

Cecelia

Why would I kill Cecelia?

That's what I asked myself after I got my new meta. It had been hooked up to me for all of three seconds before it made the call. It was overly polite because it wasn't used to me yet.

Piotr, it said, I regret to inform you that you are going to murder Cecelia Olyeander.

I had been so excited to get one of the new Blue Sky models, too. It wasn't making a good first impression. *What do metas know?* I thought.

They apparently know to contact the police when they detect your so-called intent to kill their creator, because not long after this declaration, a cop came around to my apartment.

He was short, heavy, and dressed in a white shirt with a brown coat and pants: all of which made it clear he was kept on for his brain. "I'm Sergeant Sabinetti," he said as he sized me up. I was standing in the doorway, instinctively blocking my apartment from view.

"Hello, sergeant. What's going on?"

He narrowed his clever eyes for a quick moment, probably trying to decide if I was a bad liar or just thick. "Mr. Malkis, you've been informed of criminal intent by your meta, that's correct? In this case, it's quite serious. You've been told you're going to commit murder."

"Well, yes," I said, "but I didn't think that it would call the police. I mean, you can't arrest me for what the meta said."

"We should speak about this whole situation. May I come in?" He was feigning concern for me, the confused citizen accused of murder by a talking phone.

I am not merely a phone, Piotr.

You can call the police, so you're a phone to me.

We sat in my kitchen (or living room, depending on what you prioritized). "I'm not here to arrest you or even accuse you of murder," said Sabinetti. "When we get a call from one of those," he said, pointing at my head to signify the meta interface glued behind my ear, "we have to come as soon as we can. Most of the time, we're too late. Other times, we get there and the suspect confesses. I had assumed you'd be one of the latter cases, since you couldn't be murdering Cecelia Olyeander right now."

“Why? Where is she?”

“She's doing a press conference -- for Blue Sky.” He looked surprised that I needed to be told this. It was the first genuine emotion I'd seen from him.

“Oh,” I said, “I hardly think about Cecelia anymore.” And I was trapped. I wondered if his meta was telling him how to lead me on, or if he was good in the old-fashioned sense.

“So, how does a man like you know Cecelia Olyeander?”

He meant a cook with no real money and a shitty apartment that was too small for a separate kitchen. I'd only bought the meta because they dropped the price to almost nothing at the store near my place.

“We met at MIT. I think we ended up talking because we were both Canadian. I've haven't heard from her since then.” I paused, waiting for him to confirm what I was saying by having his meta look up my school records.

Sabinetti put on a concerned face again, “You didn't graduate? That's too bad. Seems like you had good grades going in.”

“Yeah, I realized I needed a change.”

“So, what happened between you two?”

I thought that this was an obvious angle, but it wouldn't be in any records, either. “Not much,” I said, “we hung out at parties, mostly. Cecelia was one of the few girls I met there. The place is all men in most classes. I asked her out, she said no, and we stayed friends. I was too busy failing PROG 320 to make a big deal of it.”

There were more questions, but it seemed like the sergeant was distracted by something else. Soon enough, he shook my hand, then groaned as he got up. He turned as I was about to close the door on him.

“Goodbye, Mr. Malkis. I'm glad this wasn't the situation we were expecting. Please let me know if you figure out why the meta alerted us.” He was smiling, but could I see his eyes judging my reactions all the time. He was waiting for me to slip up.

“Maybe it's just a bit jumpy. I only just got it,” I said.

Sabinetti shrugged and walked away.

I went back into my kitchen and grabbed a beer. Then I grilled the chicken that had been marinating in the fridge. I wasn't hungry yet, but I needed to keep busy. It wasn't relaxing to have cops and computers asking you about a murder they were sure you'd commit.

Meta, I asked, how long until Cecelia finishes her press conference?

25 minutes, Piotr.

And how long will it take to get there? By transit, I mean.

The conference is in the Blue Sky complex; if you leave immediately, you will arrive in approximately 34 minutes. However, I regret to inform you that your chicken will burn, possibly starting a fire in your apartment.

Why would you assume that I'm stupid enough to rush out the door with food cooking?

My warning was issued based on the following factors:

- 1. You have left food cooking and had it burn on two occasions in your house. Several more instances have occurred at work.*
- 2. Even if you'd already considered it, it seemed prudent to remind you, given the possibly dangerous consequences.*
- 3. You were in a hurry to murder Cecelia.*

I slammed a pot down onto my counter. I'm not going to murder her, you jumped-up laptop.

The meta remained silent, so I finished making my meal: grilled chicken with sharp Greek marinade, brown rice with orange and ginger, and steamed green beans. It was probably quite good, but I didn't really taste it.

Cecelia and I had hit it off after some awkward introductions at one of the parties full of brilliant men with bad hair. She was tall, slim, blonde. Sexy in a fashion model kind of way. And already on her way to revolutionizing artificial intelligence design. When we were seen around campus, it wasn't just the other students that were jealous; even professors were giving me the evil eye.

They never had a chance with her, and they knew it. Hell, I knew I never had a chance. They were furious that I, this low-ambition Comp. Sci. student, had her coming back to my place most nights. I wasn't stealing her from any one man, but the university as a whole. I don't know if I ever would have made it through my degree, but I certainly couldn't once we became public. My proposals got rejected, my grades plummeted. Even the lab techs must have loved her, because I could never get the equipment that I needed.

I was on my way out of MIT for good when I decided to talk to her about it. We were sitting in one of the squares, eating egg sandwiches from the cafeteria.

“So, I spoke to Carlson. He basically told me to drop-out or wait and be expelled. I don't want that on my record, so I'll be calling it quits today.”

She paused in her eating. I remember that nothing special happened in her eyes. No surprise or flash of concern. She just took a moment to analyze her choices. "I'm sorry, Piotr. Do you know where you'll go?"

It wasn't the reaction I had hoped for, but at least she had asked something. "I'll stay in the city for a while. My place is already off-campus, so I can figure things out there." I felt like she didn't have any idea how people felt. I told her, "I think it had a lot to do with you, you know. Everyone here is obsessed with you, with your work..."

"Please!" she held up a hand to stop me. "Don't blame me for what happened. If you had tried..." She was starting to get wound up, so I backed off.

"Sorry, Olly. It's not your fault. It pisses me off, is all."

She leaned into me, putting her head in the crook of my neck. She lingered, longer than she normally would have in public. She sighed and straightened up. "Listen. If you're going to go to a different school, maybe different work entirely... it's going to get complicated. And I won't be here for much longer, anyways. Maybe it would be best if..." She shrugged and gave me a bittersweet smile that could have broken box office records.

"Right. Might be best." I said this mostly to myself.

She put her hand on my shoulder. I held it, gave her a hug, and then walked away. I remember tossing my sandwich into a garbage bin, looking back, and seeing her still eating hers. There was nothing special happening in her eyes.

I slipped out of the subway car and into the crowds of people still leaving the exposition hall. I needed to find out how I could reach her. Of course, she'd have security, an entourage, assistants. My hope was that she'd have a minute for an old fling, if that's what I had been.

Cartier, can you tell me how to get to the rear door to the hall? And search for Blue Sky metas in the area. If I can ask someone in person, I might have better luck getting to Cecelia.

There was no response for a moment, and then I realized what I had called my meta.

Meta. Your name is now Cartier. Sound good?

Ok, Piotr. Am I named for a specific Cartier? Perhaps the explorer?

No. You're named after the watch. Find me that entrance.

With directions from Cartier, I found my way to the back area of the hall. Cameras and reporters were clustered around some Blue Sky employees. It looked like security was checking for press badges at the edge of the scrum, but there was a snack table down one of the narrow hallways, so I went there and picked at the food.

It seemed that the plates of cheese and pâté were wasted on the press: no one came. Eventually, one employee wandered over from the edge of the throng and loaded up a cracker. His suit was sharp-looking, but a little tight around the middle.

Cartier, can you let me know what this guy does at Blue Sky?

There was a short delay, and then Cartier's reply spooled into my brain. *His name is Jason Embury. He is the vice-president of technology.*

Before I thought of anything to say, Jason held out his hand to me while he brushed off the other one on his suit coat. "Hi. It's okay. I know you're not with the press."

He was smiling, though there was something else behind it. He looked young for a vice-president. I shook his hand. "Hi there, I'm Piotr. No, I'm not here for questions."

"That's good. I've had enough of those interviews. But you're not a chef for the caterers. So, can you tell me what you're doing here?"

He was calm, but I looked around and saw two security guards watching us. I realized that I was about to lose my chance to speak to anyone in here. "Right," I said, "Sorry to bother you. I went to school with Cecelia Olyeander." I pushed on before he could interrupt, "I was hoping to pass her a message - Nothing big. I've finally solved the Terrance-Filks problem, and I wanted to let her know. I'll leave, no problem."

"Hmm, alright." I imagine he sent a message through his meta to the guards since they turned back to the crowd, "Nice meeting you, Piotr. Don't worry about it. I'll let Cecelia know you came by."

I awkwardly nodded and then left. On my way out, I saw security guards shoving away a middle-aged businessman. I must have been lucky, slipping in right after the event had finished.

"Come on," the man said, "I worked with all of these guys. They won't mind." As he spoke he leaned in, trying to catch the eye of someone on the other side.

The guards were too well-paid to bend the rules. They blocked him and I slipped out. I almost felt guilty; this guy had as much right as I did to get in.

I took the subway home and hoped that I could trust Embury to get my message to Cecelia.

It was about nine when I received a call from Cecelia. "Hello, Piotr. It's good to hear from you. I got your message."

Her voice sounded the same way it did on television. It wasn't quite the way I remembered it.

"Hey. I didn't really think you would get back to me. I wanted to discuss something important, and it's not about, you know..."

"Terrence-Filks?" she laughed, and it sounded much more familiar.

Terrence and Filks were a couple we knew at MIT that had constantly broken up and gotten back together. When Cecelia was explaining one of her projects to me, about how to merge different kinds of programming, I didn't get it until she compared it to Terrence and Filks. It became our little metaphor for things that can't escape getting into trouble together.

"Right. Anyway, this isn't some desperate attempt at a date. I just think we should meet up and talk." There was a silence. I could feel her weighing options on the other end. I'd certainly made myself clear, if a little bluntly.

"That would be really good. It's been a long time. I'd like to hear how you're doing. Could I ask you not to tell anyone about this? It could be...complicated."

"No problem, I understand," I said, even though I didn't really.

"Thanks. Can we meet at Transit Lounge? And be careful with the directions, your meta might have trouble."

"Thanks. It shouldn't take too long. See you there."

I dressed up a little, but I didn't want to overdo it in case she thought I was trying to impress her. Of course, I wanted her to show up and confess that our break-up had all been a big mistake, and that we should sleep together in all her various mansions. But, I needed to stay focused if I wasn't going to scare her off. This meeting was about the meta. She would want to know if her product was falsely accusing people of planning to murder her.

Transit Lounge was in a knot of tight and twisting streets that seemed to confuse the meta's navigation. I'd never seen it happen before. I was almost there when I got the alert.

Sorry to interrupt, Piotr, but I have just received a message from Cecelia Olyeander's meta. All appointments have been cancelled due to her recent death.

I stopped on the sidewalk. *How? When? Where?*

The meta rattled on about how it couldn't get any more information, and my mind split into several pieces. One of them cried out, hurt by the death of the beautiful woman I would have loved if she had let me, another panicked at what Sabinetti and the police would do now, and one, numbed with shock, thought of whether I should eat at Transit Lounge or keep looking. I stumbled about the wet streets, turning useless thoughts over in my head.

Incoming call. Identity blocked.

Let it through, Cartier.

"Mr. Malkis. It's Sergeant Sabinetti. It seems we have more to talk about after all. Can you please stay where you are? We'll send the car to come pick you up."

"Pick me up? I didn't do anything! It wasn't me." I was letting myself get angry with a cop, something I should have known to avoid.

"Piotr..."

"Don't condescend to me with your bullshit. Check my location."

"Piotr," Sabinetti's voice was deep and concerned, "we've been tracking your location since our talk. Our system alerted us when you got within fifty metres of Cecelia. Shortly after, we got the emergency call from her meta. Now, please stay where you are."

I swore again and then told Sabinetti I'd stay put. Within a couple of minutes, the blue and red flashing lights were there, and I was patted down and put into the back of a police car.

Cartier, how does it feel to be wrong?

I'm sorry Piotr, but I don't know how to respond to that. I have filed a bug report regarding my false murder accusation, and criminal prediction has been deactivated. I am sorry for any inconvenience it may have caused.

The police station was cold and damp. It hadn't struck me at first, but after waiting for a half hour on a metal chair, the chill was getting to me.

Finally, Sabinetti came in. He looked less composed than the last time I'd seen him. His eyes flickered to the camera up in the corner as he entered the room.

"Piotr, I'm sorry to see you in here. I mean, I really did think you were the victim of some glitch in the system. But now it's time to speak with me honestly."

"I don't know what happened. I got the same call you did." I wanted him to tell me how she died, but I couldn't ask it. "Am I under arrest, or what?"

"For now, no. But believe me, it wouldn't be hard to make that happen. Why don't we start with what happened after I left your apartment. Where did you go?"

I took a breath, "I went to try to talk to Cecelia, but I couldn't get in. I asked a Blue Sky employee to pass my message on to her."

"And do you have this employee's name?"

The chill had left me. I was sweating under the lights and the sergeant's eyes. I unconsciously asked Cartier to tell me the name before I remembered that they'd taken the meta unit off of me when I came in. "Yes, I don't remember it though. He was a VP of some kind. He must have given her the message, because she called me later."

"Yes, we'll get to that in a moment. Can you tell me what your message was?"

"I was just asking her to call me. I said I wanted to talk."

Sabinetti leaned back and rolled his neck, causing a few quiet cracks. "Please, don't start this now, Piotr. If you start lying now, then I'm going to have to pick apart everything you say. Instead, let's stick to the truth and it'll go quickly for both of us. Even if your relationship was more than you let on, it doesn't mean she'd call you right away just because you asked. She was an important woman, and notoriously aloof."

"All I did was mention an inside joke, the Terrence-Filks problem."

He furrowed his brow for a moment, no doubt hearing from his meta that there was no information on a Terrence-Filks problem. "Alright. So this mystery VP delivers your message, then you get the call?"

"You already know this. You have my meta out there. Don't tell me you're not scanning it for data right now."

"Yes. You received the call at eight forty-five. So how did the conversation go?"

"It was..." I stopped as I thought about Cecelia's voice. How that was the last time I'd hear it. "She sounded busy, but she laughed at the joke. She suggested we meet at Transit Lounge."

"Okay. And why did you want to meet her? What were you going to say?"

“What do you think? The false-positive I'd gotten from the meta. I thought she might need to know, especially since it was about her.”

He glanced up at the camera again, quickly. He put on an infuriating smile and continued, “But couldn't you have done that over the phone? Why go to a bar just to tell her that your meta was broken?”

“It was important. I don't like talking about those things over the phone. It could have caused a scandal with her company.” I almost kept going, but he began patting the air with his hand.

“That's fine. I think I understand. So you wanted to meet her. She agreed, and you decided to meet at the restaurant.”

“Yeah. I got ready, left, and before I got there, I got a message from my meta saying she was dead.”

“Well, that would explain why you knew that Cecelia Olyeander was dead as soon as I called you.”

“Oh.” I said. “Yeah, her meta sent me a message, telling me she was dead. I thought that it had already gotten to the news or something.”

“No, Piotr. Metas don't give scoops to the local news yet. We're still looking into how and why this message was sent. It is possible for a skilled person to send a message like this from someone else's meta.”

“Listen to me. I'm saying that I don't even know how she died.”

He started listing off facts from some report on his meta. “She was found in an alley, probably killed by strangulation. The call was sent out while you were right around the corner. So, you'll excuse me if I take what you say with some skepticism.”

I didn't say anything this time. I couldn't decide if I should walk out of there and call his bluff about the arrest, or stay put and ask for a lawyer. Either way, I was tired of being told I had killed her when I hadn't.

He looked at me, then at the camera, this time letting his face tilt up to it slightly. “How is it possible,” he said, then settled his eyes heavily on me, “that a meta could incorrectly detect both your intent to murder Cecelia, and your location when she died?”

“I don't know. But it happened. Now unless you've got a legal way to hold me here, I'm leaving.” I stood up, scraping the chair against the smooth floor.

“Oh, I could think of something to keep you. But that's fine. You go home and think about the questions I've asked.”

I stood, paused to see if he was testing me in some way, and then let my frustration with him carry me out the door. I had to give my thumbprint a few times on the way out, probably signing away any claims of police brutality, but at least I got my meta back.

I wondered how far I'd get before they arrested me. Which is probably how Sabinetti wanted me to feel. Now I didn't just want to clear my name. I wanted to make him look as bad as possible while I did it.

Cartier. Can you do a scan and find out if anything was deleted from your storage?

Yes, Piotr. It seems that information relating to Mr. Embury was removed while I was being scanned by the police.

What? Fuck. How can you still remember the name if it was deleted?

This version of the Blue Sky firmware comes with a cloud back-up system. Apparently, the technician that deleted my files was unaware of this, or unable to bypass the security on your Blue Sky cloud account.

Son of a bitch.

Piotr? Mr. Sabinetti informed you that he was a sergeant, but I heard other police officers referring to him as “Special Investigator” before I was powered off. How would you like me to store him in the contacts list?

Store him under A, as in asshole.

Yes, Piotr.

It was three in the morning by the time I got back into my apartment. I opened a beer; it tasted terrible, so I went to bed. I wouldn't sleep much, not with the fear of the police bashing down my door at any minute. I told the meta to wake me up at eight.

In the morning, my life seemed normal. I made a breakfast of oatmeal with nuts and dried mango. It wasn't until I started checking the feeds on my TV that it all came pounding back to me. The news was everywhere. Every single site was talking about the murder of Cecelia Olyeander. “No suspects yet,” they said.

Well, what am I then?

I followed a blogger called Waking Eye and he had gone off on a tear about Cecelia and posted it. He ranted a lot, and some of his stuff was out there, but he

was good at getting news about the government and big corporations. I thought that we probably voted the same way.

“Where is that predictive behavioural processing that we heard Blue Sky talking about so much?” he said on his video. “You and I know that the real reason it exists was so that they could find who was going to expose the mega-corp corruption in the government. Looks like the public safety function was total bullshit. Not one prevented crime from their system, and now their own CEO gets murdered! I'm telling you, this whole thing is going to blow up in their faces. I hope it does. Maybe that bully, Olyeander, got just what she deserved.”

Shut it off, Cartier. The TV powered off, but not before I saw a photo of Cecelia with the words “Good Riddance” printed over it. *Delete the Waking Eye feed. And tell me which company is the biggest competition to Blue Sky's meta business.*

Feed deleted, and Digital Intellect is their closest rival, though estimates put Blue Sky at a majority market share.

Thank you. Plan a way to their office in town.

This must be an important message for you to deliver it in-person.

Yes. I think I'm going to sabotage Blue Sky.

The DI office was a fancy downtown building. Nothing compared to the complex that Blue Sky had, but still an intimidating place. Now that I was here, the whole plan felt ridiculous. It seemed very hard to propose corporate espionage without insulting someone.

I'd gotten Cartier to do some research for me. I needed to speak to Mrs. Lehman, the head of their operations in Toronto for meta tech. With a little digging, we'd even managed to get her office number.

I waited nearby the entrance, holding a lit cigarette but not really smoking. A young woman who looked in a hurry went in, and I followed behind. She scanned a card at the interior door and I held it open for her. She gave me a curious look, but didn't waste any time scooting through.

I got in and walked through the building like I belonged there. With the meta's directions, it was easy not to appear lost in the maze of departments and offices. Lehman's door was open when I arrived, so I knocked at it, leaned in, and smiled.

“Hello,” she said, looking up from her monitor, “I'm afraid we don't have an appointment, so this will need to be brief.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Lehman.”

"Please," she interrupted, "call me Genevieve. You're either new or in the wrong place." She was in her forties, with dyed blonde hair and a crisp blouse and skirt on.

"I'm Piotr Malkis. As I said, thank you for giving me some time. I'll get to the point." She had started politely, but I could see that she was waiting to get rid of me so that she could get back to her work. It had to be a busy day when the CEO of your largest competitor gets killed.

"I want to talk about what happened to Cecelia Olyeander." If I kept up the politeness, it was easier to talk about Cecelia. "Some Blue Sky technology malfunctioned last night. And it's related to her murder. I was even trying to warn her, um, them."

"Close that door, Piotr." She invited me to sit, and then placed her meta on the desk. The sleek blue and black unit was nice, probably on par with the one I had from Blue Sky. She stared at me silently until I realized that she wanted me to do the same. I disconnected from Cartier and put his unit on the table beside hers. Once they were both turned off, she spoke again. "Now, what exactly are you implying?"

I started sweating, but I resisted the urge to wipe my hands on my pants. I looked back at her. "I'm not trying to imply. I'm telling you that there was a malfunction last night, and I think it had to do with Cecelia's murder. If you're not interested in what I'm saying, then I can just go."

Genevieve leaned in. She had sharp features that were turning from pretty to bony, but her gaze held mine fast. "Please, let's not be hasty. I'm obviously interested. I didn't have security throw you out when I saw that you didn't work here. What I'd like to know is: are you proposing that we come to an agreement that has you keeping certain information quiet, or is this an agreement where you're telling me something I don't already know?"

She thinks I have information on DI in relation to Cecelia's murder? I swallowed again, trying to appear thoughtful instead of clueless and nervous. "I think this is new information. What you want me to do with it afterwards is up to our...agreement, as you said."

"Alright." Genevieve sat back in her chair, relaxing a touch.

"I'd like to discuss our agreement first. I'll need a month's pay as a consultant. That will cover expenses and allow me to skip work." She looked unimpressed with me. I suppose I wasn't being professional. "That's all I need for money, but I need someone who can help me crack my meta and the Blue Sky network."

"That can be arranged. You'll have access to someone for the month. No names though, and I will need to be part of all conversations. If anything comes back to

us because of your month spent attacking Blue Sky's network, I'll happily turn you and the engineer in. Are these terms acceptable?"

"I won't be attacking..." I paused, "never mind. That sounds fine. I'd also ask that you not act on the information until the end of the month." We shook, still looking at each other warily. "What I was going to say is that the criminal prediction system that Blue Sky has running is what malfunctioned."

She raised an eyebrow, "You mean the one that everyone says is useless?"

"Right, but that's because it doesn't stop enough crimes, but no one doubts its accuracy. But what if it can accuse the wrong person? And what if the accusation leads the police to a false arrest? That makes it dangerous, not just useless."

"Well, that would be a problem. Of course, we'd need proof." She was smiling hungrily now.

"It's all here," I said, pushing my meta across the desk, "from the initial accusation to the police questioning."

She placed one hand on the meta. I tried not to flinch, knowing how much of my life was held in the slim box. "It's alright if our engineer looks into it now to make sure?"

I nodded, and soon she had hooked the meta up to a port, having an engineer remotely access it. After a couple of minutes that I spent awkwardly fidgeting with the trim of my chair, she told me that everything checked out. The details of how I would receive my weekly "pay" and how I could contact her and the engineer were already on Cartier. Then, there was nothing more to say. I got up and let Cartier guide me out of the office building.

Piotr? Are you no longer a chef at La Comedienne? Should I update your business card to say corporate espionage?

No, Cartier. That isn't something that people advertise. And it's only for a little while. Has there been any official news on Cecelia's murder?

While Cartier scanned news feeds and fed me headlines, I went to a diner for some lunch. I had their chili, even though I should have known better. The meat was chewy and the spice was far too aggressive. I was getting a little scatter-brained trying to keep everything together in my head. *Why did the meta think I'd committed the crime? Why was Sabinetti intent on badgering me, but not willing to arrest me? The killer must have known where she was going. The spot with the bad navigation...*

I resolved to go home and do some research on DI, Sabinetti, and everything I could think of that might explain why the system had pegged me as a murderer and missed the real one.

After a full day of useless research and a longer though still fitful sleep, I contacted S, the network engineer at Digital Intelligence. At least this wasn't in-person, so I didn't have sweaty palms.

Hello S. Thanks for helping me out. I sat at the kitchen table, folding Thanksgiving-themed napkins that I'd received from my sister years ago. They were very ugly, but not quite enough to distract me from the conversation.

Hey. Not much choice. Let's talk about what you need. So far I know it's about metas and Blue Sky.

Yes. First, I'd like to know why I received the predictive crime alert from my meta about killing Cecelia. It won't tell me anything on its own. Can you find that out?

Not an AI specialist. I do networks. But, I may be able to get some information if they store it on the meta. You'll need to setup my access.

The next thirty minutes were spent changing Cartier's settings (about which it gave me numerous warnings and admonitions) while S talked to me like I was an idiot, even though I knew every term he mentioned.

Ok, like I thought, nothing I can help with. It looks like the message wasn't triggered by your meta. It was sent in externally.

How does that make sense? Isn't the meta the one monitoring my intentions and sub-conscious?

Yes, it is. And I'm saying the alert was triggered by a command from the network, not the meta. It wasn't hidden or anything. Says right here, "Execute cmd.OLLY1307" and the next thing that happens is that your meta calls the cops and alerts you.

I dropped a crumpled napkin to the floor. *Right. Thanks S. Please let me know if you can find out where that command came from and who sent it.*

Yeah right...

He kept talking but I disconnected. Olly was Cecelia's nickname around the campus; probably not something she was called now that she ran one of the most successful tech companies in the world. The numbers could be a part of the command's name, but I didn't want to ignore it. And who was sending the alert with this little clue?

I started cooking, letting everything roll around in my mind. I realized in the midst of steaming some asparagus that this wasn't my fucking job. It was the cops that

were supposed to solve crimes. So if they wanted the right culprit, they were going to have to help.

I finished my food and called Sabinetti.

“Mr. Malkis. I was hoping to hear from you soon. Are you going to provide me with some more useful information?”

“You know what, Special Investigator Sabinetti? I think you're going to provide *me* with some information.”

“Oh. You figured out my title. I knew you were clever, Piotr. How about we discuss this in a more enjoyable location this time? Would you care to meet me at the mBar on Dundas this evening?”

“Why would a cop go to the mBar?”

“Indeed, Piotr. See you there.”

He disconnected. I sat, unable to think of anything but the way Cecelia sounded last time I talked to her. Eventually, I got hungry enough that I thought I could cook more, but I didn't have what I needed, so I went out shopping. Merguez, eggs, oka cheese, pasta; it took me a good few hours to hit all of my favourite shops.

I had enough time to make a frittata for dinner before leaving.

The mBar was a gimmicky hangout downtown. It had no waiters, just a couple of hostesses that hung around looking pretty. All the drinks were self-serve from wall-mounted taps, and the paying was done through metas. When they had first come on the market, this place was home to the elite of the tech industry. Now it was merely trendy.

Sabinetti stood out with his short, wide frame and shabby tie. I probably did as well: my clothes cost less than most of the metas there, and my face didn't have any work on it. I sat down at his table.

“Hey.” He sipped a beer from a pint glass. “I started before you because I couldn't stand the music or the people listening to it. Forgive me.”

“Yeah, why are we here? Did you think this was more my style?” I said. I noticed that the table top lit up when I touched it, and menus appeared.

“The place is lousy with modified meta signals and electronics. We can send information inside without having it picked up from out there.”

“Oh.” I dragged my hands on the table's screen, flipping through the mDrink menu. The music was getting louder, so I had to raise my voice, “I called because

I need you to do something for me. I know I didn't kill her, and you don't want to arrest the wrong guy in case the real one gets off. So let me access Cecelia's meta. I think it has something I need."

I saw Sabinetti chuckle a little, "Do you think we haven't had our best look at that thing? There's nothing on it. Nothing we can get, anyway."

I shook my head. I needed him to start helping and stop being so arrogant. I went to get a beer, came back, and took another shot. "Listen, I'm not saying you're doing it wrong, it's that I found a coded message inside the alert that was sent to my meta. I think it was meant for me. Maybe her meta has more."

His mocking look changed to a clever, sharp one, "Interesting. I could get you access, but not for long. I'll need something from you though."

Of course

He burped then said, "Tell me what Digital Intelligence knows about the case. Why did you go to meet them?"

"It was a stupid hunch. I thought they might you know... what with that whole corporate warfare thing."

"And?"

"They thought I was trying to blackmail them. They figured out I didn't know anything, and then it ended." That last part rang false and he caught it. I tried to look guilty and said, "It ended awkwardly, let's say."

He rubbed his puffy cheeks and mouthed some words, making a note to himself with his meta. He wasn't used to thinking the commands.

"Now, that could be something. As you so astutely said, I do want to arrest you, but only once I know you're guilty. So, I'm giving you enough rope to either hang yourself with or find the perp. Some other players have been showing up, and that makes me nervous. You've just added DI to that list, and there was already Andre Lennox. "

"Who's that?"

"Another ex of Cecelia's. Though a lot more recent than you. He worked with the PR firm that had Blue Sky's contract. That is, until she dumped him and his company. Anyway, he got pinged with a PCA the morning after Cecelia died."

Cartier, what does PCA mean here?

Predictive Crime Alert is the most likely answer. It seems Mr. Lennox's meta is malfunctioning as well. That is good. More cases of the bug occurring will result in a faster response from Blue Sky Support.

"I think I might know why that happened. But I need to see her meta first."

"Fine, fine." He got up and knuckled his back, letting his belly poke through the front of his dress shirt. "Call me at noon. I'll get you in for about thirty minutes. And don't tell anyone else about this. Please, Piotr, you can do that, right?"

I scowled, but he smiled back at me and then left.

A few moments later, Cartier informed me that his tab needed to be paid.

The next day, I called Sabinetti and we arranged to meet near the police headquarters. I'd also called S to make sure he was ready to help. It was bright cafe, but quieter than I would have liked.

"Here you are," he said as he removed the slim box from his coat. It wasn't a model I'd ever seen before.

"Thanks. I've got a tablet here so we can both see what I find." I synched it to the meta, and then fiddled with options in an attempt to buy time for S.

S, how's it going? Is it locked up?

Of course! This is Olyeander's personal meta. I'm not going to be able to just log in. What are we looking for?

Anything to do with Olly1307.

"Are you able to get in? Our techs said that most of the information self-destructed once Cecelia died."

I snapped out of my online conversation with S. "I think I'll be able to get something. But it will take time. Does 1307 mean anything to you?"

He ordered a latte from the counter, thinking the numbers over for a bit. I went back to S, to see if he'd gotten in yet.

Anything?

This is difficult, you know. There is some data that she stopped from getting wiped, but it could just be system files. I need time.

Sabenetti ignored my question. "So, nothing on the screen? I hope you haven't inconvenienced me for a wild goose chase. I might think you were deleting information that incriminated you."

"That's not what's going on and you know it." Another patron in the cafe looked up from the tablet he was reading. Sabinetti gave me a disappointed look. For several minutes, the only sound at our table was Sabinetti loudly sipping his drink.

"I think 1307 is a date: July 13th. That's when the justice department was scheduled to make their decision on Blue Sky's little project here." He twiddled his fingers to indicate the electronics on the table.

"You mean the crime prediction? But that's already out, what is the decision about?"

Sabinetti dipped a biscotti into his latte, "I had such hopes for you. The decision is whether or not it is suitable as evidence. When we met, you told me I couldn't arrest you for what the meta said. That's true, for now."

"Fucking hell."

"Quite, Piotr. Now, we've got to go. Your time with the toy is up."

Ha. The command name was the password for this little section. Seems like this is what she wanted to keep. Just let me convert it and I'll put it on the tablet.

"Hold on, I just need another minute. I've found something."

He put his hand down on Cecelia's meta, "Tell me what it is while we walk. I need to get this thing back, or we're both cooked."

I started walking, trying to keep up with S on the meta and Sabinetti in real life, telling one what the other was finding while making it seem like I was doing the work.

We were nearly at the doors to the HQ. *Now? S, I need to kill the connection.*

Fine, go, go.

I disconnected the tablet. "There's something from her. I'll check it out and let you know." I turned to leave but Sabinetti grabbed my arm.

Looking up at my face, he said, "Now please don't try to hide anything from me. It would be much easier to take you in than let you stay out. If you don't deliver me a case, then you're all I have, Piotr. Neither of us wants that."

He gave me a cheery smile again and walked into the police building.

When I got home, I wanted to make some real chili. I had everything I needed in the fridge. But once I got inside, something got under my skin. The chairs in the kitchen had moved, I thought. My cupboards were all closed but I remembered leaving one open. The more I looked, the more small things I noticed. It made me jumpy, trying to see what else had changed.

Cartier, can you detect any new wireless signals in the apartment. I think someone broke in.

No Piotr, I don't see any. However, that doesn't mean there are not any new ones. It is not difficult to stop them from appearing on my scans.

Always a comfort to have you around, Cartier.

I grabbed whatever I thought might have personal info on it and went to a different cafe. I kept looking at the door while I sorted through the files from Cecelia's meta.

One of them was an audio file titled 'incaseof'. I played it:

"Hello. If you're hearing this, then I am dead or have been missing for some time – and because... I cared for you," Her voice again. It sounded just like I remembered it. Always having work up to emotions, "and you cared for me. The metas detected this, and were then sent the coded message."

She had said metas, meaning I wasn't the only one to get the message. Lennox must have. And maybe others as well. The recording continued, "The emotional modelling of the software can do that. It can detect the kinds of feelings you have. But it can't detect what actions you will take, not with a useful amount of lead time. That's why the board took the project from me; because I couldn't change that -- a problem with the brain, not my software! Even if it doesn't work, Embury and Fournier won't stop. They're going to prove that it works somehow, and then it'll become mandatory. Just what I used to want. They're going to use the emotional modelling for sales. I thought they were going to help me protect people, but they're going to manipulate them. It's a clever idea, I'll give Embury that. Targeted marketing based on real-time emotional feedback. Once they've forced this sham onto everyone, they'll have everything they need."

There was a long pause, and then the sound quality changed. She was in a smaller room now. "They discovered the message in the software, so it was deleted. All I could do was change the emotional modelling for any PCAs about me. Remember that no one that gets the alert can be my killer."

Most of the other files were emails between her and the board of Blue Sky, plus some government officials. Embury and Fournier, both of them VPs, wanted the crime prediction system ready and more accurate. At first it was both of them, then just Embury. He pushed her, threatened her, and told her that her biggest discoveries were behind her and that she needed to step down. It must have

driven her crazy. She knew they were looking to get rid of her, but she didn't protect herself. She even used her own death to save her work's reputation. I wondered if it would have changed anything if I could have told her that her metas weren't worth that.

The last file was something I didn't recognize. I asked Cartier about it.

That is a modification to my software. I do not recommend installing it. It has not been approved.

Right then. Please install the modification.

Are you sure?

Yes, Cartier! Install the file. Tell me what it changes.

Installation complete. It has upgraded your access to Blue Sky's internal networks. Your GPS identification has been altered as well. Mr. Sabinetti and the police will no longer be able to locate you via that method. You will still be able to meet at your favourite hangout, the mBar.

Was that a sponsored message at the end there?

Yes it was.

What about Embury and Fournier? Can I contact them?

Fournier is no longer available. You may call or send Embury an email through the Blue Sky internal network. However, if the message is important...

Yes, let's say it's important.

Then you can find him at the Media Centre in the Blue Sky compound. He checked in there fifteen minutes ago.

Since I was spending Digital Intelligence's money, I sprung for a cab to Blue Sky. Spring was warming up, but a solid rain was coming down today.

The complex was busy with workers eating, walking in the gorgeous park-like grounds, or holding meetings in the glass-walled rooms that ringed every building. Now that Cartier was able to open doors for me, it was easy to get in. I followed his directions to the media centre. I was less nervous than I'd expected. Perhaps I was getting used to showing up unannounced on the doorstep of giant corporations.

I pushed open the thick glass doors to a big room lined with monitors. Dozens of channels were playing at once, though the sound wasn't on. Around me, a team of people typed at desktops or dictated. Embury was talking with a young woman by a bank of screens playing news coverage.

"Hello again, Mr. Embury."

He didn't even turn to look at me, at first. Once he did, he started, "You? What are you doing here?"

"Well, Jason, I believe you have framed me for murder." Despite all the activity, the place was quiet. Most of the room turned to watch us now.

"You're insane. I've called security, and the cops will be on their way. Get out."

Cartier, can you cancel that call to security?

Yes. It has been cancelled.

"You don't know me, and don't have any reason to be afraid of me. It's her you should be afraid of." I knew I didn't have long, so I didn't let any doubt creep into my voice. I had to push him into spilling something.

His nostrils flared, and I could see he was trying not to shout, "Her? Do you mean Cecelia? She's dead. You probably killed her!"

I slammed my hand onto one of the desks and I saw people shuffle away. They thought I could be a murderer, and that kept them cautious. "She let herself die! You couldn't have caught her like that unless she'd wanted you too. She sent out a message saying that the PCA doesn't work, and you wanted her gone because of it."

"Go, get security and the cops," he said to the other Blue Sky workers. I started to shout, but then stopped, realizing that I didn't want to take hostages.

I'm sorry, Piotr. I cannot stop those people from contacting security or the police. Perhaps in a future upgrade from Blue Sky.

"You're pathetic. The PCA works and it'll be the best thing she ever did. You don't have any proof." He moved behind a desk, so it was between me and him.

"No? Keep watching these channels and you'll see some familiar emails appear." I pointed to the screens. In a half-hour, they'd all be playing the tapes and showing the emails from Cecelia.

"You son of a bitch!" he smacked a coffee mug off of the desk and it shattered on the wall near me. He wanted to hit me, but knew he couldn't start the fight.

“Did you kill her? Your name is already on those emails. Tell me if you killed her, you bastard.” I thought of starting the fight for him. But he looked scared and doubtful. I kept at it, “I know the cop on the case. Tell me and I'll put in a word for you.”

“You've ruined all of this, and you don't even know what happened. I didn't kill her!”

He was furious, but he knew that he just had to wait for security to show up. “Did you get a PCA? Did your meta tell you that you were going to kill her?” I asked.

“What? Yeah. That doesn't mean anything. She said it was a glitch because she'd used her own patterns so much in the software.”

I sat down in one of the fancy ergonomic chairs. Jason just stared at me and then left.

S, I need you to find out who spoke to Cecelia before she left to meet me. Access Blue Sky's network if you need it. There was no reply. I could see the pack of security guards and cops heading up to the glass door.

Genevieve, where is S. I need him now. There was also no answer. Maybe they knew I'd been reported to the cops and weren't willing to risk any more to help me.

The security came in and I was handed to the police. I kept silent, trying to get in contact with S and Genevieve over and over. They arrested me and put me into the car. They asked me questions that I didn't listen to.

Cartier, is the recording being played? Are they showing it on the news?

Yes, Piotr. It is hard to keep track of all of the different outlets, but it has a very high viral factor. Was this a success?

Yes, Cartier. I wish Cecelia had also thought of a way to get me out of this.

It could have been the exact same interrogation room as last time. The wait felt longer. Finally, the portly Sabinetti came back into the room.

“Hello again, Piotr. It seems we've added some more charges to the list. And just so we're clear, you're not allowed to leave this time.”

“Shut up. I still didn't murder her.” I pushed my hands through my hair, wondering if this man would ever get less frustrating.

“So you say. But you did barge into Blue Sky and accuse their executives of doing that. I'm afraid this will not be good for you. Even if you avoid the jail time, you might get sued into oblivion.”

“Fantastic. How about you? Solve any murder cases recently?”

“No, and your lead with Digital Intelligence went nowhere. If they were afraid of you knowing something, I couldn't find out what.”

“Ah, maybe having a cop sniffing around was what scared away my connection there.”

“Your connection? Are you telling me that things didn't 'end awkwardly'?”

I laughed. I'd gotten barely one lie past him. “No. I told them I could sink the crime prediction system and they went with it, for a little while at least.”

“But that doesn't make any sense,” he seemed genuinely confused, “I found out that they were about to launch a counter-offer to the justice department. If the whole tech went under, what could they gain? They even wooed some exec from Blue Sky over to help them get it off the ground... Fournier, maybe?”

“Fournier? He was on the emails about Cecelia...can you show me a picture of him?” I started to stand, forgetting that I was handcuffed to the table.

“Hold on there. Just a moment.” He left, brought back a small tablet, and brought up a picture of the middle-aged businessman that I'd seen trying to get into the back room at the press conference.

“Okay, what if Fournier left Blue Sky, but knew about Cecelia's plan, or at least part of it. Then, the PCAs go out, and he's pretty sure she's about to ruin them. So he follows her, waits until her location can't be tracked easily, and kills her. He knows there are dozens of other suspects from the PCAs, and he would know where the meta signals get confused.”

Now Sabinetti laughed, “You're pretty proud of yourself there, aren't you? A few holes though, why would DI then help you to disprove the system that Fournier has killed to protect?”

“Genevieve must not have known about who the murderer was. Then, once you came knocking, she got scared or got told to cancel our deal. But, why would you come after me on the night of the murder? You must have received other PCAs by that point.”

“Ah, yes, we did. But after a couple of false-positives, I stopped worrying. So, colour me red when you showed up at the crime scene. I imagine Fournier or Embury have friends in the department as well. A couple of tips in your direction didn't help your case.”

I lay my head flat against the cool table in front of me. I couldn't believe this might all be over soon. "So, that's it. I'm not her killer." I was a little giddy, "Release me!"

Sabinetti laughed again put his hand on the cuffs. "No," I started to laugh at him but he didn't move to unlock me, "you're under arrest for what you pulled at Blue Sky, remember? I'm sure I can get them to go easy on you, my good man."

Weeks later, I received another message from Cecelia's account.

"Hello Piotr. Do you know what I do most nights? I sit at my desk and look over the data from the metas all over the city. I listen in on specific people, too. Old friends, classmates, boyfriends. I can find out if they're happy, stressed, in love, or lonely. It's easier when you can see it all laid out before you.

"I couldn't see you though. So, I looked you up on SocNet -- you don't keep it very up-to-date. It didn't even have your newest job. I made your local Blue Sky supplier drop her prices. I knew you went by every once in a while. Then, one night, you showed up for me. You weren't particularly happy, but you missed me. I could see it right there in the numbers. Thanks, Piotr. It was good to see that."