of the public as a *fait accompli*. And to do that we need money.”

“Ah,” Drakanis said. “Back to the point at hand. You don’t want Sam’s untimely death to scare off the cash. Who are your potential investors?”

“I’d rather not say. They’re, uh, privacy-minded folk themselves.”

“Hmmm,” Drakanis frowned. “That certainly makes my job more difficult. I can’t charm them for you if I don’t know who they are. Is the prototype working reliably?”

“It seemed to,” Diana said.

“Multiple fail-safes and redundancies,” Rose replied. “Redcrosse will run out of supplies for its internal testing mechanisms long before it will malfunction. But our investors aren’t going to see it that way. I’m terrified that they’ll think Redcrosse killed Sam.”

“It is,” Drakanis said, “the most powerful narrative we can assemble from the available fragments. The scientific pioneer killed by his

own invention. What if we take this in a different direction: a ‘race against time’ story. Sam knew his homemade pacemaker was going to fail, and he struggled to finish Redcrosse before he died, nobly giving the machine to a needy world that....”

The most powerful narrative. The two men faded out as Diana chewed over that phrase. The most powerful narrative. The best story. Was Drakanis right? Something else lurked just out of her mind’s reach. She’d experienced this before, on the force. The answer to an investigation would make itself visible to the back of her mind before it strode through the curtains onto the brightly-lit stage of her conscious mind. There was something that she’d already heard and dismissed. What was it?

Back up, Diana. Start over. She replayed the visit to Wilkes’ home back from the beginning, seeing herself and Drakanis as they walked through the front door, stepping over the yellow police tape, her discomfort as she watched Rose pacing in the living room, Drakanis’ slow extraction of an explanation.

Ah ha! Diana had it. Drakanis had quoted Shakespeare. “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport.” Rose, misunderstanding, had asked if Drakanis thought someone had killed Wilkes. She had a better story.

“It’s a murder mystery!” Diana blurted.

The two men jumped.

“Diana, are you alright?” Drakanis asked.

“Yes. Fine. Sorry about that. I just figured out that you’re wrong, Drak. A race against time isn’t the most powerful narrative. We’ve got a perfect little whodunit here. Somebody killed the good doctor to keep Redcrosse away from the public.”

Rose looked curious. “But that’s not true.” He paused, confusion seeping into his expression. “Is it?”

“Of course not!” Diana replied. “The paramedics say that Wilkes died of a heart attack. But which story will motivate your investors better? A murder investigation would put any questions about the technology into

a holding pattern.”

Standing behind Rose, Drakanis looked uncomfortable, but Diana had a full head of steam. She kept talking.

“By the time the truth comes out your investors will have had time to get used to the idea that Wilkes is dead. They won’t still be looking for a scapegoat, like your Chair. It’s the ultimate endorsement: this product is so good that somebody *killed* the inventor to keep it off the market.”

“Now,” she continued, falling into an unexpected rhythm of eager speculation. “We need a villain. Every good whodunit has a black hat. Any ideas?”

Drakanis’ expression slid from discomfort to downright agitated.

“Um,” said Rose.

“Enemies? Somebody who wants to expose you to the big three before you’re ready? Or competitors?” Diana asked. “Is another group doing what you do... or what you’re trying to do?”

“No one else does what we do. Redcrosse is closely guarded. Nobody knows about it.”

“Drak knew.”

“He heard *rumors*. There’s a difference.”

“You said you were out to investors on this.”

“Trusted friends. Discreet.”

“Somebody spilled. We’ve got to imagine—we’ve got to *count* on—the genie’s escape from the bottle. Maybe not one of your buddies, but what if an investor had *no* technical expertise? Is he going to trust you—the guys who want his money—or is he going to give the specs to his pet scientist? I’m betting on the latter. Do you trust the techie not to slip the specs to somebody else? A competitor?”

“And what about Wilkes personally? Anybody out there with a grudge? Did he ruin some young hiccup’s career? Sleep with anyone’s wife? He seems pretty crotchety, if that talking Chair is any indication.”

“Now let’s not speak ill of the barely cold,” Drakanis nodded in, a funny look on his face.

“Did Wilkes ever insult anyone?”

“Sam insulted everyone, all the time,” Drakanis said moving smoothly from his corner. “It was his hobby.” He took Diana by the crook of her elbow. “Joel,” he said. “Will you excuse us for a moment?” He led her out of the sunny lab, through the heavy drapes, back into the living room.

“What?” Diana asked.

Drakanis cradled his face in the fingers of his right hand, eyes looking down to the floor. He sighed.

“Detective,” he said.

Uh-oh. We’re back to “detective.”

“There are a few things wrong with what you just did.”

“You said we were looking for a story to tell.”

“Yes,” Drakanis nodded. “But a story and a *lie* are not the same thing.”

“Says who?”

“I say. Some stories are lies, and some lies are stories, but those squishy categories are not coextensive. In my experience, with this sort of spin problem the farther your story travels from the honest-to-God and independently verifiable truth the harder it gets to maintain in the face of scrutiny. Did you never have to cover something up working for the police?”

“Yes,” Diana replied. “It’s not that hard.”

“Perhaps, but *this* is not a good idea.”

“Boss, I’m just trying to keep the customer satisfied.”

“Don’t try so hard.” Drakanis turned back to the lab, then stopped and looked at her again. This time he smiled. “In addition, detective, I’d appreciate it in the future if you didn’t say such stark and unpleasant things as ‘Drak, you’re wrong.’ At least not in front of paying clients. I have a certain reputation for being right. If not always, then at least often.”

“Oops.”

They found Rose sitting in the Redcrosse chair, staring at his

fingers.

“Hi Joel,” Drakanis said. “I apologize for the interruption. Now, we were talking about—”

“This murder thing is great! It’s perfect! I love it!”

Drakanis winced. Diana bit down hard on the inside of her cheek to conceal a smile.

Rose spoke excitedly. “I’ve even got a black hat for you. Easy Scan. You’ve seen their trucks everywhere, I’m sure. I think a lot of them are old UPS trucks. I think they’re now a Mastercare subsidiary. The truck comes to your neighborhood or your office, your school, and you can get a combo UltraFast CAT/MRI scan in a few minutes. It’s expensive, but businesses will pay for it to keep employees from wasting a whole day at the clinic. Redcrosse will *kill* their business—he does so much more than a CAT/MRI.”

He? Diana thought.

“Easy Scan has three thousand employees who might be out of work. Each of them has every reason to want Sam dead! I almost believe it myself. The investors will eat this up! They’ll rally behind the new tech like never before. Drak, you’re a genius!”

Diana’s cloaked smile faded. *Drakanis* was getting credit for this?

Drakanis reassumed his position in the corner. “We’ll have to be excruciatingly careful about how we present this, ahem, hypothesis to the world.”

He’s not only getting credit, he’s taking it. Doesn’t miss a beat, does he?

“We cannot,” he continued. “Come right out and *name* Easy Scan—or Mastercare or anyone else for that matter—as suspects in our little fiction. Libel suits tend to be messy and expensive. Bad for business too.”

“So what do we do?” Rose asked.

“Since I’m still training Ms. McNight,” Drakanis replied dryly, tongue literally poking around in his cheek. “I’d like to see what she comes up with on this.” He turned to Diana. “Diana?”

“Drak, it’s such a smart idea—so characteristically *you*—I wouldn’t want to presume.”

“Please. Presume. With abandon.”

Diana hopped back onto her stool. “The first thing is to figure out why Wilkes died. Is the heart attack evidence from the paramedics scan conclusive or do we have some wiggle room?” She felt herself gearing up, talking faster. “What about the chair? Was it *running* when they found him and do we have those records? We find somebody independent—somebody other than a big three hiccup—who can interpret those records. If there’s any ambiguity, you hold a press conference and announce that you suspect some sort of foul play.”

“And if we don’t find your Boojum ambiguity?” Drakanis asked/

“We punt and find another theory.”

“Joel,” Drakanis said. “Was Redcrosse running when Sam died?”

“I think so,” the little man powered up the machine.

“Welcome to the Redcrosse Medanalysis Chair,” the machine said.

“Hello, Redcrosse,” Rose said. “Identify me as Joel Mark Rose, highest level user.”

“Identity confirmed by voiceprint. How can I help you, Joel?”

“Please list your previous five scan aliases.”

“Of course, Joel. The last five patients to use the Redcrosse Medanalysis Chair were Luna, Clemens, Daisy, Clemens, and Clemens.”

“Clemens was Sam’s alias,” Rose said. “He loved Mark Twain.” He turned back to the machine. “Redcrosse, please display the date and time for the most recent examination of patient alias Clemens.”

“April 27, 2023, at 10:43am.”

Rose sighed sadly. “That’s when he died, all right, at least according to the paramedics.”

“Can we get a copy of the exam data?” Diana asked.

“Redcrosse, please download patient data Clemens, from the stated time, to disk.” Something whirred inside the machine and a tiny, dime-sized ROM diskette popped out of a slot, and Rose bent to pick it up.

“That’s a little easy,” Diana said.

Rose turned with a curious look.

“It just gave you that data? What about Clemens’ privacy?”

Rose smiled and raised his hands and shoulders. “Who’s Clemens?”

“Wilkes, you just told me so.”

“Prove it,” Rose said, smiling bigger. “Redcrosse will release data about patients, but it strips out all the PII and biometric ID fields—fingerprints, retina prints, et cetera. You’ll find a lot of information about patient Clemens in this disk, but nothing that let’s you link it to Sam Wilkes except my say-so.” He handed the ROMlet to Diana. “The cryptobank keeps the identifiers, as well as patient-accessible copies of the data. That’s how we’ll charge people without it screwing up their coverage: the only thing the health credit account will show is ‘consultation, Wilkes/Rose/Redcrosse Holdings, Inc.’ without any diagnostic data attached to it.”

Something in the back of Diana’s mind remained skeptical, but she couldn’t quite identify it and made a mental note to think more about it later.

“Is that all we need, detective?” Drakanis asked.

“No. If we’re going to posit a homicide then we need crime scene material to provide details. Who found Wilkes dead? Where? You said,” Diana turned back to Rose, “that somebody found him *in* the chair?” Rose nodded. “We need to confirm that. *Disconfirm* it, preferably. How did our hypothetical killer get into the house? How did he or she or they leave? The paramedics and the local cops—Fillmore, I think, way out here—would have conducted interviews and made scans. We can get them through Freedom of Information Services, but that might take time we don’t have. If I had my toolkit I could take pictures of the room for reference in the meantime.”

“What sort of pictures?” Drakanis asked.

“3D digital scans of all the rooms. Nothing fancy. Since nobody except us thinks that murder is a possibility, I’m sure they didn’t look for fingerprints or anything like that. Too late now, with all the people

tramping around in here. Drak, do you think we can get the gate Gestapo to fork over my kit?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Drakanis said, pulling an old-fashioned pocketwatch from his suit trousers.

“They let you keep that?” Rose asked.

“I said it’s a wind-up that doesn’t generate any appreciable EMF. However,” Drakanis popped the face of the watch out of its case, “I lied.”

Under the face lay a CPU, an elegant microcomputer. Diana remembered her father showing her an old half dollar that he’d saved. It was about that size and at least as expensive as Diana’s pearl-strand.

“I’m rather private myself,” Drak continued. “Don’t much like to have strangers pawing my computer, even if it’s relatively secure. Activate camera,” he said to the CPU, then flipped it to Diana.

Drakanis then removed a stylish pair of glasses from his breast pocket. From the thickness of the pewter-colored wire frames, Diana could tell that they doubled as a *virim*, a virtual reality monitor that would allow him to view 3D web pages. Diana suspected that there were tiny speakers in the earpieces as well. He might not know much about databases, Diana thought, but Drakanis bought only the finest appliances.

Drakanis handed Diana the glasses. She slipped them on and said “Room One” into the CPU in her hand. She then took a systematic tour of the lab. Starting at the doorway, she performed a meticulous side-step circumnavigation of the entire room twice, first looking in and then looking at the walls. Standard Operating Procedure for crime scene analysis on the force. As she shuffled around, she watched a tiny outline of the room gradually take shape in the upper-left hand of the *virim*: Drakanis’ CPU was generating a 3D map of the lab that they could revisit later. Diana peered under tables and behind doorways, and looked at the Redcrosse chair at particularly close proximity. The outline became more detailed. “End Room One,” Diana said. She repeated the process with the other rooms in the house, Drakanis and Rose watching quietly.

Finally, she was done. They powered down the Redcrosse chair,

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closed the windows, and locked the front door. The home of the late Samuel Wilkes was secure.

They walked side by side through the unnaturally quiet town. “Now what?” Rose asked under his breath.

“We begin the investigation,” Diana replied.

“Such as it is,” Drakanis said softly. “Don’t get carried away, detective,” he said to Diana. “We’re *inventing* this murder, remember?”

She’d forgotten. “Of course. But we still need to find a doctor to look at the data in that disk.” *Nice save, Diana. You imbecile.*

“So while we,” Drakanis said, fluttering his hands in the air, “spin gossamer tales from nothingness, you, Joel, should lie low. Don’t answer calls. Don’t talk to anyone, particularly over the phone or net. I’ll set up a press conference for, say, sometime tomorrow afternoon at my office?”

“I can’t help?” Rose asked.

“They also serve,” Drakanis said, “who only stand and wait.”

Rose looked bewildered.

“It’s from Milton’s sonnet ‘When I Consider How My Light Is Spent,’” Drakanis replied.

“But what does it mean?”

Drakanis sighed. “It means *wait*, Joel. We’ll do the rest.”