"This is the greatest book in the history of the world, bar none, and I mean *none*."

— Clark Kent, author of Under a Yellow Sun

THIS IS HOW YOU DIE

STORIES OF THE INSCRUTABLE, INFALLIBLE, INESCAPABLE MACHINE OF DEATH®

PREVIEW #4

EDITED BY **RYAN NORTH, MATTHEW BENNARDO, & DAVID MALKI !**

This is a PREVIEW COPY of a story that will be appearing in our book *This is How You Die*, out in July 2013 from Grand Central Publishing.

It's the sequel to our bestselling short story collection *Machine of Death*, which introduced the idea of a machine that can predict how you'll die. All of the the stories in both books are explorations into this common theme.

This story, "CONFLAGRATION," is by Ian Stoner, writing as D.L.E. Roger. In the book, it'll be paired with an illustration by Sam Bosma. We're releasing this story in advance thanks to the kind supporters of our Machine of Death card game Kickstarter, which is open for pledges through March 19, 2013!

THE MACHINE HAD BEEN INVENTED A FEW YEARS AGO:

a machine that could tell, from just a sample of your blood, how you were going to die. It didn't give you the date and it didn't give you specifics. It just spat out a sliver of paper upon which were printed, in careful block letters, the words "DROWNED" or "CANCER" or "OLD AGE" or "CHOKED ON A HANDFUL OF POPCORN." It let people know how they were going to die.

And it was frustratingly vague in its predictions: dark, and seemingly delighting in the ambiguities of language. "OLD AGE," it turned out, could mean either dying of natural causes or being shot by a bedridden man in a botched home invasion. The machine captured that old-world sense of irony in death: you can know how it's going to happen, but you'll still be surprised when it does.

We tested it before announcing it to the world, but testing took time—too much, since we had to wait for people to die. After four years had gone by and three people had died as the machine predicted, we shipped it out the door. There were now machines in every doctor's office and in booths at the mall. You could pay someone or you could probably get it done for free, but the result was the same no matter what machine you went to. They were, at least, consistent.

CONFLAGRATION

Eliot tapped sugar out of a spoon onto the glistening surface of half a grapefruit. It took a few moments before the crystals softened their edges and melted to syrup. He knew, when he sealed it in a Ziploc bag and stowed it in the crisper, that Lydia would want the other half. He knew she wanted the other half of the fruit, and he knew how the rest of the morning would unfold.

In a few minutes, Lydia will appear at the foot of the stairs in slippers and a white terry-cloth bathrobe cinched below her breasts. She'll see him hacking with a too-big spoon at the wedges of his fruit, squinting against the spray of juice. She'll glance over the Formica counter, which she scrubbed yesterday or the day before, but she won't bring it up. She'll yawn in the doorway and step in the kitchen and say, "Did you save me half?"

Eliot will freeze, his spoon poised, and say, "Oh. Did you want that? I'm sorry, I put it back in the fridge."

Lydia will stare at him, expressionless, for about two beats longer than necessary to make her disappointment clear. As she glides across the kitchen, ankles just visible in the gap between her slippers and the hem of her robe, his mind will drift to mornings a decade ago. In those days, her legs would scissor out of her robe when she walked. In those days, when she bent low to scratch at her shin or adjust a slipper, one of her breasts might sneak out from behind a loose knot at her waist.

At some point—probably after she's coaxed three or four wedges of fruit from the rind with a lazy, juiceless ease—she'll ask him about their vacation plans. Has he been cleared to take that week off work? Though his request had been approved days ago, he'll evade the question.

Eventually, they'll dress. He in a rumpled blazer intended to make his patients see him as competent yet cool. She in a crisp, cheap pantsuit

intended to make her colleagues see her as professional but unambitious.

In the driveway, cars crouching side by side, he'll give her a kiss on the cheek. He'll climb into his car while she fidgets in front of the garage, waiting for her coworker, the pudgy and pasty-faced Gary, to cross the street from his house, stuffing his shirttails into his pants.

That, Eliot knew, is how the morning would unfold.

He stood over the freshly scrubbed counter. The sugar had dissolved in the juice of the grapefruit, and he jabbed at it with his too-big spoon.

He hadn't yet finished unpacking his briefcase when Rosemary's number appeared on his desktop phone.

Eliot pressed a button and winced at the torrent of noise it uncorked. "Rosemary!" he said. "Turn it down."

The noise calmed and a beat emerged from the distortion. Bossa nova? "Eliot, hey," Rosemary said. "I'm stuck in gridlock and have an appointment in ten minutes. Could you babysit him until I get there?"

"I can do better, if you want. I scheduled an hour of prep it turns out I don't need. Should I take him for you?"

"That would rock," she said. "You rock."

Eliot grinned and raised his eyebrows at no one in particular. "What's the guy's story?" Eliot said to Rosemary.

"My guess is he's a standard-issue scared guy."

"Not another suicide looking for an excuse?"

"Definitely not. He's midthirties, owns his own business—a little three-person graphic design shop. I've got him pegged as feeling ground down by uncertainty, looking for bedrock in the first place that occurred to him."

"Your basic type-one talkdown."

"That's my guess. His name's Mike Cohen and his file's on my desk. Thank you so much, El. I'll see you in—God—maybe an hour?"

"Sorry to pull a switch on you like this, but Dr. Martin is stuck in traffic. Do you mind?"

"No." Mike Cohen was tall and a little thin, pale behind a few days of dark stubble. "One is as good as another."

Eliot nodded. "You understand why you're here?"

"You're asking me for proximate or ultimate causes?"

"I'm not sure we'd agree on the ultimate reason. Too deep."

Mike shifted in his chair. Slouched, then sat up straight. "I want to know how I will die, and before the government will release the information to me, they send me to you, so you can convince me that I don't want what I do want."

"That's pretty much it," Eliot said. This was a likable kid. Smart but willing to engage. "Why do you want to know how you'll die?"

"Variables," Mike said. He cleared his throat. "How am I supposed to make informed decisions—how am I to choose one path over another when the future is a mess of unknowns? If I can eliminate some uncertainty—nail down the value of one big fat variable—I'm hoping that it'll be easier to make some choices."

"And you're faced with some particularly difficult choices now? That's why you're filing the Death Machine request now, instead of five or ten years ago?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "I've got a business, a fiancée, health issues, parents. None of it is going like I expected. Do you want details about this stuff, or what?"

"If you want to tell me."

"Not really."

"The complications are worse now than they've been?"

"They're more paralyzing than they've been. I swear, it's like a sickness. Or poison. Hemlock, right? Numbness creeping in, limbs to heart."

"How will your Death Machine slip help? How will this little bit of knowledge eliminate complications or cure your indecision?"

"It's a pretty big bit of knowledge, isn't it? A huge bit. And I don't expect it will cure it, exactly. But it will sweep away one whole range of unknowns. Or at least it could. Depending on the answer, I might be able to guess whether I'm planning for the short or long term. That's huge. If I'm planning short term, everything gets easy. But even if it's long term—even if the answer comes back 'senile dementia' or something, just knowing that will help shake things loose."

"Here's what I think," Eliot said, looking at his fingers, at the deepening creases over his knuckles, the thickening nails, the coarsening skin on the backs of his hands. "I think this particular cure is worse than the disease."

Mike snorted and shook his head. “I have to tell you, GI Shrink, that I’m shocked to hear you say that. But go ahead. Let’s hear the spiel.”

Eliot thought about fire, water, car accidents, and cancer. Infectious disease and cross fire. The slow agony of cirrhosis and the shock of aneurysm. He looked at Mike and supposed that any one of these avenues would work. “Imagine you file this request and the response comes back that you’ll die by drowning. What would you do?”

“Well, that would be annoying. That could be a short- or long-term thing. I guess I’d move to the desert, try to make it a long-term thing.”

“Move to the desert—that’s what everyone says. But would your situation actually improve? Given that the machine is never wrong?”

“You’d have me do nothing? That’s certainly one way to make the request pointless.”

“But you’re no more or less likely to drown if you live in the desert than if you live on a houseboat. It’s certain either way.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, sounding tired. “I know. I wouldn’t be trying to avoid the inevitable. I’d be trying to nail down the time frame.”

“Suppose you move to the desert. What would your life be like?”

“About like it is now. Much drier.”

“Would you take baths? Or showers?”

“Oh. Right.”

“Every time you step into the shower, you’ll be gripped with dread. Is this the time I slip and fall, unconscious, with my face over the drain?”

Mike deflated. “Right,” he said.

“Every time it rains: fear. Every time you walk past a community pool: is this the time some prankster or an impossible gust of wind tosses me in? Every time you see an unstopped fire hydrant. Every time your neighbor fills his shitty inflatable wading pool. Every time you pop the top on a beer or develop a wet cough: fear.”

Mike avoided Eliot’s eyes, and Eliot felt a little thrill of success. They were silent for a few moments; then Mike said, “I think you’re right.”

“Recently you’ve been struggling with the unknown. It’s a potent fear, I know—believe me, I know—and it can be paralyzing. But your paralysis is temporary. It’s a phase that will pass. If you get the machine’s report, it’ll be like you’re living a horror movie from now until you finally die.”

“Yargh,” Mike said.

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Eliot sat at their table by the window, looking across the street at their office building, smaller than some of the structures in Washington, D.C ., but still, it seemed to him, grimmer. Rosemary approached carrying a cafeteria tray. “Usuals all around,” she said.

“Thanks so much for lunch,” he said.

“Please.” Rosemary slid into her chair, across from him. “After a bailout like this morning’s?”

“It was fun, actually. Nice kid. You had his number from the beginning. I used drowning on him and he left in blissful ignorance.”

“Shame I was late. The job is satisfying when it goes well.” Rosemary lifted her spoon to her lips and slurped—a ridiculous, throbbing slurp. Eliot smiled behind his napkin. She’d caught him smiling at her over a bowl of soup once before and asked what was funny. He’d made up excuses. “It’s soothing when they seem convinced, isn’t it?” she said.

“Satisfying, yes. Soothing?”

“You really believe the arguments we deploy against these poor befuddled people? All the time, you believe them?”

Eliot chewed a mouthful of sandwich until it was liquid, then took a sip of coffee. “You don’t?” he said.

“Not all the time, no. I mean, it’s not like I think they’re crap, the arguments. But death is scary. It doesn’t really matter, sometimes, that I know about a thousand case studies from the Oedipus years, or that I know every single client I’ve failed to dissuade has gone on to suffer. Reasons are more convincing when other people believe them. You know that as well as I do.” Rosemary leaned across the table, reaching for a packet of sugar. Eliot looked at the wisps of hair, fallen from their clip, the interplay of light and shadow on her neck and collarbone.

“Lydia,” he said. “Lydia is my other people, I guess.”

“God,” Rosemary said. “I guess she’d have to be.”

“Yeah. I waver for minutes here and there. In particularly bad moments of particularly bad days, I just want to know and have it over with. Those moments pass. But Lydia, she’s up to her neck in the raw data. She could call up her death slip with one line of SQL. I think she honest to God has no desire to know how she’s going to die.”

“It must be comforting to have that sort of certainty.”

“It was.”

“Was?”

Eliot, thrown, stammered and fumbled with a napkin. "You mean for her," he said. "Yes, she's secure in her certainty. I know she is. More than secure. 'Comfortable' is probably the right word."

Rosemary was smiling, mischievous, looking younger, even, than she was. "It was?" she said.

Back in his office, Eliot phoned Lydia's desk. She didn't answer.

Over the years Eliot's office had aged and contracted. He wedged books into every available length of shelf and then laid more across the tops of the others. The room was filled with him—the great wooden desk, its varnish rubbed away under his elbows, the scattered offprints sent to him by grad school colleagues who were publishing at a much brisker pace, the framed handbills for rock shows that were now dingy and dated and, worst of all, out of place—and it depressed him.

Beneath the surface of his guilt was a current of anger that Eliot tried to tease to the surface. Why should he feel bad for admiring Rosemary's hair? Why should he feel bad for admitting—especially as obliquely and accidentally as he had—that marriage to Lydia was no longer comfortable?

Eliot slid open the deep drawer on the lower right of his desk, thinking he might have a calming drink of his celebration bourbon. Inside the drawer, a series of five chrome spheres were suspended via fishing line from a wooden frame. Newton's cradle, the toy was called, a fixture on the desk of every Hollywood headshrinker ever committed to film. Lydia had given it to him as a gift when he was hired by the feds. He'd been delighted at the visual gag—the stodgy old Newton's balls on the desk of the hip young psychologist. It was hilarious.

As the years passed, he grew worried that people weren't getting the joke. He moved the toy to a shelf behind him, where it wasn't as prominent, and later to a shelf behind his clients, where they would see it only if they were looking. Finally, after they hired Rosemary, but before he showed her his office, he hid it in a drawer, where it straddled his bottle of bourbon.

Lydia, Lydia. It was a hell of a gift.

He picked up the phone and dialed her desk once more. Once more, she didn't answer. It wasn't like her.

In the first days of their marriage, Lydia hadn't yet started her job in Aggregate Statistics. She was finally approved—security clearances,

psychological batteries, proficiency tests in pattern recognition and statistical analysis, and on and on and on—just before their first anniversary. It seemed to him, at the time, a symbol of their fitness for each other. He defended her from distraction while she mucked about in the numbers. She worked with the demographic and death-report data that was collected from all infants at birth, looking for early indications of impending public health disasters. He worked to dissuade adults from filing Death Machine requests, from learning what the government already knew, and triggering the tragedy and chaos that usually followed. It was like a Western: he at the window of the bank with a revolver, fending off the hordes, she inside with a stethoscope on the vault. Like a Western, but more bureaucratic.

It wasn't difficult to identify the period when they began to decline as a couple. It was during Lydia's fifteen minutes. The whole bird fever thing, five years before. In fact, it wasn't difficult to point to the exact moment their deterioration began: he'd been standing over the stove, stirring a red sauce, when she came home from work and said, "At last, some success."

Eliot put down the wooden spoon and gave her a hug. "Your mathly hoodoo is getting some results?" he said.

"Yeah. We're pretty sure my spider found an outbreak of bird fever in Boise, something like fifteen or twenty years from now. Found it hundreds, maybe thousands of cases before the normal tripwires would have flagged it."

"That's fantastic," he said. "How sure is pretty sure?"

"Sure enough that the director is committing resources. We've started the bidding process to synthesize a shotgun vaccine, and as soon as it's ready the Boise schools will start requiring it."

"That's huge," he said, turning back to his pot of tomatoes. "That's money."

"I know it. We stand to save a lot of future lives."

"When will you know?"

"I expect new death slips with 'bird fever' to start tapering off right away," Lydia said. Eliot could feel the happiness radiating from her but couldn't bring himself to meet her eyes. "Like, today," she said. "If I've got this right, we should be down to the odd instance within a few months. We'll do the official review in a year, but with the number of babies born every day in and around Boise, we should have a pretty good idea within the month."

Eliot didn't feel right. He stripped oregano leaves from a stem into the pot and tried to locate within himself a feeling of happiness or pride. With the wooden spoon, he forced the tiny leaves beneath the simmering surface of the sauce.

"Eliot?" Lydia said.

He stepped back from the stove and looked at her. "That's huge," he said. "They have a lot of confidence in you."

Over the next few months, it got worse. Lydia's new filters were a breakthrough in identifying future outbreaks, saving unknown numbers of the not yet conceived from deaths due to disease. Her techniques were adopted across the department and she attained as much celebrity as is available to a midlevel number cruncher in a beige government cubicle.

During that period, each of Lydia's successes made Eliot seize up inside. She received invitations to give talks at conferences frequently enough that he couldn't take the time off to accompany her. He went to work every day and did the same things he'd done for years, feeling less like a partner and more like a nuisance, always hovering two steps behind. Her work was published in academic journals and she was profiled in a popular science magazine. He stopped reading the Death Machine trades so as to avoid seeing her name.

When he arrived at home that evening, the day of Mike Cohen and his lunch with Rosemary, Lydia's car was already in the driveway. Eliot peered through the windows as he slipped between the cars, holding his briefcase high, looking for any hint of why she was home early. He saw none.

The house was quiet. He called for her and stuck his head in the living room, the study, the dining room. From the kitchen he spotted her in their backyard garden. She stood there wearing heavy canvas gloves, holding a cultivating fork, vibrating. She took half a step toward a planter on her left, turned toward the bed on her right, paused for a moment, then cast about again. Eliot watched her through the window as he set down his briefcase and draped his blazer over the back of a chair. Her convulsive indecision was almost funny—like a kid at Christmas who can't get as far as playing with any toy thanks to the distracting temptation of the others. Eliot tried to chuckle, but it came out as a grunt. Could Lydia have been so excited to cultivate the garden that she left work early? It wasn't possible.

Eliot pushed through the screen door and down the steps into the backyard. Without the barrier of the window to provide distance, the silence in the yard was eerie. She was radiating panic. “Lydia?” he said.

Lydia froze and looked at him. Her face was strained and her eyes wouldn’t settle. She threw the cultivating fork aside and made for the house, dropping her shoulder to dodge around him. “Lydia!” he said and put out his arm to catch her around the waist. “What is it?” She folded against him. He spread his hands across her back and felt her shudder against his chest. Never had he seen her this upset. The list of potential causes didn’t seem long. Did something happen to her sister? Had she been fired? Was she having an affair? Eliot leaned away from her enough to look at her face. She wiped thin cords of snot from her lip with the back of her canvas gloves. “What is it, Lydia?” he said. “What happened?”

“The car’s in the driveway,” she said into his shoulder. “I stranded pasty-faced Gary at work.”

A quarter of an hour later, Lydia sat across the kitchen table from Eliot, holding a cup of tea. He sat in silence, fascinated by the redness of her eyes. Somehow, hunched over the kitchen table, in the grip of this pitched misery, she put him in mind of the laughing, driven woman he had courted more than a decade before. He waited for her to work her way through a few sips of tea before he tried again. “Lydia?” he said. “What happened?”

She glanced at him and configured her face in a smile. “There’s going to be a conflagration,” she said. “A conflagration, of all things. In New York.”

It took Eliot nearly an hour to piece together the story Lydia told him in fits and starts, digressions and metaphors. Partway through, he put on another pot of tea and sat down beside her at the table, their upper arms and shoulders touching.

Lydia’s Boise algorithm—the one that launched her career—was easy to understand in the abstract. Infectious disease tends to kill, disproportionately, the very young and the very old. If the Department of Aggregate Statistics catches the slips of the cohort who will, eventually, die when they are very old, the people who will be very young at the time of the outbreak haven’t yet been conceived. They haven’t been born, so they haven’t been tested, so their slips haven’t been printed. Though the

deaths of the very old are written and cannot be changed, there's hope that a concerted public health effort, like a vaccination campaign, might prevent the disease from ravaging the future cohort of the very young. Thus it was that, thanks to her work, no future infants would die of the bird fever in Boise.

Lydia had spent the last year developing a successor to the Boise algorithm, adapting it for applications other than infectious disease, lowering its threshold sensitivity. The challenge was this: while epidemics of disease tend to cluster geographically and demographically, large-scale death due to natural disaster clusters only geographically. These die-offs are demographically scattered, killing healthy adults just as well as infants and the elderly. Without demographic clusters, identifying trends in the raw data of the death slips is much harder to do. Nevertheless, Lydia had some luck catching natural disasters in test data and proceeded to take a stab at real-world data. Her first hit in the real world was the word "conflagration" in New York City. Four hundred death slips going back nearly sixty years came from blood tests of babies in New York.

"Conflagration" was an unusually obscure word choice for the Death Machine. In the overwhelming majority of cases in which the cause of death was fire, the machine reported "fire." So Lydia searched New York's death slips going back sixty years and found 380 hits for "fire." The machine's bizarre behavior put her in a paranoid mood. She searched for "inferno" and found 370 hits, just under the threshold sensitivity of her new algorithm, though far below the threshold of the production standard. A search for "broiling" netted 300 hits. She loaded a thesaurus and worked her way through nouns and verbs related to fire. Immolation: 380 hits. Combustion: 350 hits. Cremation, incineration: 340 hits each. Searing, scorching, charring, roasting: each between 250 and 400 hits.

When she totaled her list, she had thousands of death slips from the city of New York indicating death by fire—far too many to overlook, had they not been cloaked by synonyms. She turned to types of death that often accompany traumatic disasters. Smothering: 350 hits. Asphyxiation, suffocation, hypoxia. Same story. Blunt trauma and bludgeoning. Blood loss and—absurdly, it seemed to Lydia—"exsanguination." Tens of thousands of death slips, taken altogether, suggested a massive disaster coming to New York.

"What could do this?" Eliot said. "A terrorist attack? A nuke? It sounds like you're talking about the total destruction of New York City."

"It's worse than that," Lydia said. "You still don't get it."

She searched for "conflagration" in Seattle: 240 hits. In Albuquerque: 180 hits. Seven hundred fifty hits each in Chicago, Houston, Miami, and D.C.

"You've detected the end of the world?" Eliot said. "You and your computer predicted Armageddon?"

"Armageddon?" Lydia said, and smiled at her teacup. "I could probably get a hundred and fifty hits for it in every American city."

Eliot satisfied the suddenly overwhelming urge to do something with his hands by carrying their teacups to the sink. He could think of nothing to say.

"There are ways," Lydia said, "to predict, roughly, when a disaster is going to fall. We can look at the numbers of babies born with a given death slip, and how those numbers change over time. In this case, since it looks like nearly everyone is going to die, it's a simple linear projection and very precise. We just extrapolate to the time when every baby born gets a disaster-related death slip. It's twenty-nine years and three months away."

He laughed and was startled by the volume of his own voice. "Twenty-nine years?" he said.

"Eliot," Lydia said. "We're barely forty. We're probably going to live to the end of the world."

The next morning, when the clock radio struggled to life—an NPR arts and culture story on a band he didn't recognize—Eliot and Lydia lay there, listening. When the story finished, Lydia turned to face him. "I don't think I'm going to work today," she said.

Eliot reached over the edge of the bed, stretching for the nightstand, and turned off the radio. "I'm thinking the same," he said.

He lay beside her in silence for a time. The thin curtains swelled and glowed. The cherry trees in Potomac Park had dropped their blossoms not so long before, blanketing the banks of the greasy river with petals. They'd do it again the next spring, and again, and twenty-six times after that.

"Is this going to change?" Lydia said. "After I've had a few weeks to contemplate the end of the world, will I want to go back to fine-tuning pattern-matching algorithms in a government cubicle? Ought I?"

"I don't know," Eliot said. "For me, it would be working for a paycheck. I don't know how important paychecks are now."

"I don't think I'm going to work today," she said.

Eliot, wearing sweats and a T-shirt, dialed Rosemary from the garden while Lydia made her calls from the kitchen. The vegetables were established; the annual flowers were growing tall, some of the perennials already blooming. He brushed his hand across the petals of a tulip while Rosemary's phone rang.

"Listen, Rosemary?" he said. "Something's come up. I can't come in today."

"Is everything okay?" she said.

"Sure," he said. "Fine." He bent down and plucked a yellow leaf from the bottom of a young tomato vine. "I'm sure I'll be back tomorrow."

"Well, I'll take as many of your patients as I can. I owe you one. A few, actually."

"Thanks," he said. "The next lunch is on me."

"Oh!" she said. "That reminds me. I read a review of a place last night. It's a tea bar and café, and totally punk rock. Can we try it? Can we try it?"

"Yeah. Rosemary?" he said. "I've got to go."

Lydia knelt beside him at the flowerbed. Eliot had dragged the cultivating fork between the stems and was breaking up small clods of earth with his fingers. "I was evasive," she said. "On the phone just now with pasty-faced Gary. What am I supposed to say to him that doesn't run the risk of ruining his life?"

Lydia had always understood, in an instinctive way that Eliot envied, the horror of a known fate. She never needed to refer to the case studies from the Oedipus years—the painful period after the machine's invention, during which human suffering crested as people learned their fates. A few times a year, Eliot would drag out textbooks to remind himself of the grimmest of the Death Machine stories; Lydia cringed when he tried to read them to her.

"You know," he said, "you don't actually know how you're going to die." He brushed the soil from his hands. "With twenty-nine years left on the clock, you could totally be cut down by cancer, or—I don't know—a serial strangler or something."

She laughed and kissed him on the cheek. “Oh, Eliot,” she said. “You always know just the thing to say.”

That afternoon, they read together in the study. She had a novel; he’d loaded the noon edition of the *Times*. He lowered the paper and gazed at a blank portion of the wall. “There are cheaper places to live than D.C.,” he said.

She closed her book around her finger. “And we’ve built up a lot of equity in the house,” she said.

“Do you think it’s enough? If we sold this place and moved to backwoods Alabama, could we make it for twenty-nine years?”

“I could still research part-time,” she said. “Telecommute. Leave plenty of time for reading and gardening. I could finally get back into sketching.”

“I could start a little practice. Just a few patients a week. Couples therapy and things.”

Lydia shook her head at him in mock exasperation. “You’re going to buy a guitar, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he said. “A loud one.”

An ambulance ran by a few blocks away, howling, then fading in the distance. “Other people can apply filters to data just as well as I can,” Lydia said. “We could be yokels, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Hot yokels.”

After dark, after dinner, they sat in chairs in the backyard, glasses of wine on a table between them. The sky had gone overcast and the lights of the city, reflected on the clouds, cast everything in a lambent blush.

“I’ve been thinking about some of the case studies you’ve told me about over the years,” Lydia said. “I’ve been thinking about the cases when the machine seemed…almost malevolent.”

“Malevolent?” he said.

“I’m anthropomorphizing, I know. Still. I remember a case when an adult—a happy, middle-aged man—received a slip that read ‘suicide.’ He started pulling hard on all the loose threads of his life to try to understand the prediction. Everything fell apart and he ended up killing himself a year later.”

Eliot nodded. The details of that case—Suicidal Sam, students called

him—had persuaded a number of his patients not to file Death Machine requests. "Malevolence suggests agency," he said. "Suicidal Sam was a straightforward tragedy."

"Forget I said malevolence. I just mean this: would he have killed himself without the prediction?"

"Everything we understand about the machine says that he would. The textbooks say he would."

"There are the other cases, the misleading fortunes that really do go straight back to Oedipus. Would Oedipus have left Corinth if it hadn't been for the oracle? Would—was her name Richardson?—have emigrated to Ireland if not for a misleading death slip about snakes? Would that football player have surrounded himself with nothing but men if not for an unusually poetic death slip about a woman scorned?"

"I know. It's hard for me to believe that the machine isn't sometimes, whatever, malevolent. In some of those cases, it sure looks like the fortune was designed to prompt the very decisions that eventually bring it about."

Lydia topped off their glasses and checked the level in the bottle. "You don't have to go as far as design. I'm just saying that the machine itself is sometimes involved as a necessary link in the causal chain."

"Yeah," Eliot said. "It's not the received view, but it seems obviously true to me."

"So here's one possible scenario. In twenty-nine years, a dinosaur-killer asteroid hits the earth and everybody dies."

"Sure."

"Here's another. I tell Gary what I've discovered. You tell Rosemary." Eliot shifted in his chair. "I confirm the trends with standard, accepted statistical methods and take it to the bosses. Over the next three decades, word leaks and spreads. People leave their jobs to pursue lives that seem more important in the gloomy new context. Court systems, police forces, infrastructures grow weaker as people withdraw to take up painting or ballroom dancing or saxophone. The date approaches, the level of panic rises, riots break out and spread, and the world ends."

"I think I prefer the asteroid," Eliot said.

"Except—"

"Except what?"

"The second scenario could be averted."

"Lydia! Of all the people—"

"This isn't as unorthodox as it sounds. I don't think so, anyway. Look, if the machine is involved in the causal chain, we have an opportunity to take it out. If Oedipus hadn't heard the prediction of the oracle, he wouldn't have left Corinth. This is Oedipus writ large. If the people don't hear the prediction, the machine is removed from the causal chain, and the fate doesn't come to pass."

She took a long drink of wine and put her glass down on the table, leaning over the arm of her chair toward him, and continued. "We should have years yet before the death slips trigger the standard trip wires. I just stop developing my new work—claim it was a failure. We can use the time to coordinate a response—a cover-up, I guess—with one or two bosses we know we can trust. If we can keep this contained, it could work."

Eliot looked at Lydia. He wanted to reach out and touch her. One day—one day on her heels after devastating, life-changing news—and she was already forming a plan to fight back. A plan that struck him as totally plausible. "Does this mean no Alabama?" he said. "Does this mean I have to go back to work tomorrow?"

"I don't see any real choice. We kind of have to try." Lydia reached between the chairs to squeeze his knee. "We'll start looking for something better for you," she said. "In the evenings."

The next morning, Lydia and Eliot shared a grapefruit and a pot of coffee. They got dressed and walked to the driveway to wait for pasty-faced Gary. Across the street, he and his wife, Alina, were already outside, strapping a roof rack to their sedan. Both of them were moving in bursts of energy that reminded Eliot of Lydia in the garden two days before.

"Gary!" Lydia called. "What's up?"

Gary jogged across the street while Alina finished tying off the rack. "You're still here?" he said, squinting against the sun. "I didn't know." He looked over his shoulder at his wife, then back at Lydia. "We're going to stay with Alina's parents while we reorient."

"Reorient?" Lydia said.

"I hate my job. Alina hates hers. Who wants to prepare for Armageddon by wasting a life?"

"Armageddon? What are you talking about?"

"Seriously, Lydia. You freaked out and disappeared from work in the middle of the day," Gary said. "You were creepy. We checked what

you were working on. IT opened up your computer for us, and the files were all right there." He looked like he couldn't decide whether he was embarrassed or annoyed. "Did you think we wouldn't?"

Lydia looked at Eliot, then turned back to Gary. "So the bosses know what I found?"

"Yes, they know," he said.

"And you told your family too? Parents? Cousins?"

"Them too," he said.

Eliot watched Alina across the street. He thought she might be crying. Gary gave Lydia an awkward hug and shook Eliot's hand. Eliot and Lydia waited as their neighbors loaded the trunk and roof rack, climbed into the car, and drove away.

"Well," Lydia said, "I guess Armageddon's back on."

Eliot fought back a grin.

"You're smiling?" Lydia said. She looked at her car and at their house and down the empty street. "That's totally inappropriate."

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