Groaning, I leaned back from my computer and stretched. The statistics, both social and medical, had started to blur together in front of my eyes, like vertical streaks of grey on a white background. Yawning, I pushed my chair back and stood to stretch a bit more.

I glanced at the clock on the far wall. Two AM; sheesh. I still had a ton of data to sift through.

"I'm gonna get some coffee. Want me to bring you back a cup?" I asked Lanelle, situated at her own computer a few feet away. She shook her head, so I left without further comment. She was probably just as depressed about our job as I was.

The TV in the lounge was still on, and I watched idly as some anchor went on about the recent outbreak. They were talking about our outbreak, actually. The map showed the area near our field lab, about fifty miles north of Silver City, New Mexico. Idly, I wondered if my car was one of those in the background behind the reporter now speaking.

It had started in the supermax prison a few miles away, before spreading into the nearby town of Datil. Because the area was so isolated, there hadn't been much news coverage so far, which was good for us. It gave us a chance to analyze this new threat. The CDC was massively overtaxed with the Coronavirus already strangling the country and the rest of the world, but they had been able to spare a small team to investigate Datil.

This disease wasn't Covid, that was for sure. The symptoms looked similar at first- fever, shortness of breath- but this.. was a whole different animal. Maddeningly, our initial examinations of the prisoners hadn't found any trace of the virus, or any antibodies to it. They had just.. died.

It seemed to be airborne, based on the pattern of dispersal from the prison to Datil, but it also had a short survival period outside the body. It had taken us two days to get out here, and if the virus could survive in the air or in animals, it would have already been reported in other cities in New Mexico. So.. it seemed to have come and gone, but that was about all we knew for sure.

Fully re-caffeinated, I sat back down and looked at the list of victims again. Dan Hendricks, a cafe-owner. Jenny Samuels, a stay-at-home mom. Catherine Hackley, a corporate investor out here on an inspection of one of their chemical plants. Allan Harper, a paper delivery guy. And thirty-eight convicted criminals in the supermax.

There were hundreds of prisoners in there, and almost a hundred living in the town nearby. Why had the disease only killed those forty-two people? And why hadn't anyone else even gotten sick?

"Any news on the genetic data?" I asked Lanelle from across the room.

She shook her head slowly. "Nothing conclusive. From what I can tell, all the victims make up a pretty even cross-section of America, genetically speaking. I can't find any commonality that's statistically significant, or even close." She sighed and rubbed at her eyes. "I don't even know what I'm looking for."

"There's got to be some reason this bug targeted only these people," I insisted. "If it's not genetic, then it's environmental. We know people in prison have a restricted and pretty terrible diet. I thought the trigger was something in the food, but the four others had wildly different diets."

"Their routine was different, too," Lanelle added, moving over to look at my screen. "Most of the inmates were in solitary. Twenty-three hours a day in a concrete box- no contact outside of that." She grimaced at that, and I could feel her frustration. Some of those inmates were violent offenders, but others were there on nothing more than drug charges. The thought of being isolated like that made me feel sick to my stomach.

Of course, her feelings were much stronger. We'd been working together for years, and some time ago she mentioned that her brother was in prison back in New York, for drug charges. He wouldn't even be eligible for parole for another five years.

Wait, the charges. Could that be it? I pulled up the criminal records of each inmate, and then pulled up the victim list next to it.

"Did you find something?" Lanelle asked.

"I'm not sure, actually." I scanned through the list several times. "I guess not."

Dejected, Lanelle returned to her computer. I kept staring at the list for a few more minutes. At first glance, the victims were a cross-section of the prison population as well, but the convictions also included everything the prisoners had been charged with, and acquitted of as well.

There were more than two hundred prisoners in there, and thirty-five of the thirty-eight victims had either been convicted of, or at least accused of, murder.

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The next day, lab results came back from the remaining bodies. Still no sign of any virus, bacteria, radiation source, or mutation that might have caused this.

I had to write up my initial report to the CDC, and Lanelle had already done hers. What could I tell them? That this virus- if it even was that- had a taste for murderers?

I went to church that morning, or as close to it as I could be. A group face-time meeting with only the pastor speaking and several dozen faces watching him wasn't my idea of a rewarding church service, but it was better than nothing.

The choir had become quite accustomed to singing remotely, and had adapted pretty well. And the sermon was engaging, at least. The pastor spoke of having faith through trying times. Of stepping out into the unknown, and trusting that God would catch you if you fell. Hell, for all I knew, this disease was God's work directly. It was as good an explanation as any, so far.

When the service was done, I pulled up the victim list again, and focused on the outliers. Three prisoners who hadn't been accused of murder had died. Two more who had been accused were still alive. Finally, four civilians who had pretty clean records were dead.

It took a call to a friend in the Department of Corrections, but thankfully the outliers' court cases had been publicly available. It wasn't hard to get their transcripts and previous criminal records. I also asked for anything on the other four, just in case.

I had just started in on the list when I got a text from Lanelle. "News on the virus. Get back over here," it read.

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The CDC compound also had a makeshift morgue for the victims, and that's where I'd been called. It was full at the moment of course, but there was an adjoining lab for tissue analysis, and Lanelle was in there waiting for me.

"About time," she said impatiently as I finished suiting up and stepped into the 'clean room'. "Look at this."

She was examining a sample under a microscope, and stepped aside for me. When I looked into it, I could see a pretty standard blood sample. Except.. for something I couldn't identify. A particulate, about a third the size of a red blood cell. I looked around and saw more of it in the rest of the sample.

"That's our culprit?" I asked Lanelle curiously, and she nodded.

"But we examined all the bodies days ago. There was nothing in any of the samples!"

"This wasn't from any of the bodies," she said excitedly. "This is from the other prisoners!" She gestured at the sample tray, and there were hundreds more lined up on the far wall. "That.. contaminant, whatever it is, is in all of them. The townsfolk too. What if this virus, or whatever it is, stays alive along with its host, but then dies and denatures immediately if the host dies? That would explain why we couldn't find any sign of it in those bodies."

I frowned. "But no disease we've ever studied behaves that way."

"No disease we've studied ignores 97% of potential hosts this way either," she said, shrugging helplessly. "I think we have to go a bit beyond medical science to understand this one."

I paused. "Are you saying.. this is some kind of nano-technology here?" The idea of microscopic machines had been around in science fiction for a long time, but it was still decades, if not centuries, away from practical use.

Thankfully, Lanelle seemed to agree. "I don't think so. It seems to behave more like a bacteria from what I've seen. It's slowly dying off in those samples I took, but new samples seem to have the same concentration as the originals. Whatever it is, it maintains numbers at a steady rate." She took a deep breath, looking troubled. "And that rate is different from person to person."

That made no sense either. "How could that be? A steady concentration is only possible in frozen blood samples!"

"I don't know, but I've confirmed it with over a dozen samples now. The concentration of whatever this is- we gotta come up with a name one of these days- is steady, and different in each sample. It's a little higher in the prisoner samples, but not much."

My head was already spinning, but we were both spared from further speculation when her phone rang. Apparently on autopilot, she picked it up.

It was the Datil police chief. There'd been another victim.

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"Chief Paario, this is Dr. Sanders," Lanelle introduced me.

"Call me Terry," I said amiably, but didn't offer a hand. We were all masked- and would have been even without this new disease- so he seemed to understand. "Dr. Pauls spoke with you yesterday about getting all those blood samples?"

Paario nodded curtly. "I hope they're useful- I've got a townful of frightened people out there, terrified they might drop dead from this new Covid strain." He gestured into the nearby house.

"Damndest thing I've ever seen," he said before we even got to the living room, and in a second I could see why.

There were actually two bodies on the ground in there. One had a gaping chest wound from a shotgun, which was lying next to them. He had apparently fallen backwards from the blast itself, and been killed instantly.

The other was a much shorter woman, who was curled up almost in a fetal position. I was no crime-scene expert, but I could see traces where her makeup had run. She'd been crying before she'd died.

"At first it looked like some kind of murder-suicide," Paario said grimly, gesturing down at a phone about two feet away. "Tony here was messing around with some other woman on the side, and Trish found out and shot him. The strange part is, the pills in her medicine cabinet haven't been disturbed, and the gun was never reloaded. I can't find any cause of death for her, except-"

"Except for the reason you called us," I said darkly, and took a closer look at Trish's body. "From her skin discoloration and body position, it could have been respiratory problems, yeah."

"Yeah, but it looks like she just curled up and died right there," Paario objected. "The 'rona takes time to kill people. Days, weeks, what have you. Unless she was already at death's door when she found those messages on the phone. But then she wouldn't have been able to load or fire the gun, would she?"

I shook my head. "Questions upon questions, chief. If it's any consolation, we've got a pile of them back at the lab, too. We'll take samples and run more tests. Hopefully we'll have some answers for you sometime this afternoon."

He nodded hesitantly, and Lanelle and I got to work. My mind was only half on task, though. This woman, Trish, had died within minutes of killing her husband. Based on our earlier tests, she and everyone else in town had been infected by this.. thing for days now. Based on initial reports made by the prison guards and town family members, it usually took about 36 hours from infection to symptoms, and then less than an hour from symptoms to death. She hadn't suffered any ill effects at all, until she'd pulled the trigger. Had that trigger been for the disease as well?

I had shared my murderer theory with Lanelle on the drive over. She'd been skeptical, but I could see her glancing at the body again and again, just as I was.

When we got back to the lab, I took a sample of my own blood on a hunch, and had a look at it. My blood was clean. So was Lanelle's, after she did the same. It may have seemed a bit paranoid, but after all the mind-bending details of this disease, I felt it was a prudent precaution to take.

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Two days later, I was finishing up my report to the regional manager in Santa Fe.

It read like a story written by someone surrounded by invisible walls. Frustration and questions, and nothing else.

In short, sir, I added what might be the only glimmer of hope in this whole ordeal, if there is any good news to this situation, it's this: Whatever this disease is, it appears to be non-transmissible. Victims are only contagious in the short time between their own infection and when they might otherwise die- about thirty-six hours on average. The virus appears to only be viable in the air for about the same time.

I recommend the town and prison remain in quarantine for at least three months just to be safe, but I doubt the virus will mutate during that time. Mutation depends on massive concentration of disease, and constant changing of circumstances, neither of which is happening here.

I finalized my report and leaned back again. Lanelle's report probably read similarly; we'd both left our conclusions about murder out of our official statements.

Thankfully no one else had died in town or in the prison over the past few days. I'd had a chance to examine those criminal records, and they'd been chilling. The dead inmates who hadn't been charged with murder this time around had all been charged with murder previously. The living ones who had been charged were both suspected to have been set up.

As for the townsfolk, that took a bit more guesswork. And legwork. I tracked down the cafe-owner's friends and interviewed them one by one. It had taken some effort, but I had gotten one of them to admit that in a drunken confession years ago, Dan Hendricks had said he'd been involved in a hit-and-run. His friend had assumed Hendricks was just making it up, as he was pretty hammered at the time, but there had been a dead body found weeks later off the trail. Or so Paario confirmed with me later.

Catherine Hackly, the chemical corporation investor, had been tied up in a class-action lawsuit with dozens of people claiming wrongful deaths. Apparently she'd decided to let her company dump toxic runoff into a nearby water table, and five people had died from it. Dozens more were sick with varying conditions.

The delivery guy, Allan Harper, was unremarkable on paper. His brother Stan had died four years ago of lung cancer, but that was about it. However, there had been a note by the doctor on Stan's case that his postmortem had shown more than three times his usual pain medication in his system. Allan refused to talk to me about any of it, but I reflected that if I had a brother who was slowly dying from an inoperable and inexorable lump of pain, I might consider assisting him on his way out.

The home-maker, Jenny Samuels, was squeaky clean. No one had anything bad to say about her- at all, no matter how deep I went. However, medical records did show several previous pregnancies before her twin boys. One of which had been terminated at her request.

So there I had it. Murder apparently triggered this thing. As did wrongful death, assisted suicide, and, it seemed, abortion.

Or, perhaps not the abortion itself. She'd had several miscarriages before. Perhaps it was some mistake she'd made while carrying those which had triggered.. it.

I quit the CDC the next morning. How could I possibly continue to devote my life to medical science when I knew that things like this existed? Everything I thought I'd known about how diseases worked, about how they spread, had been bullshit. Childish fantasies.

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Years passed. Over four years, actually.

My life had changed, but no more than the rest of our world. Covid was finally gone, at least from most countries. Viable vaccines had wiped it out of larger cities. Even the people who hadn't gotten 'the jab' as the brits called it, were protected by the resulting herd immunity. Businesses and hobbies and sports were slow in getting back up and running, but they did eventually.

I'd gone back to work as well- though I was working for the church now. It was only part time, so that I would have time to go through seminary as well. I had no idea what path God had set for me, but I knew a sign when I saw one.

Then I got an email from my old friend at the Department of Corrections. There were a number of people I'd asked him to keep an eye on, including Lanelle's brother.

It seemed there'd been a fight in his facility. He'd been injured.. and died later in the prison hospital.

Lanelle was living in New York City, and I lived only about an hour's drive away. I reached out to her, but didn't get any response. That worried me, so I decided to drop in and make sure she was all right. I made arrangements with the seminary, and left right after that.

I had only visited her apartment once before. We'd had some contact over the past few years- Christmas cards and the like- and we hadn't spoken about what had happened down in Datil. I had gotten the impression she just wanted to forget the whole ordeal. Lanelle had even quit the CDC as well, and started her own medical practice.

It was work hours on a Wednesday, so I went to her office first. According to her staff, she'd called in sick that day, so my next stop was her apartment. The building was open and her front door unlocked. I knocked, but didn't hear any response. I hesitated there, given that what I did next might technically be a crime, but worry overcame that.

Things had definitely changed here. Her living room had been co-opted by what looked like a makeshift lab. There was a centrifuge and industrial fridge used for tissue storage on one wall. Cell cultures had been arranged along with blood samples, and notes littered both desks in her living room. I called her name, and didn't get any response.

I checked the rest of the place and she wasn't here, but my professional curiosity compelled me to take a closer look at her work. It had been a while, but I recognized much of her notes. She'd been studying the Datil 'virus' on her own, apparently. Somehow, she'd smuggled a sample out before the CDC had destroyed all of our other work. I hadn't heard anything more about Datil since then, so it seemed most people were assuming it had just been more Covid.

Wait, there were live tissue samples here! They couldn't be stored that long. Someone else had been infected! Belatedly, I noticed the lining on the doors and windows. This room had been airtight for a time. Her notes confirmed it, too. She'd been testing it on herself!

My breathing quickened as I thought about it. This thing was extremely contagious and airborne. If her precautions had failed, I would have heard about the outbreak by now. According to her notes, these tests had started months ago. She'd infected herself then. By now, she wasn't contagious anymore. I calmed down a little.

The last notebook was the most interesting. It described a cell culture she'd arranged to keep the virus alive, in a container, for more than just a few days. The container wasn't here, though. I pulled out my phone and called her. If she didn't answer, my next call had to be to the authorities. Messing around with this thing was dangerous enough, but alone? Without the resources of the CDC? This was playing with napalm!

I heard a ringtone come from her kitchen and saw her phone on the counter. She'd left without it. I started to dial my old workplace.. and paused. That call, even if it did stop an outbreak, would land her in jail- most probably for the rest of her life.

On a whim, I checked her phone. The last call had been to a taxi service; she could have gone anywhere. Then I remembered some of the stories she'd told me about her brother and what they did together. There was one place I wanted to check first, before I nuked her life entirely.

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It was 2pm on a weekday. Time's Square was loaded with people, all streaming their way past each other through the intersection. Even in broad daylight the massive billboards and neon signs were overpowering to look at, so I kept my eyes down to my level.

At first I despaired of finding her in all this mess. It hadn't really been much more than a guess on my part, where she'd gone. But then I saw her on one side street, just standing there looking up at the sky. She was carrying a sealed medical specimen container- that had to be the same one she'd constructed.

It carried the live virus. And she'd already unlatched it.

"Lanelle!" I called out desperately. Somehow, she heard me across the street and over the noise, and looked my way. She kept the box closed, but beckoned me to come over. I did so carefully, walking slowly so as not to alarm her.

"I'm glad to see you, Terry," she said softly, once I was closer. "It seems right, that you should be here for this. Full circle and all that." She laughed briefly. "Full circle in more than one way. Four thousand years ago, a woman named Pandora had the same choice. The only difference is, I know what opening this box does."

"You don't have to do this," I urged her softly, keeping my distance. If I lunged, she could open the box in an instant. Despite her relaxed stance, she did seem quite alert. "I know you're angry about your brother. I'm so sorry. He didn't deserve that- no one does. But if you do this, you're no better than the men who beat him back in that prison! You'll be worse- much worse, in fact, releasing this virus on the world."

"It's not what you think it is, though," she said calmly, looking around at the passersby. "This isn't a virus, or an infection, or some kind of contagion. You studied it with me. You know that none of those words apply to this," she cradled the box for a moment.

"This thing I'm carrying within me, that punished that woman for shooting her husband, that struck down all those murderers in jail. This thing is judgement, Terry. It's fair, and impartial. It strikes down people who harm other people, and spares everyone else. It can make the world safer for everyone!"

The epidemiologist in me knew what it could do, better than most. With airborne transmission, an incubation period of 36 hours, in one of the most populated intersections in the world, and multiple planes flying out every minute.. this could be a world-ender.

"Please, Lanelle," I begged softly. "What would your brother want you to do?"

She coughed lightly, and then again a bit harder. I could see her skin flush for a moment, and then she smiled at me. "You don't understand. It's already done. I opened the box five minutes ago."

She started coughing again, dropping the box on the ground, and then sat down with her back to the wall. As her lungs seized up and her eyes closed, I stepped back in wonder.

Judgement was upon us all.