

ATBEV

Call Michael.

That's what had been scrawled onto the cereal box.

Abigale turned the empty box over in her hands. The handwriting was a mess and she didn't recognize it as her own, but no one else had been to her apartment in weeks.

"Hey FIL, who wrote this?" she asked.

A device reminiscent of a thermostat flashed to life. FIL's voice came from a speaker above her.

"You did," it answered. And then after a few seconds: "Did you forget?"

Abigale frowned.

"No, I didn't forget," she said quickly, and tossed the empty box into the trash can.

"Thank you, FIL."

"Of course, let me know if there's anything else you need!"

The office doors swung open to admit the unfamiliar man. He didn't wait for the president to greet him, or even to face him.

"You've known about this for *how* long? When exactly did you plan on telling everyone? Was there a certain number of deaths you were waiting for? Five-thousand not enough for you?"

Scott said nothing.

“*Answer me,*” the man demanded, “I had a right to know — *they* had a right to know. How many deaths could’ve been avoided if they had been told?”

“Less than the amount of lives we saved by hiding it from them.”

Scott stared out the window. The red glow of the sunset swallowed the horizon. He wasn’t a particularly religious man, but he envisioned a similar scene somewhere down in Hell waiting for him.

“You had no right to hide it!”

“I had no *choice,*” Scott shot back. He finally stood from his chair to face his unwelcome judge. All judgements were unwelcome, it suddenly occurred to him.

“Tomorrow your network is going to break the news, you want to know what happens then?”

The man opened his mouth to speak but Scott cut him off.

“I’ll tell you what happens: mass hysteria unlike anything you could imagine.”

The man faltered.

“Yes, yes, people have the right to know,” he waved his hands dismissively, “that’s easy for you to say,” he said, pacing the room. “All you’re worried about is the truth, the ‘big story.’ But me? I have a greater responsibility. You have the privilege of being able to cast stones wherever you please — you’ve never had to experience life inside of a glass house.”

“Right,” the man said, “you’re *so* brave, hiding behind arbitrary complexity to justify your actions.”

“Arbitrary? Son, there’s nothing *arbitrary* about this. Do you understand what this will mean for our economy? What this will mean for our healthcare system? Hell, for the entire world?”

Scott stopped pacing, inches away from the man's face.

“A virus that attacks the brain is something straight out of a horror movie. Once people find out it's in their food, what happens then? Am I supposed to have every cow in this country slaughtered because it might be infected? Should I have every last tree, bush, and shrub cut down too while I'm at it?”

The man set his jaw, unable to answer.

Scott's shadow left the man the only thing in the room not engulfed in a blood-hue. He sighed and leaned his haunches against his desk.

“It's a nightmare.”

Abigale stopped watching the news a long time ago, holding the belief it was bad for her mental health.

She only caught the end of the broadcast.

“...viewers are being urged to throw out any dairy and beef products they may have, and are being advised to stay out of forested areas and indoors as much as possible...”

They were calling it a pandemic.

Pandemics were something taught in history class, not something that happened in today's age. Ever since the creation of the PPO, pandemics never made it past the epidemic stage, and it was rare they even made it that far. That was the whole *point* of the Pandemic Prevention Organization, to make sure something like this didn't happen.

But it did happen. It was happening right now.

Her hands shook as she picked up the remote and turned off the TV.

Get it together.

She took a breath and reminded herself that she lived in the middle of a sprawling metropolis and hadn't stepped foot in a park in months, much less a forest. But the nagging feeling of unease was hard to ignore.

What about the milk?

Abigale *was* a religious drinker of chocolate milk before bed — she believed in strong bones and all that.

But, then again — really — what were the odds?

“The press conference is being received well by the public, sir.”

Scott heard the aide but only vaguely registered his words. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the uncomfortably warm glass of the sedan window. Everything seemed to be uncomfortably warm nowadays.

“Are you feeling alright, Mr. President?”

Scott shooed away the aide's concern without picking up his head. “What else do you have for me?”

“Well,” the aide began, his voice uncertain, “the order to, uh... *destroy* all cattle has been sent out, but some farmers are refusing to comply based on a ‘lack of hard evidence’.”

As expected.

“The PPO is anticipating the same for some domesticated goats as well, but they won’t know for sure until next week.”

“Also,” the aide added hesitantly, “there has been an uptick in Hinduphobia online. Apparently, some radicalized groups are blaming them for the virus.”

Scott’s head shot up at that and he raised an expectant eyebrow at the aide.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand it either, sir. But don’t worry, we’re keeping a close eye on it.”

Scott let his head drop back against the glass.

Arbitrary complexity.

“Is there anything else?” Scott asked.

The aide cleared his throat. “We believe that a number of countries are planning to impose a ban on all of our agricultural produce as early as tomorrow, sir.”

This soon? He knew it would happen, but he secretly hoped that they would give it some time before, at least until the PPO had a chance to weigh in on the risks.

But, in truth, he couldn’t blame them — he’d probably do the same.

This was his greatest fear. A situation totally and completely out of his control. If not even a collection of the world’s brightest minds could reach an agreement on how this virus should be handled, how could he be expected to tell people what they should do? How can he blame them for being afraid when he was too?

How long will it take for us to recover, he wondered.

Will we be able to recover at all?

Abigale answered the phone, still half-drunk from sleep.

“Hello? Abigale, are you there?” the woman on the other line asked.

“Yeah, I’m here,” she said, “who’s this?”

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Her head pounded, and the midday sun that shone through the window was doing her no favors.

“Did you *just* wake up? Abigale, what is going on with you?”

Abigale didn’t have a short fuse and wasn’t one to get defensive, but she also didn’t appreciate getting yelled at by a stranger over the phone. “I’m sorry, exactly who are you again?”

The woman on the line didn’t respond for a few seconds. When she finally did, her voice was rife with concern. “It’s me... Kate,” she said, “I was just calling to check on you since you were supposed to come back to work yesterday and no one at the office has heard from you.”

A sensation overcame Abigale, the strangest she had ever experienced. It made her hair stand on end.

Somehow she knew that Kate had spoken the truth, but her mind told her that her words simply couldn’t be accurate. *She’s lying*, a voice seemed to whisper into her ear. *She has to be*.

“Look, with all the craziness of this pandemic, I just wanted to check on you and make sure you were feeling—” before she had a chance to finish, Abigale chunked the phone across the room. It shattered against the exposed-brick wall. She faintly heard the sound of a dial tone from where it landed.

“Ms. Abigale, is everything alright?” FIL asked her from over the intercom.

“Go away, FIL!” she screeched, breathlessly. There was a pause, as if it were making a calculation. “As you wish,” he said.

And then the world was silent.

It suddenly occurred to Abigale that not even the bustle of traffic was present in the street below. She brought her knees up to her chest. She had never felt so scared before, and it was only made worse because she didn't understand *why*. Something was wrong, she knew that much. But she felt frozen, unable to do much more than rock back and forth in her bed. After some time — she wasn't sure how long— she buried herself back under the covers. *It'll go away*, she told herself. *It can't find me here*. She wondered what exactly *it* was.

Yes, some rational part of her brain thought. *Something is very wrong*.

Scott wondered where the stars had gone.

Of course, he knew they hadn't gone anywhere. They were still up there, silently judging him from above — albeit hidden away from him by equal parts smog and cloud.

He hoped they would forgive him.

“Scott,” A voice said from behind him.

Bruce came to rest his forearms on the balcony beside him. He wore a lab coat, one that had seen better days based on the half-washed food stains that speckled it. His hair was just a touch greyer than Scott's own, and his beard untrimmed. His would probably look the same if he wasn't expected to keep up appearances. Scott was grateful to have Bruce joining him; not just because he was the founder of the PPO, but because he was one of his oldest friends.

“We were right about it only being in the milk,” he began — business immediately.

Scott shook his head. “Doesn’t matter, the news cycle beat us; there’s no stopping people raiding their freezers for every last frozen hamburger they have.”

“Maybe,” Bruce admitted, “but that’s why we sent out the ordinance to increase lab-grown meat production along with milk production weeks ago.” He looked down at the empty street below. “We prepared for this.”

Minutes passed before either spoke.

“So,” Scott said, “it’s really that bad, huh.” He managed a weak smile.

Bruce inhaled and ran his fingers through his hair. “Well... we’ve managed to determine what tick spreads it, but...” he made a gesture with his hands.

“You’re not sure what good it’ll do,” Scott finished for him.

Arbitrary complexity.

Bruce nodded. “I pulled some lab techs from the vaccine work to have them focus on creating an individualized pesticide, but there’s no way to determine how long it would take, or if it would even be effective. And assuming that it *is*, there’s no telling what the collateral would be.”

Scott pursed his lips. *So this is it*, he thought.

“Hey,” Bruce said, guessing where his head was at. “This isn’t the first pandemic we’ve dealt with.”

Scott nodded and gave him another pathetic smile.

But it might be our last.

He opened his mouth to speak, but his phone rang, cutting him off. “Sorry Bruce, I gotta take this,” he said.

“Dad?” asked the voice on the line.

“Hey Michael,” he said, trying to hide the weariness in his voice, “what’s up?”

“Have you heard from Abigale? I’ve been calling her all week but it goes straight to voicemail, I’m worried about her.”

How long had it been since he had last heard from his daughter? Three weeks? Four? He had been so busy he hadn’t even realized it. “No,” he said, rubbing the bridge between his eyes. “No, I… haven’t heard from her.”

“Are you alright, dad?” Michael asked.

“I’m fine, son,” he said “I’ll give her a call, and if she doesn’t answer I’ll stop by her apartment tomorrow and check on her.”

“No, I’ll do it. I’m closer, and you have too much on your plate,” Michael said, “I’m sure she’s fine, anyways.”

Someone had broken her TV.

They had thrown a chair through it, to be precise. It was for the best — however it had happened — the news had been getting on her nerves, anyways.

Her hands shook uncontrollably trying to open the fridge. “Stop it!” she yelled at them, but they didn’t listen. She winced as the noise sent needles through her skull. *Why does it hurt so bad?*

She stumbled over to the garbage can just in time to catch the bile coming up from her stomach. The sound of retching filled the kitchen. *Why hasn’t FIL checked on me yet?* Abigale

wondered. The vaguest memory of her taking a hammer to his operating box flashed before her eyes, but she quickly dismissed it. *No*, she reminded herself, *that was a dream*.

By the time she had picked herself off the floor, the sun was beginning to set. She hesitated, standing alone in her kitchen. *Wasn't it just noon?* She felt like she was going to throw up again, but she also felt impossibly tired. *Sleep. Yes. That will make me feel better.*

Using the countertops to steady herself, she had just begun the arduous trek to her room when a knocking came from her front door that nearly sent her to the ground.

“Hey Abigale, it’s me, Michael,” the voice outside announced. “You haven’t been answering our calls, I’m worried about you.”

“Our” calls?

Abigale recognized the voice. It was her brother’s — the recesses of her mind informed her of such. But her mind also recognized it as a trap. Had he not slipped up, she might have let him in, even welcomed a friendly face. But she was smarter than that; she knew that wasn’t her brother.

“Go away!” she screamed at the door. The words were heavy on her tongue and stuck to the roof of her mouth.

There was a pause, but then the voice came back angry. “Are you seriously drunk again?”

“Go *away!*” she repeated.

“Unbelievable. Abigale I swear to God if you don’t open this door I will knock it down,” the voice threatened.

She knew right then what she had to do. They were coming after her, she had no choice. She tripped over her own feet as she dashed to her nightstand. With trembling hands she opened

it, her fingers finding the gun her father had left her. *Keep it loaded in case of emergencies*, he had told her. She was glad she listened to him.

The first *bang* rattled the walls of her apartment, making her jump.

He's coming in.

She walked back and faced the door. Another pounding.

“Abigale, let me in dammit!”

She flipped the safety off.

“I’m serious Abigale!”

With shaky hands, she aimed it.

Another heavy *thud* shook the door.

You won't take me.

She pulled the trigger.