

Reggie taps his foot to a silent rhythm, sitting in the driver's seat of the Amazon van—more nervous energy than actual nerves. The text message comes in from Frank; it reads, *go*. The time is 8:13 a.m. on September 27, 2020. Reggie puts the van in gear and moves up the quarter mile at the rehearsed speed, careful not to lurch the heavy vehicle. This maneuver has been practiced. It takes eleven seconds to pull curbside at 1311 Turnipseed Drive, where it partially obstructs the driveway with the van. By design.

It's early enough for most of the neighbors to still be inside: watching their children, logging into work, sleeping in. But it's not impossible that someone will meander out to grab the mail they neglected the day before. Move the sprinklers. Take the dog out. Anything, really. On this front, Reggie and Frank had agreed they'd need to stay lucky. They would add to this good luck by moving with a purpose, by being efficient. The houses on the street were spread out well enough, plenty of space buffering property lines. It was plausible they'll go undetected. People were minding their own business more than ever. If they got nosy, it would be from a distance. And even then, they might not act.

Reggie looks out the passenger window and sees Maggie Egan heading for her Lexus SUV, immaculately groomed and every bit as beautiful as the pictures he's seen. The stories told. She was a stunning creature by any measure. She carries a medium-size handbag. Nothing else.

Reggie straightens his N95 and adjusts his aviators over his eyes. He makes sure his Sig is tucked away neatly in the large pockets of the jumpsuit he's wearing over his proper suit. He wears an Amazon baseball cap. Latex gloves. He takes a package off the passenger seat and hops out of the van. He remembers to smile; even if people can't see it anymore, he does so anyway. It feels like one less thing given to chance. He throws his free hand up in greeting to Maggie Egan, briskly walking up the driveway to her, narrowing the distance between the two. She seems a bit disoriented but not too much—maybe just surprised to be dealing with a human being this early in the day. She doesn't wear a mask. Reggie gets close but not close enough to hand off the package. A culturally acceptable distance for the day and age. He's angling their interaction ever so slightly toward her car. She twists her mouth.

"Kind of early for a delivery, no?" asks Maggie Egan, pleasantly.

"You're not wrong," says Reggie, pulling out the Sig and pointing it at her heart.

Maggie Egan puts her hands up, lets out an involuntary yip.

"Put your hands down and get behind your car."

Reggie directs her with his gun to exactly where she should stand. The two of them are now mostly out of view from the street. She attempts to plead something to Reggie, who just drops the package on the ground, puts two fingers to his mouth, indicating she should be quiet. A well-calibrated stopwatch ticks down in his mind. He pulls a suppressor from another pocket and screws it onto the Sig. Maggie Egan gulps. They can hear the heavy footfalls on the driveway: Frank hustling upon them, leaving his hiding spot from across the way. He's also wearing an N95, welder goggles, and a longshoreman's knit cap. Same type of jumpsuit and gloves that Reggie wears. His hands are empty. He addresses Maggie Egan, apropos of nothing.

"I'll be taking that now," he says, pointing to the handbag.

“You can’t have it.”

“He’ll shoot you in the stomach.”

“No, he won’t.”

The two men look to each other, nonplussed, though mildly impressed.

“Two for two,” says Reggie, giving a curt nod to Frank.

Maggie Egan almost had time to scream for help. Almost. It’s always easy to see these things in hindsight. It might have helped, or it might have gone unheard. But it was a moot point. Frank is on her in a second: one hand cupped over her mouth, the other arm under her throat as he positions himself behind her. She can taste the latex on his hand, then is rendered unconscious in less than ten seconds. He carries her weight and gingerly places her body under the back fender of the Lexus, minding her head on the blacktop. He clears some strands of red hair off her face. Checks her pulse with two fingers to her wrist. She’s plenty alive and will have a long snooze, vivid dreams.

Reggie picks up the handbag and puts it in the Amazon box, which was empty the whole time. The two men make for the van, Frank hopping out of sight into the back while Reggie resumes his role as the driver. They pull away from the curb and head back through the neighborhood a little above the speed limit. The whole endeavor has taken under two minutes, and it does not appear they’ve been observed. There are no frantic bystanders. There are no cars to spy in their mirrors. Certainly no wailing sirens. It feels like a success. The luck you bring to yourself.

Reggie gets out of the neighborhood onto a thick artery of road, though with significantly less traffic than usual. They know their destination well, also did a practice run a few days ago. It’s a kind of flophouse thirty minutes away on the outskirts of a lesser borough. It’s a fortified spot. Reggie feels good being back in the van’s motion, feels good just to be working again after a tumultuous six months. Frank is sitting on a bolted-down little bench in the cargo area, not so far from Reggie, but no line of sight out the front window. This makes him uneasy. He’s a visual guy. So he studies Reggie’s body motion, his hands on the wheel, his shifting in the seat. The occasional word spoken. As they get closer to their destination, Frank starts to mirror Reggie’s relaxing energy, the feeling that they’re in the clear. The tension dips. He settles in and exhales for what feels like the first time in an hour.

The box with the handbag rests on his knee. He makes note of its weight for—heavier than he supposed. He takes the bag out of the box and looks it over. Weird to think that a hunk of leather sells for 20k. That people just carry around something like that without giving it much thought. Or protection. Some people, that is. There’s a whole market and secondary market and black market and investor class that operate in such handbags. Seems like a waste of hide to Frank, but what does he really care? A score is a score. He opens the bag, mostly out of curiosity—idle hands. It’s not an unreasonable action to take. He looks inside, and his heart burns a quick flutter, forcing him to look around the back of the van as though he suddenly wasn’t alone, like someone had been shadowing him the whole time. He places his hands inside

the bag and smooths over the objects, calls out to Reggie, who's steadily driving with his hands at ten and two.

"Yeah, what's up?" asks Reggie.

"There are two bricks of cellophaned money crammed into this thing."

"Denomination?"

"Hundreds."

"That may be a wrinkle."

"Or a windfall."

"Too early to tell," says Reggie, calling back over his shoulder. "We're ten minutes out. Stay frosty and we'll sort it out upstairs."

They clam up and save the jawing for the apartment, knowing they won't solve for this development in short order. Reggie keeps the van tight on the roads until they get to the building they're looking for. He flashes a keycard over a kiosk sensor and follows an underground ramp into a subterranean parking garage. They park in spot 9C. They wipe down as much of the inside as they can, even though they kept their latex gloves on the whole time. Lots of folks were wearing latex gloves wherever they went. People hardly even noticed it anymore.

They cautiously get out of the van and look around. Still wearing those N95s, still wearing their hats and eye covering. The garage looks empty. They leave the keys on the front tire and hustle through the garage toward the staircase, where they hump up the nine floors and enter apartment 9C with a single key, then lock the deadbolt behind them. They proceed to sweep the spartan, one-bedroom flat and confirm no one else is in it. They strip off their gear and coveralls. They allow themselves a relieved smile. Reggie sends a text from a burner phone, then disables it. The bathroom gets used, and bottles of water are retrieved from the fridge. There are disinfectant wipes on the kitchen countertop. Hands are cleaned. Then Reggie and Frank take seats opposite each other at the lone table, the handbag placed between the two. They conduct an inventory and discover the following:

- two tightly wrapped packages of money
- one tin of wintergreen Altoids
- one roll of cherry Life Savers
- one sealed tampon
- one driver's license
- assorted US and Canadian coinage

The two men find it hard not to stare at the money. The remaining contents of the handbag are strewn out across the table. There had never been any discussion about that type of money on Maggie Egan. Truth is, they don't really know who she is. Just a mark. Or that anything of relevance might be in the bag. The job was just about the bag itself, supposedly the kind worth tens of thousands, easy enough to move. It was supposed to be very good money for just a morning's worth of work. Particularly when work was scarce these days. Though all this was looking less and less the case to Reggie and Frank. Prospects have changed. They just couldn't say for better or worse. Reggie takes one of the bricks and feels around it, strips off the

plastic methodically. Frank watches with interest. Once they're bare, Reggie thumbs through the bundled packets, one by one, until all have been examined thoroughly. He leans back in his chair. Pensive.

"What do you think?" asks Frank.

"Quarter million between the two, I'd say. Feel free to inspect the second one," says Reggie, drinking from his water bottle. "Keep your eyes peeled for anything that could be a tracking device."

Frank proceeds to dissect the other brick of cash. Reggie takes the empty handbag and examines it, feeling around for anything that shouldn't be there. Maybe stitched into the satin interior, embedded under a glossy panel of leather. It seems more probable to him that the bag would be tracked over the actual cash, but he can't find anything that suggests the bag has been tampered with, bugged. That said, it's a type of technology that's only getting more sophisticated, slicker with the expansion of digital and mobile mods. Even Apple was getting into the arena with their Air Tag products, commercializing tracking options—concepts that had once been clandestine for sale on the open market. So Reggie can't be totally sure the bag or its contents are clean. Some of it will force a wait-and-see approach that's unavoidable. This much he's already accepted. Frank finishes going through the cash as Reggie's had enough of feeling up the designer bag.

"I think it's clean, but who really knows?" says Reggie.

"Same with the cash."

"What's your take on the other stuff?"

They look to the random objects on the table.

"Why have Life Savers *and* Altoids?" asks Frank.

"Different flavors."

Frank rolls the package of Life Savers around his fingers.

"How would you characterize this pack of Life Savers?"

"Looks worn down," says Frank. "And unopened."

Reggie drums his fingers on the Altoids tin.

"How much you want to bet those aren't mints?" asks Reggie, opening the Altoids and examining the contents up close—it's not even good subterfuge. Reggie's not sure what to make of it. He closes the tin and puts it back on the table.

"Xanax," he says.

"Street value there, no?"

"Nah, just someone's personal stash. Maggie Egan."

"So we save them for a rainy day?"

Reggie hesitates for a half second, then collects himself, carries on.

"Benzos are a bad road," says Reggie, pushing the tin toward Frank. "Would you mind flushing these down the toilet?"

Frank takes a quick measure of the man sitting before him, ten years his senior, someone he's only known in person for a few days now. He's heard plenty of the stories about Reggie,

though. How he was a talented thief but also a dope fiend. How Maxwell had taken an unusual liking to him, helped get him sober, and given him a second chance in a business that didn't offer many of those. How he was referred to as the "reclamation project" and not in a sporting kind of way. How the man had already lived three lifetimes and wasn't even forty yet, though he wore it in the way he slouched, in his bony hands. He wore it all over his fucked-up face.

Frank gets up and disposes of the pills in the bathroom, returning to see Reggie examining the driver's license.

"Different address, different name, but the right photo," says Reggie. "This whole thing feels really off."

"The coins seem legit," says Frank, spinning a quarter, a stroke of levity.

The two men fix their eyes on the last untouched object on the table—the sealed tampon. Reggie gives the other man a nod. Frank picks up the tampon and takes a closer look at the packaging, then proceeds to pull a utility tool from his pocket. He unfolds a tiny sharpened blade and makes an incision into the paper wrapping, pulling the actual tampon out. He massages it with his fingers. Searching. He reapplies the blade to the tampon and cuts through with a notable amount of precision. Almost surgical. He chooses a few more spots to do this. Once satisfied, he thumbs open the incisions and lets the content that's been squirreled away fall to the table. A flash drive.

Frank and Reggie look to each other for an uncomfortable beat; this kind of revelation makes one think the other is double-crossing them. The money was one thing, but now hidden data. Who knows what could be on it? How much it's worth? And to whom? This job was supposed to be about a stupid handbag. They remain still, allowing enough time to pass to convince the other they haven't a clue what's going on. A lot being said without technically saying it. They relax a bit; certain muscles unclamp. It appears they're on the same side. For now. For whatever that's worth.

Reggie tries to clear the doom from his throat before he speaks.

"Someone is going to come a-knocking on our door soon enough, probably even someone we know," says Reggie calmly. "You know Simon brought me directly into this. But how did you get put onto this job?"

"Maelstrom. Know him?"

"I do. The street sweeper of information. Sometimes he's even accurate," says Reggie, clearly thinking things through. "OK, we might be OK if it's him that shows."

"And if it's not?"

"Obviously we're not letting unknowns in without a fight," says Reggie, glancing at the money. "Anyone else we know could also be a problem."

"Then let's hope it's Maelstrom."

Reggie affirms this conclusion with a head nod. They hear some noise in the apartment above them, like someone's vacuuming a rug. It reminds the men that real people live here. It's mildly jarring.

"He didn't tell me about any of this extracurricular shit, I swear," says Frank.

“Sure.”

“So what do we do?”

“We make some coffee and play Ratscrew to pass the time,” says Reggie, pulling a deck of cards from his jacket pocket. “Until someone darkens our door.”

“Don’t know that one.”

“I’ll teach you. It’s good once you get the hang of it.”

They brew some freeze-dried Folgers from the cupboard, and Reggie walks Frank through the card game, which they end up playing for a couple of hours. This part of their plan remained static; the intent was always to cool their heels in the apartment for the day until nighttime, providing nothing unexpected happened. Allowing for the unexpected, they’d be holed up. Simon had hooked up the apartment, along with the Amazon van, a concept he’d been developing for the past year, now accelerated given the rise of home deliveries in the past months. The van was to be picked up from parking space 9C, where a slash of blue paint would be left in the spot to signal all had gone well. The less electronic communication the better. The old ways that still had their place.

So, in a premeditated sense, the men didn’t have much to do but play cards and kill time, maybe swap some stories, and get to know each other better. Of course, steely questions now presented themselves, given the contents of Maggie Egan’s handbag. Also some added buoyancy, given the quarter-million dollars in their possession. Still. It wasn’t what they were expecting, and that has a way of leaving a sour pit in the gut. It made the lack of communication through the remaining burner phones that much more annoying. No news isn’t necessarily good news. It was hard not to feel unsettled. And there is only so much cards you can play, coffee you can drink, before you want the next move to reveal itself. Which it does around one p.m., their door finally knocked upon, the next threshold to cross. They rise from their seats and go to the front on either side. Reggie has his Sig drawn out of his shoulder holster. Frank wields a two-inch blade that he favors sticking in people’s throats. It has a grooved-rubber handle for added grip. Reggie looks through the peephole and lets out a quiet sigh of relief.

“Maelstrom, alone it seems,” says Reggie.

Frank nods, and they let him in—their visitor gets right to the point.

“I’m sure you have questions,” says Maelstrom, gliding in, the door quickly closed behind him. “I brought you desperados some fresh food.”

He puts down a shopping bag on the kitchen counter, takes stock of the handbag and its contents still laid out on the table, set aside from the strewn playing cards. He lets out a long whistle.

“You boys have had a day,” says Maelstrom. “Still tricking people into Ratscrew, eh, Reggie?”

Reggie takes a peek inside the shopping bag, making sure it’s just food.

“I’m guessing you won’t be offended if I give you a little pat down, right, buddy?” asks Frank, though he’s hardly asking permission.

Maelstrom smiles and lifts his arms. Frank checks him, and he's clean, not overly surprising as Maelstrom, despite his name, isn't known as a heavy. More brains than brawn, and some would say that's being generous. His talents rely on more naturalistic traits, like a parasitic fungus. Not that he's shunned for this. Or denies it. He takes a seat and motions for the two men to ask away.

"Did you know what was going to be in that bag?" asks Reggie patiently.

"There were certain probabilities, but nothing for sure," says Maelstrom. "The money is often there, not necessarily a USB."

"So Simon put you onto this, and it gets tossed to us under a false pretense," continues Reggie, less patiently.

"He's only interested in the drive," says Maelstrom. "Anything else is yours to split as you see fit."

Reggie and Frank give each other a look, unable to conceal the hint of pleasure at that news.

"Yeah, I thought that might take the sting out," says Maelstrom, getting up and grabbing a water from the fridge, cleaning his hands with a disinfectant wipe. "Get a sandwich. We have a lot of territory to cover."

The three men proceed to pull wrapped subs from the grocery bag, begin eating, which helps relieve some of the tension in the air—not thoroughly diffused, but more room to operate in a palpable manner.

"Why not just tell us what we were up against?" asks Frank, hungry to the point he barely registers what he's eating; maybe it's ham and cheese. Or salami.

"It was part of a test—multiple tests, in fact," says Maelstrom. "Tests you continue to pass, including not killing me on sight. Thanks for that, by the way."

"So what's on the drive?" asks Reggie.

"Disparate information that will be monetized to our best extent."

"And Maggie Egan isn't going to be sore she's out a quarter million?" asks Frank.

"It's not her money. She's mostly the courier," says Maelstrom. "Besides, it's a rounding error to the actual owners. They'll be more put out by the lost drive."

"Never heard of someone not missing a quarter mil."

"They lose more cash to silverfish on any given day," says Maelstrom dismissively. "The lost info is what'll stick in their craw."

"And who does Maggie Egan courier for?"

Maelstrom takes a pause—perhaps for effect, perhaps because the words are like cankers in his mouth.

"Horace Prestidigicom."

Reggie and Frank stop eating their sandwiches, hard-swallow the masticated food down their throats. They take in some water. It was hardly the name they were expecting to hear. Certainly not a name you'd ever want to hear.

“So this goes above Simon,” says Reggie. “You’re saying all of this is coming down from Maxwell?”

Maelstrom says nothing.

“I’d heard Maxwell was in seclusion since April,” says Frank. “Riding things out until the treatments got better.”

Maelstrom takes a moment to wipe his mouth with a napkin, sizing up the two men incrementally. He knows he’s in the presence of dangerous beings and not goons—legitimately smart killers. Savvy in their own brand of street intelligence. What they think of him, he can only imagine. The question would now pivot to how trustworthy they can be. The calculated risks that require bringing them into the fold. Now or never.

“Maxwell has been dead for five weeks,” says Maelstrom, minding his words. “The day and age we now live in.”

“Jesus,” says Frank. It’s all he can muster.

“This is hardly public knowledge,” says Reggie, trying to remember the last time he spoke with Maxwell, saw him in person—the man who brought him back from the brink when no one else gave a damn. Now gone.

“We’re warming up the space slowly,” says Maelstrom. “A succession plan is playing out at a certain pace.”

“Simon,” say Reggie and Frank at the same time.

“His idea is to lend some disruption to Horace’s outfit, which you’ve now done,” says Maelstrom. “Plus there’s an element of measured retaliation over some torched property.”

“Simon’s not going to allow a power vacuum,” says Reggie. “Especially now.”

“Does Horace know that Maxwell has shuffled off?” asks Frank.

“We presume so. Simon is drafting new lines as we speak,” says Maelstrom. “He’s not going to give Horace or Vincent from Across the Border or smaller entities a chance to pilfer what Maxwell created.”

“So he’s a cartographer now?” asks Reggie.

“You joke, but that’s exactly how he sees himself,” says Maelstrom. “And you two very much figure into the new faction being formed.”

“How so?”

“There’s going to be churn, but Simon believes you could have stronger roles in the consolidation,” says Maelstrom. “In particular, he was curious how well you would work together. What the dynamic might be like.”

“More tests,” says Reggie.

“Opportunities. Pairing you together, different skill sets, experiences, synergy,” says Maelstrom. “There’s upward mobility in Simon’s vision.”

“Everything’s a corporation now,” says Reggie.

“Again you joke,” says Maelstrom, taking a breath. “Tell me, how did the job go, surprises aside?”



“As planned,” says Frank, less chippy about what he’s hearing than Reggie is. “You going to deliver the drive to Simon?”

“No, you fellas stick to the drop-off as scheduled. He’ll be waiting for you.”

Reggie and Frank agree. The men return to eating their sandwiches.

“Suffice it to say keep the Maxwell news under your hats,” says Maelstrom. “And even if your feelings are a bit raw, those bricks may warrant a thank-you to Simon.”

“We’ll mind our manners,” says Frank.

“In that case, I’ll be off,” says Maelstrom, getting up from the table. “Keep to the plan; sometimes it’s all we have.”

Not wanting to linger in the presence of these two killers longer than need be, Maelstrom doesn’t tarry and gets to the door, checks the peephole, and exits like a wraith. Even if he does kind of like the two, he’s well aware they’re cut from different cloth. Nothing he’d ever want to be draped in. Reggie and Frank find themselves alone again, well fed, but another long block of time to trudge through. They’ll have plenty of new information to mull over. If even half of what Maelstrom said was true, the Earth was indeed slipping its axis. More than it already had this year. There was the money though, a great deal of it that was theirs for the taking. Unless it wasn’t. Time would tell.

More hours pass as Reggie and Frank play cards half-heartedly. They are distracted by all the news laid onto them over lunch. Maxwell’s death. Simon’s ambition. The real reason for stealing the handbag. It’s hardly a small series of events for two relative strangers to share with one another. And there’s only so long they can puzzle over the different variables from competing angles. To shift gears, for respite, they trade war stories. Frank talks about his martial arts background. His wife and twin babies at home. He says people have taken to calling him “family man” now. It fills him with pride. He has some peculiar tattoos around his wrist and neck and maybe some other places. Words and images of bone and blood vessels and roman numerals. Reggie can’t quite bring himself to ask about them. Frank doesn’t volunteer to explain them. They talk about the money and dreamily discuss what they may do with it, not wanting to jinx the outcome. They discuss the merits of kicking up a gratuity to Simon, a gesture he may appreciate, that may reinforce their interest in this new cabal he’s cooking up. They discuss what a higher station in life might be like. They talk about what things have been like for them over the past six months, since March really. The information. The misinformation. The bullshit. They find there truly is plenty to discuss with the bloat of time, even if they can’t handle any more Folgers or sodium-soaked cold cuts.

Then it is eight p.m., the agreed-upon time they can depart the apartment and move into the next phase of the plan. So they tidy and leave the place as they found it, taking some of the extra food and water in the grocery bag Maelstrom brought. They repack the handbag, including the coins and empty Altoids tin. The only things they leave behind are their coveralls. They peek out the door to find the hallway empty. They scurry off, taking the same flight of stairs down into the parking garage where they should find a nondescript sedan parked in 9C, the Amazon van gone, blue paint visible in the spot.

Reggie and Frank make their way through the heavy metal door and get a few steps into the parking garage—then a stationary white van about one hundred feet away opens the sliding door that faces them. Loud and fast. Not enough to catch them off guard, but enough to put some surprise in them, a bit flat footed. Inside the van, Maelstrom is tied to a chair, facing Reggie and Frank, his mouth covered with duct tape. His nose is leaking blood over the tape. A stout man in all black wearing Ray-Bans and a balaclava holds a gun to Maelstrom's head. A few feet away from them is Maggie Egan, looking as beautiful as ever despite the day she must be having. No mask or glasses or face shield to cover up that sculpted mug of hers. She's also holding a gun, but even from a distance, she doesn't look overly comfortable with it. Something in the way her arm is extended, like she's never experienced recoil before. Like she doesn't know how to protect her elbow. Not that it makes her a nonfactor, holding a loaded weapon in their direction. If anything, she's looking awfully determined, and there's a fire in those eyes to match her hair, and she's looking pretty pleased to have tracked down Reggie and Frank.

The two men take a subtle, reflexive step backward: sizing up the distance, creating a little more space. There are parked cars nearby that may provide some shelter. If they can be reached. It's hardly the greatest of positions they find themselves in, though it need not be terminal. There are moves to be made. A couple of charged beats take place, no one talking or moving so much, until enough acclimation has set in, and Maggie Egan opens her trap, flashing those pearly whites, her slick tongue like a caged reptile.

"The bag and its contents for your man," she says cheerily. "Let's not throw good money after bad."

Reggie and Frank don't respond to her opening offer.

"Hell, you can keep the bag; just give me back all the stuff that's in it."

"We were told the money wouldn't be missed," says Frank.

"By a fool," says Maggie Egan, throwing a glare at Maelstrom. "So turn it over."

"He's less our man than you realize," say Reggie, motioning for Frank to inch backward, slowly, whatever pace they can get away with.

Maelstrom's eyes are now bugging out—no one wants to hear they're less valued than they think they are, particularly with a gun to their head.

"You think we're bluffing," says Maggie Egan, who nods in the direction of the masked gunman, who proceeds to plant his pistol into Maelstrom's leg and blows apart his left kneecap.

This assailant may have thought he was acting with expediency, but it would be the last mistake he ever made on this plane of existence. Before he can even reset himself, Reggie pulls his Sig from the holster and puts a single bullet into the man's face, slamming him into the back of the van, coating the interior with brain and gore and blood and teeth. The speed at which Reggie drops the man could only be described as blazing. The sound, sickening. Maggie Egan barely registers what happens, the shock on her face slowly replaced with a vapid kind of lucidity as she clumsily fires a shot in Frank's direction, though she misses by a country mile as he dives behind a parked pickup truck. Frank doesn't even have a pistol, so it's more likely she's just going through the rote motions of what you're supposed to do in a gunfight. This isn't her

wheelhouse. Reggie's got his Sig trained on her before she can even glance back in his direction. When she does, she looks visibly shaken by the reversal of fortune. She's in a bad way, but maybe Reggie isn't quite ready to murder her over it. Maelstrom has fallen over in his chair, screaming muffled screams through the duct tape. His knee is spewing all it's willing to give up. Frank is peeking over the pickup's wheel well, assessing whether the coast is clear.

Now Reggie's in the position to counter Maggie Egan's original proposition.

"You can go ahead and drop that pea shooter," he says, tersely.

"I'm afraid."

"That happens when someone's in my crosshairs."

"No. That if I toss the gun, it will accidentally go off."

"Put the safety on."

"I don't know how."

With his free hand, Reggie pinches his nose in exasperation, keeping the Sig leveled at her head.

"It's the little sliding button right above your thumb," says Reggie. "Just push it backward."

After a bit of fumbling, Maggie Egan engages the safety catch and tosses the gun out of the van per Reggie's instructions. He closes the distance to the van and signals for Frank to follow him. The two get into the van and close the door behind them. Frank immediately frisks Maggie Egan for any other weapons she may be equally inept with. His search is both thorough and mean spirited, unapologetically so. Reggie holsters his Sig and helps upright Maelstrom, ripping off the duct tape from his mouth, using one of Frank's knives to cut the bindings around his wrists and ankles. He's free of the chair and subsequently collapses out of it, puking his guts onto the floor, spraying bile onto the nearby corpse. Everyone looks away out of modesty. The van's becoming a real tableau of odors and fluids, the elements of life and death—it's a wonder any of them can keep their lunch down. Maelstrom purges, then punches the dead guy's chest in a childish way, calls him an expletive. Reggie gets him back to his feet and hands him some napkins from the grocery bag to clean his face off. Also a bottle of water. Encourages him to drink. Then takes a knee so as to address Maelstrom at eye level.

"I know you're suffering right now, but try not to moan too much, OK?" says Reggie.

Maelstrom grits his teeth, wipes at his tear-stained cheeks, nods in agreement.

"I'd have choked to death if I didn't fight to hold it back," says Maelstrom, rasping.

"You did good," says Reggie, smoothing the man's unkempt hair with his hand.

Behind them, Frank keeps tab on Maggie Egan, a stiletto blade playfully pointed at her neck. She's got a fearful pallor to her fair skin, almost ashen in the low light of the van's interior. But something else. Behind the eyes. Maybe a survival mode that's beginning to activate. Perhaps Frank can see it too. He's not cutting her much slack in these closed quarters.

"Can you tell me what happened?" asks Reggie.

"They got me right away. Never even made it to double-check on the 9C spot," says Maelstrom.

“They wanted to know where we were?” asks Reggie.

Maelstrom nods his head, clamping his jaw shut to keep the noise down. His eyes have gone glassy and unfocused. His kneecap is shredded pork. The pain is going to be a real problem. But at least it’s not major blood vessel territory.

“And you told them we were in 9C,” says Reggie. “But they liked the idea of waiting to ambush us down here better.”

“Sorry, man, I’m not the guy that withstands torture.”

Reggie pats the man’s shoulder, tosses a look to Frank.

“How’d you find us here?” says Frank, his voice a rock tumbler, the stiletto tip now on Maggie Egan’s carotid. “Where’s the tracking device?”

“There is no tracking device,” she says. “He’s the bug. We followed him early and got lucky.”

“Short-lived luck, if you ask me,” says Frank, looking at her neck, then the corpse.

“How’d you know to go looking for Maelstrom so quickly?” asks Reggie patiently.

“I didn’t. Horace did. You two covered your tracks well enough,” she says. “So we started a rung above. Easy pickings too—guy drives like he doesn’t own a rearview mirror.”

“Fuck you,” spits Maelstrom.

“You spoke with Horace. Where is he now?” asks Reggie.

“Sonoma. Anyone who’s anyone knows this,” she says. “Seems he’s become an awfully big believer in UV light.”

Reggie takes in the information, for whatever it’s worth—Frank coaches Maelstrom to drink some more of his water.

“You know, I don’t appreciate you throwing that bullet my way,” says Frank to Maggie Egan.

“Says the guy who choked me out twelve hours ago.”

Fair points.

“Why’d you come back for the bag?” asks Reggie.

“Because quitters never win.”

Reggie rolls his eyes at the nonanswer.

“And who’s this unlucky fellow?” asks Frank, pointing to the stiff with the blown-apart head.

“Someone who may or may not be avenged,” says Maggie Egan. “I’d never met him prior to today.”

Reggie and Frank take each other’s measure stoically—she’s not wrong about the unknown body; it will have to be dealt with. A factor in a mounting sense of deterioration. As Maelstrom is slowly losing his battle to keep a lid on the pain. Maggie Egan’s getting lippy. And the van is really starting to stink.

“Look, why don’t you give your man one of my pills. I’m sure you found them by now, and it may take the edge off,” says Maggie Egan. “I’ll take one too if it’s not so much to ask.”

“We flushed them.”

She screws her face up in disgust, somehow making herself more attractive, like a woman scorned.

“Oh, that’s right. One of you is a junkie,” says Maggie Egan. “I’m guessing it’s the gangly one with the scars.”

She points her finger at Reggie, who dips his head down. There’s a certain shame that never quite goes away no matter how much you change. How much you atone. Frank sees this and rotates his hips and rabbit punches her in the kidney, and that takes some starch out of her, though she manages to stay upright. Not that Frank was trying to flatline her, just making a point. Reggie gives him a look of condemnation and gratitude at the same time. Frank rolls his shoulders. He’s pretty sure he’ll never tire of punching people.

“I’m calling Simon,” says Reggie, pulling out his last disposable phone and dialing a number he has committed to memory.

After a few seconds pass, the call is accepted, and a one-sided conversation can be heard, Reggie not putting the call on speaker just yet. He apprises Simon of where they are, all that’s happened. The success. The reversals. Their current predicament. Maelstrom. The corpse. It’s a heady one-minute explanation. He asks Simon’s opinion of what’s still on and what’s most assuredly off. He asks about underground doctors Maelstrom can be taken to. He listens, then mutes the phone to address the denizens of the white van.

“No resources on the medical front anymore; they’ve all been reenlisted or gone to seed,” says Reggie. “Maelstrom, buddy, we got to take you to an ER, but don’t worry. No one gets arrested for getting shot in the knee. You don’t have outstanding warrants, by any chance?”

Maelstrom shakes his head, and Reggie returns to the phone call.

“The kid’s a fighter, says he’s good with the hospital,” says Reggie, giving Maelstrom an encouraging wink. “And what about the courier?”

Reggie listens, looking casually at Maggie Egan as though her life wasn’t currently in the balance. He rattles off a couple of uh-huhs and clucks his tongue in his mouth a bit.

“So is that one grave or do them separately?” asks Reggie into the phone.

“No!” says Maggie Egan loudly, forcing Frank to put a bear-paw around her throat to remind her of the food chain again.

“You don’t say,” mumbles Reggie into the phone.

“Listen, I can still be of value,” she wheezes out. “I know how you can stick it to Horace.”

Maelstrom’s grumbling on about killing the bitch, though no one’s much regarding his opinion.

“Yeah, she says she has a plan if we let her live,” says Reggie into the phone. “Tell us about this supposed value you still have.”

Reggie puts the phone up and places it on speaker. Frank loosens his hand from Maggie Egan’s throat without removing it. She takes in some gulps of air like a drowning person, which she is.

“It’s all a big pissing match, right? Well, I know where his house in Westchester is, hardly common knowledge,” she says. “I’ll take you there right now. We can dump the body into his own backwoods.”

“What’s that supposed to solve?” asks Frank, still holding her throat, though slowly lowering the PSI.

“Disposal of the body for starters. But it sows chaos. Let the body rot. Hide it really well if you want. Or don’t. Make it so the landscapers can find it. His kids. Call in an anonymous tip to the cops whenever you feel like it. You can jam him up without declaring all-out war.”

Reggie and Frank look to each other, then at the phone. Reggie takes it off speaker and puts it back to his ear. Simon is asked if he got all that. Some more time is spent on the line, Reggie offering up a lot of one-word answers, tugging at the dingy collar of his button-down shirt. He eventually hangs up and blows out a stale puff of air. He feels the aura of the van seeping into his pores. It’s hardly pleasant, even if it’s one way to make a buck. The eyes of the living rest upon him in anticipation.

“You have one shot,” says Reggie to Maggie Egan. “Do what you say, and you’ll have a chance to walk back to the city.”

“Done,” she says.

Frank releases her delicate throat, snorts a bit, raises an eyebrow at Reggie, a silent question asked.

“One less corpse is his preference. For now,” says Reggie. “Let’s get Maelstrom the hell out of here.”

“They’ll call the cops for a gunshot wound.”

“Can’t be helped. Doesn’t mean Maelstrom has to open his trap except to receive those pain pills, right?”

They look to the woozy man in the chair, his mind swimming laps in the wave pool.

“What’s there to say?” says Maelstrom, lucid enough to give them the answer they want to hear.

“Long days and nights,” says Frank, almost philosophically.

“Simon made mention of that. Told us in return to keep all the money free and clear,” says Reggie. “So that’s one less decision.”

Frank grunts in approval—he never much cared for philosophy anyway. Reggie goes back to the driver’s seat and starts the van, the keys hanging in the ignition the whole time. He takes a few moments to himself, trying to get his mind right, to sort out the many cataclysms of the day. Then Maggie Egan speaks up abruptly.

“Hey, Reggie—it’s Reggie, right?” she says, calling up to him from the cargo hold of the van. “I’m sorry for that crack about being a junkie; that was uncalled for.”

There’s an unmistakable lilt to the way she says this.

“Don’t talk to him,” says Frank, wondering if that roll of duct tape is around.

“Whatever,” says Reggie noncommittally as he puts the van in gear and eases it out of the parking garage, which has more than lived up to its reputation as a place where everyone minds their own business.

They drive. It’s at least a half hour to the hospital, not the closest one but the one they feel more comfortable dropping Maelstrom off at. He isn’t doing so hot, but no one’s ever died from a slug to the knee, so he’s in the unenviable position of forced patience for the greater good, doing his part to keep their caper afloat. At least they’ve stopped prompting him to drink water. He kind of hates water.

On their way, they detour near an overpass construction site, where Reggie hops out and quickly pilfers some plastic tarps and a two-by-four. He’s back in the van in under a minute and on the road again. The tarps will be used to conceal and transport the corpse. The two-by-four will serve as Maelstrom’s crutch as he’ll have to hobble—crawl if necessary—some distance into the ER. They can’t risk the van getting too close to the property, getting caught on film. More insult to the injured man, just a cold reality of the situation. He doesn’t begrudge his fate. He tries to frame his trials as proving grounds for Simon, for the killers he’s currently aligned with. Men who could turn on him without much cause. In truth, he’s feeling pretty grateful to be alive; just ask the motionless assassin on the van’s floor. He wonders what the dude ate for breakfast, probably his last meal ever. That single shot Reggie took. Thinking about it provides a modicum of euphoria running up his leg. Though fleeting, ephemeral. He knows middlemen like him don’t fare so well in these live-ammo scenarios, keenly aware of his soft spots. It’s forced him to posture for much of the day. To feign a toughness he’s unsure he possesses to gain the approval of these would-be killers, saviors, collaborators. His thoughts are bubbles in a roiling sea. But he’s keeping it together. Mostly. Until the van slows near the darkened stretch a half mile from the hospital, parking lot lights glowing above the tree line. There’s little fanfare with respect to his parting. There’s too much to do, too little interest in being spied by another party. Frank helps him slink out the sliding doors and gets the piece of lumber under his armpit. Who knows how long that will work for? As long as it can. Someone says adios. The van doesn’t linger; it gets back on the long road to Westchester with a body to bury.

Maelstrom hobbles his way toward the hospital, alone.

They ride out close to an hour, Maggie Egan offering the occasional snippet of direction to keep Reggie on the right path. She doesn’t remember the actual address—so she says—but recalls the route, will recognize the house on sight. She explains that it’s a big place on spacious property, but nothing one would call a compound. It’s known that Horace owns many different houses but doesn’t really live in any of them. That they’re almost for show, for certain seasonal meetings. She was at the Westchester house last summer for a sort of gathering—half celebration, half business.

She’s inched up closer from the van’s back to see out the front window. Frank doesn’t allow her more than an arm’s length’s worth of distance. She’s been mostly quiet, apart from the directions, but it’s a long ride, and she’s got a burning question that won’t leave her be. It may anger her captors, but she’s already in hot enough water. What’s a few more degrees?

“Reggie, how did you draw down like that back there?” she asks.

“What did I say? Don’t talk to him,” says Frank sharply. “Let the man drive.”

“It’s all right,” says Reggie, putting his hand up, maybe a bit restless himself. “Tactical weapons training. It’s important that I keep my mind occupied.”

They all know what he means by that.

“It was a hell of a display,” she says. “A marksman’s shot.”

“Enough,” says Frank, and she pantomimes zipping her mouth.

They’re silent for a long while after that. No one suggests they put on the radio.

Well past midnight and the three of them arrive in a manicured neighborhood where Maggie Egan starts recalling street names. She’s sitting shotgun now so she can actually see where they’re going. Frank keeps an eye on her, sitting in the chair that had imprisoned Maelstrom not long ago. He hardly trusts her. Doesn’t trust how she keeps trying to chat Reggie up. He figures she’s got something nefarious in mind even if he can’t name it.

Reggie drives through the affluent area, trying not to look like a decrepit van creeping along at an uncommon hour. After five minutes of some stop and go, she finally spots the house they’re looking for. They park curbside in front of the large Tudor with its rolling lawn and tree-choked borders. There’s an ornamental gate that’s not really meant to stop anything. They avoid the streetlamps as much as possible, preferring the obstructionism of dark. There are neighboring houses, though distanced and equally dark. All is quiet. If it’s a trap, it’s been perfectly constructed to exude safety. There isn’t so much as a stray dog baying at the moon. They give it an extra minute or two just to see if the environment reacts around them. It doesn’t. So they move out.

They pour out of the van through the sliding door and push the rolled-up tarps and their grisly content out, grabbing a side from each end. Maggie Egan gets a few steps ahead of them, but not too far as they are working purposely without flashlights. Frank has the handbag and all its contents tucked under the back of his waistband, unwilling to leave it unattended in the van. Paranoid or not paranoid enough? They hump the tarps through the perimeter trees, minding their step against roots and depressions in the ground. The goon they killed was thick, easily over two hundred pounds, so the haul isn’t without its labor. It wouldn’t be tough to buckle a knee or roll an ankle in the dirt. A balance of caution and urgency must be struck. When they speak, their voices are hushed.

They get into the backyard and feel less exposed. There’s a gated, in-ground pool with a small clubhouse. It seems empty. The entire property is still, almost abandoned given some signs of disrepair, the absence of sensor lights, lackluster upkeep. Maybe Horace really does only use the house once or twice a year. Maybe he let the property management contract lapse. Maybe things really are just radically different this year. It changes nothing. They put the body down for a few seconds to catch their breath and readdress their grips on the tarp. Then they’re off again. Maggie Egan informs them they’re close; they can see the back of the yard, where it devolves into untamed woods. They can hear the rhythmic running of natural water. The whole vista could have been described as bucolic if they weren’t carrying a stiff with rigor setting in.



They get to the back perimeter, and Maggie Egan finds a good point of ingress, has the two men follow closely behind her. One big functional team now. There appear to be some thin paths, maintenance-like, that can be traversed. They don't want to dump the body too deep. Or too cleverly. There's bound to be a suitable distance for the varying scenarios of how it will pop off. No one's sure exactly how the corpse will be found, only that it will be found at some point. Simon will see to that.

They move about twenty yards past the running water, a creek of sorts, and lay the body down. The tarps are slid out from under him. They could strip the guy naked but decide against it. The three of them look over the corpse, and it's hard not to think what's going to happen to him over the next few days. What the animals will do. The bugs. The elements. A single bullet to the brain isn't the worst way to go. Being dumped nameless and alone in the woods is a different story. Especially when it's to send some vague message to an exiled crime boss. That said, no one's going to eulogize the brute. In fact, it's best they stop considering him all together. And the purpose his death now serves.

"I need to take a leak," says Frank. "You OK with the thirst trap over here?"

He's pointing at Maggie Egan.

"Not my first rodeo. Go."

Frank moves deeper into the woods for some privacy, leaving the two alone.

"Man, that guy really holds a grudge," says Maggie Egan, standing about ten feet away from Reggie.

"He's the least of your concerns."

"You know, Horace is more reasonable than you realize," says Maggie Egan, moving two feet closer. "When this thing blows over, he'll recognize there's still money to be made with me."

"Bully for you. Do realize that if you tell a soul what we did here, if you ruin our fun, little surprise," says Reggie. "Your torture and death will be green-lit."

"That could have gone without saying."

She's standing four feet away now, the faint trace of her perfume tickling Reggie's nose.

"I feel better saying it all the same."

Reggie's not oblivious to her encroachment—but there is something pleasing in it, her animal allure.

"You've had a hard life, haven't you?" she asks.

Three feet away.

"Sure."

Two feet away.

"What does my face remind you of in this moonlight?" she asks.

One foot away.

She places her left hand on Reggie's cheek, then, with her right hand, goes for his pistol, unlatched in the holster, and pulls it off him. Reggie doesn't try that hard to stop her, maybe a little tranced out by her, the long day. Maybe a little weary of a life where his heart's been

treated as a chew toy. Either way. Maggie Egan takes a few hurried steps backward, looking over her shoulder for Frank. She sees nothing. Turns her attention forward and levels the gun at Reggie's face.

"Poor baby. All alone in this world," she says and pulls the trigger. Nothing happens.

"The safety switch by your thumb, Maggie," says Reggie lazily.

She huffs and slides the switch in place, tries the trigger again. This time a click. But still nothing. Over and over again, just empty clicks. Reggie looking bored.

"You really don't know shit about guns, do you?" says Reggie, taking the Sig back from her quickly and forcibly. "There isn't even a clip in it. How do you not feel that?"

Maggie Egan gets this instantaneous feral look in her eyes, maybe wondering if going after Reggie with her hands and teeth is her last, best play. If the gun was empty for her, that means it's empty for him. Her mind starts spinning, and Reggie sees it too. It's short lived, though, as Frank returns stealthily and places his hand on her shoulder, digging his thumb into her clavicle. She winces as the pain reorients her thought patterns, rendering her docile.

"I hope you washed your hands," says Reggie, pulling the wayward clip from his coat pocket and loading it, making a bit of a production of it.

"Yeah, water from the crick," says Frank. "She go for your gun?"

Reggie makes a noise in the affirmative.

"Called it. What should we do with her?"

"Try not to take her homicidal instincts too personally, I suppose," says Reggie.

"Really?"

"We're sanctioned one corpse. Plus she's ash if she talks prematurely," says Reggie, holstering his properly loaded pistol. "Once Horace gets around to her, I'm guessing he'll be less reasonable than we are."

"I can talk my way out of this with Horace," says Maggie Egan, though it mostly sounds like she's trying to convince herself, like going for Reggie's gun wasn't her last-ditch effort to stay out of Horace's doghouse.

"Maybe you can. And we're going to help with that," says Reggie, who throws a right jab smack into her nose, stunning her, surprising even Frank. It's solid contact, and blood is pouring out soon enough. She manages to stay on her feet, her hands reflexively covering her face. There's some moaning. It's turning into a whole rigamarole now.

"Damn, partner, a little heads-up next time," says Frank.

"Can you take her down in an arm bar, please?" says Reggie neutrally.

Before Maggie Egan can pivot from her busted nose, before she can even protest, Frank gets her to the ground, her arm now trapped in his martial arts acumen. He exerts enough pressure to where she lets out a few yips, quickly realizing it's in her best interest to be very still—struggling will only further the pain.

"What does the gentleman have in mind?" asks Frank, seemingly very comfortable jostling on the ground with another human being, clutched up and writhing.

“Can you do something worse than a dislocation but short of a compound fracture?” asks Reggie, who’s absently rolling his Sig’s unattached suppressor in his hands.

“An excellent choice,” says Frank, who torques his body with some leverage and adds the needed pressure to hyperextend Maggie Egan’s elbow with a satisfying pop, though some of that may also have been twigs and sticks snapping under them.

She lets out a painful shriek, like any woodland creature being abused in the dead of night. Then it’s over. Frank gets to his feet with some spring in his step, dusts himself off. A man who takes pleasure in his work. A man who appreciates measured comeuppance. Reggie stands over Maggie Egan and considers how pleasing it would be to kill such a ravishing creature. How the world would be better off. How easy it would be to attach the suppressor onto the Sig and be done with it. He’s really thinking about it. And even Frank is a bit concerned that Reggie will veer off their prudent course. But Reggie lets it go. His newest incantation isn’t one that acts off emotion. He’s been there before. He’s let those versions of himself die with his past.

“You’re going to look like a racoon for a week or so. Your arm will need a sling,” says Reggie to the felled Maggie Egan. “Make sure people see you like this, people that will report back to Horace. It may just save your life.”

And with that, the two men take their leave of Maggie Egan, who is still writhing away on the ground, empty of pithy comments, trying to get ahold of her breathing—alive, though running low on reassurances.

Bats passing over the moon are the last thing she sees before giving in, passing out.

It’s a solemn enough trip back toward the city. Frank drives while Reggie takes a load off in the back. The sun’s coming up over the highway as more cars merge from the on-ramps. The expanse of concrete and endless exit signs, banal mile markers. The hazy presence of pollution. It’s enough to put anyone in a bad mood, let alone men who are already exhausted. Weary from a day that shouldn’t have been a day, that somehow morphed into an overnight. Sure, lives were irrevocably changed, and sums of money crossed hands. But that just made it all the more tiring. The conversation is sparse between Reggie and Frank, mostly around loose ends, preparing for the final drop-off. The flash drive burning a hole in their pocket. Frank asking the occasional question about Reggie’s tactical weapons training.

They end up cleaning the van out as best they can. Wiping down surfaces. Soaking up blood. Frank knows a good spot to dump the vehicle; it’s unlikely that it will be missed by anyone. Or that the police are on to it. It’ll likely be chopped up into parts. Driven to Mexico. Or left to rot in some mechanic’s graveyard. It’s the least of their worries. They strip the plates all the same.

They openly wonder about Maelstrom and how he’s faring. Did the ER follow protocol and notify the police? If so, did he keep his wits about him for all their sakes? Or maybe, in this day and age such protocols have been suspended. Maybe no one has the time or energy in a hospital to ask why a man’s been shot. There are larger concerns at play. Just patch him up and go, go, go.

Despite all their tangents, the timing and drop with Simon are still in good standing. Of course, it was originally conceptualized to take place after the two men got a proper night's worth of sleep, after certain vehicles were used and re-inventoried. It was also just supposed to be a handbag getting dropped off. All those waters have been muddied now. But the finish line is still in sight, and Reggie and Frank are all too eager to relieve themselves of the USB, to look Simon in the eyes and hear something meaningful off his lips. Too much chatter had been passed through ciphers; it wasn't unreasonable to crave the signal from the source.

They part ways long enough to catch different lifts from lesser-used ride-sharing apps—not as noticeable apart as they are when traveling together. Their N95s are back on. It isn't always easy to know which precautions are wise or excessive. How their smartphones might betray them, even if they know how to disable them in savvy ways. The correct amount of paranoia to leverage. Sometimes you need to be lucky. Other times you need the miasma of cover fire. It really is a clusterfuck out there. Everyone is feeling it. And fading it in their own way.

They arrive within ten minutes of each other at the athletic fields, where they wait in the parking lot and, once ready, join Simon, who is sitting in a more isolated section of the metal bleachers. He's watching his seven-year-old daughter play soccer, some kind of scrimmage. He doesn't wear a mask—it's well known he has the antibodies. There are other parents there, some of them wearing masks, some not. Everyone's personal calculus. Particularly outside. All the kids on the field are wearing little cloth ones, though many are falling around their necks or being fiddled with beyond utility. No one seems overly concerned.

The two men sit down next to Simon and take note that the sun is shining, that it's a rather pleasant morning to be out in the fresh air, even if they feel strung out.

"You boys look well worked," says Simon. "Guessing you didn't catch any sleep?" Reggie and Frank wordlessly shake their heads.

"Sorry for that. Here, I brought you some coffee stuff and bagels just in case," says Simon, motioning to a tray and bag by his feet. "Take a few minutes for yourselves."

Having not eaten anything since the sandwiches Maelstrom brought them the day before, the two men don't indulge in false modesty and get to fixing up their breakfast. Simon follows after them. They lull and watch the children be children.

"Which one is yours?" asks Frank, breaking apart an egg bagel, buttering it, eating chunks at a time.

"Number ten. Little speedster, so they got her at midfield," says Simon, pointing his daughter out. "Of course, at this level, these games are just glorified scrums. But the kids love them."

"Nice to see them at play," says Reggie, blowing steam off his coffee. "Even if they are all covered up."

"Like weird little ducklings out there," says Frank, thinking about his own babies at home.

"That's what my ex says about them too," comments Simon.

They continue to watch in silence for a few minutes, each man latching onto a quieter aspect of their being—a decompression mechanism. To do otherwise would be to court madness.

“So where would you like to begin?” asks Simon.

Reggie discreetly hands him the flash drive. Simon pockets it.

“My guess is it’s not even that valuable,” says Reggie. “There are others out there, maybe even multiples in a given week. This was a pure disruption play.”

“It’s not *not* valuable, but sure, you’re mostly right,” says Simon. “Though Maelstrom would have clued you into that already.”

“Is there any word on him?” asks Frank.

“He’s holding his own is the little information I have to go on,” says Simon. “Don’t seek him out. He’ll be embarrassed for a bit, so let him come to you on his own time.”

The ref blows his whistle to uncouple a bunch of kids who have comically tangled themselves around the ball.

“Everyone’s test is different in this new world of yours,” says Reggie evenly.

“Including mine,” says Simon, holding Reggie’s gaze—Simon’s the younger man by five years, so what he lacks in experience, he needs to compensate for in ambition, in big-picture thinking. “Quarter million split two ways has some legs, even if you’re less than thrilled with the changing landscape.”

“We appreciate the full kick,” says Frank.

Simon tips his head.

“How exactly did Maxwell die?” asks Reggie.

“Prematurely of his expectations,” says Simon. “And there’s nothing to be done about it.”

Reggie doesn’t press; whether it was natural causes, a virus, an insurrection, a life of crime—Simon is right, it hardly matters anymore.

“Maelstrom intimated that you have some plans for us,” says Frank. “Given the outcome.”

“You two are in line for a promotion,” says Simon. “We’ll need to gauge the fallout, but the outlook is promising.”

“It’s all a corporation run by the Ivy League,” says Reggie, half smiling. “Not that we don’t appreciate the consideration.”

“Well, I graduated SUNY Cobleskill if that makes you feel any better. Think of it this way: they won’t be calling you “reclamation project” anymore,” says Simon, not unkindly. “That is, not to your face, that much I can assure you.”

Frank bristles at this.

“I’ll be putting the word out, the man is ‘drawdown,’” says Frank, his voice full of intent. “Anything less or apart from his given name will have consequences.”

To this, Simon nods in consent. Reggie is pleased, even if he tries not to show it. He’s always hated being thought of as a saved cause, a pet project. Plus it’s not easy for men his age to make new friends.

“And how’d the courier make out after last night?” asks Simon.

“With more problems than less,” says Reggie.

“We’ll have to learn more about the soul that didn’t make it,” says Frank, keeping his voice down, looking around. “No such thing as a nameless goon anymore.”

“We will. It’ll account into how Westchester plays out,” says Simon.

“And what about Horace?” asks Reggie.

“He’ll make his way back here once he’s soaked up enough vitamin D,” says Simon.

“Fun fact: vitamin D is actually a hormone.”

The men nod, a bit too exhausted to appreciate a good bit of trivia.

“By the way, the Amazon truck worked like a charm,” says Reggie.

“They’re ubiquitous to the environment now,” says Simon. “You two should sit on that handbag. There’s a good chance it will only grow in value if you leave it be.”

They agree and continue on with their bagels and coffee. Some wispy clouds have moved in but seem harmless enough. Rain looks out of the forecast. Someone scores a goal, but it’s mostly just the ball squirting out of the pack. Cheers and celebration abound all the same. People are clamoring to get excited about anything, given the day and age.

“There’s going to be a lot of change over the next year, fellas, and not all of it is going to make sense at first,” says Simon. “But if you want aboard, to keep partnering up, then that’s what we’ll do.”

More silent agreement, until Reggie speaks up.

“You said all tests are different. Mind telling us yours?”

Simon gives this some thought, absently looking at the fellow parents in the stands, the coaches on the sidelines. He smells onion grass, but it might just be a bagel.

“I’ll tell you a piece of it. My test is to be out in the open and serve as a bellwether,” says Simon. “Meaning, if Horace P or Vincent from Across the Border or whoever hires a sniper to put one in my head in front of my kid, then we’ll know the disruption hasn’t healed a damn thing.”

“Is it meant to heal?”

“When done properly, over the long term, yes,” says Simon. “But honestly, who’s to say anymore?”

The three men pipe down, thinking the same thing—there are no guarantees in life—just the inpatient struggle against the slow passage of time.

\* \* \*