

STEPHEN WEBB

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## *Area 37*

### 1

“Dr Bok?” Scudamore stared at the yellow smiley face that filled his laptop screen. “Dr Januarius Bok?”

“This is he.”

The scratchy, high-pitched reply somehow matched the grinning icon. Scudamore paused, and wondered again at the wisdom of contacting this—well, whatever this individual claimed to be. But what option did he have? “I’m not a fan of avatars, Dr Bok.”

“Do you suffer from visiosubrideophobia?”

“Suffer what?”

“Have you a phobia of smiling faces? Or perhaps of emojis in general?”

Scudamore thought it better to withhold the fact that smiley faces, along with those of clowns and ventriloquist dummies, all crept him out. “Consider it practicality not phobia. I prefer to look people in the eye, see who I’m dealing with.”

“But we have no deal. Indeed, I have no idea with whom I converse.”

Scudamore gave his name. “My colleagues speak highly of your gifts. They tell me your advice has led to convictions.”

Silence. Scudamore stared at the banana-coloured image on the screen. “Are you there, Dr Bok?”

“Yes.”

Scudamore inhaled diaphragmatically, as the mindfulness

quacks had told him to do at the first sign of anger. “I should like to consult with you on a case.”

“If your profession is that of police officer then let me save us both some time. I have no interest in affray, assault, arson. Retail theft, robbery, and racketeering do not—to use a barbarism—float my boat. I will never...”

“I’m not police.” Tempt the weirdo, Scudamore’s colleagues had told him, like using maggots to lure a carp. “I’m Head of Risk at a government research agency. And I’m up against a locked room mystery. A puzzle that puts the security of our nation at stake.” Was it his imagination, or did the smiley face twitch? Scudamore pressed on. “The case will prove difficult even for you, Januarius Bok. The law restricts what I can tell you.”

“Restrictions spur creativity,” Bok replied airily.

“Well that’s... dandy,” Scudamore said. “Look, I’m authorised to offer a reward. The money could run to six figures.”

“I decide upon my fee after the successful completion of an assignment,” Bok said. “A warning: I place a high value on my time. But you intrigue me, George Scudamore, so I offer my service. Send me an outline of your puzzle. Focus on the main points of interest.”

The smiley face collapsed into a blob of pixels.

Scudamore slammed the laptop shut. He had wasted valuable investigation time on a charlatan. A ridiculous, pompous, blathering charlatan. Tomorrow he would re-interrogate witnesses, reanalyse the system logs, reconsider the forensic evidence. He inhaled, deeply, and tried to concentrate on the exhalation. But his mind returned to the mystery, like a tongue to a hole in a tooth. He prodded and poked at it, but the problem remained. The events baffled him. He needed fresh thinking. Even a charlatan such as Bok might provide some insight. Scudamore opened his laptop and began to type.

## 2

*Two days ago, someone punched a hole through our security protocols. I need to know who made the hole and how they did it.*

Scudamore lifted his fingers from the keyboard and considered how much information he could share with Bok.

*The agency contains an Institute, Area 37, which carries out its work in a three-storey building situated in the middle of the back end of nowhere. CCTV cameras outside the building cover every brick, every window, every access road. The building has a single entrance, which requires the successful completion of biometric checks before it opens. The door time stamps all activity. We know who entered and left the building, and we know when they did so. The tech gurus confirm that our systems remain unhacked. The logs don't lie.*

As he typed, a familiar feeling descended. Despair. The crime, though impossible, had happened. Unless someone was playing a practical joke? No, a prank made even less sense than a crime. He pulled the notebook from his jacket, even though the details it held were fresh in his mind.

*The day before yesterday, four people worked in Area 37. Rebecca Tipstaff, personal assistant to Charles Melchior, the Institute director, entered at 7.30 a.m. Nine minutes later she was joined by—let's call him N. He works as a neuropsychologist. You don't need the details. Twelve minutes after that a biologist—let's call him B—entered the building. The fourth person, a chemist—he's C—arrived at 8.01 a.m. Tipstaff left the building at 11.53 a.m. and returned at 12.17 p.m. At 12.20 p.m. she called me from the phone on Melchior's desk and said an intruder had been in the director's office. I entered Area 37 at 12.24 p.m. The CCTV cameras, the biometric door system, and the phone records all agree with that chronology—and with the accounts of the five people involved: B, C, N, Tipstaff, and me.*

Scudamore replayed the scene in his imagination.

*Tipstaff seemed agitated. Confused, I think, more than upset. She'd returned from the canteen to see a man standing by the director's desk. When he saw her, he left. She checked the office then ran out to confront him. The intruder had gone. We have no cameras inside the building, so we don't know where he hid. Fingerprints, fibre analysis, DNA ... forensics examined the room and found nothing unusual.*

*As you can see, Bok, I have a locked room mystery on my hands. More precisely, a locked building mystery. If the intruder can penetrate Area 37 then he can enter any building in the country. None of our labs is safe.*

Scudamore's finger hovered over the send button. He felt the

same shame as that time in *Missing Persons*, when he'd asked the spirit world to help find a body. Januarius Bok was a bigger fraud than that medium. But what were his options? He pressed send.

## 3

"Tell me about the three scientists." The smiley face appeared unbidden on Scudamore's desktop. Bok's thin voice echoed off the walls and out into the corridor.

Scudamore closed his office door. "How did you get this number? It's restricted."

"We can discuss your security, or lack thereof, at some later time. For now, I need more information."

"Lack of security? No, we'll talk about that now." He hadn't had a chance to grab his morning caffeine boost but, despite himself, Scudamore felt a growing excitement. "You found a bug? A fault that permits unauthorised entry?"

"Your systems, as far as they go, are robust. No, you presented me with an accurate chronology: Tipstaff, B, C, and N—tinker, tailor, as it were—entered the building at the times you stated. No one else entered until you arrived."

"So who did Tipstaff see? A ghost?"

"I have no need for such an hypothesis." Bok sniffed. "Concentrate on the corporeal. Four bodies had access to the office."

"Did you read my account? Tipstaff saw the intruder. He was not one of the scientists."

"If she saw him then you must have a description of the trespasser?"

Scudamore paused. "I find this conversation difficult. Please, Dr Bok, turn on your camera."

"No. Continue with Ms Tipstaff's description of the man she saw."

Scudamore swore, not caring whether his absurdly named interlocutor heard. In interrogations, *he* dictated the pace of conversation. How could he do that when talking to an avatar? He massaged his temples, another of those tips the wellbeing wheeler-dealers told him to practise. Fine for them to hand out advice. They didn't have to deal with Januarius Bok. "The description lacks precision," he said at last. "Medium-sized man, dark hair, wearing

Institute-issued coveralls. I can't hang a photofit on that."

"Fascinating," Bok said, strangling each of the syllables separately and in different ways. "Was anything stolen?"

Scudamore shrugged. "I can't rule it out."

"Hmm." Bok's voice whined out from the speakers like high-pitched interference. "Do you fear for your job?"

Good question. Scudamore considered. "In truth, no. If some punter can swan around Area 37 whenever he wants then I've identified a national security risk. I get a gong, the director gets the sack."

"Ah, the director. Where is Melchior?"

"Abroad. He doesn't deserve the kicking he'll get when I report the breach. He's a first-rate scientist, an outstanding administrator, a skilled political operator. And a good man. He takes care of his staff. I have to nail this before he returns tomorrow."

"In which case I suggest you contemplate what information you can provide regarding those three scientists. I have yet to break my fast. Expect my return call in two hours."

The smiley face shrank to a point.

#### 4

The screen came back to life precisely two hours later. Scudamore looked up at a water stain on the ceiling, the result of a plumbing problem that the Estates department had resolved to the satisfaction of no one except those working in Estates. "Please understand, Dr Bok, that I am limited in what I can say."

"Yes, yes. Government secrets, hush hush. I grasp the nature of the constraints. Divulge what you can. Biologist, chemist, neuropsychologist. B, C, N. Tell me something about them."

"Three middle-aged white men," Scudamore said. "Our Head of Diversity has yet to make much impact."

"Start with B," Bok pressed. "Have you ever had reason to run a security check on him?"

"We check everyone." Scudamore considered whether to continue. Bok's line of questioning led nowhere. Then again, all other paths led nowhere. Might as well humour him for now. "B gambles. Plays

slots to chase money to pay the debt he racked up playing slots. You're thinking motive, yes? That he plans to sell secrets to fund his addiction? Forget motive. We need to focus on whom Tipstaff saw in the director's office. It wasn't B, C, or N. Someone else got into Area 37."

"The Institute's name intrigues me. I assume Areas 1 to 36 do not exist. What, then, is its significance?"

"No idea," Scudamore said. "I believe the previous director proposed it. Before my time."

"Then let us return to B. His research is...?"

"Classified," Scudamore said at once. "A freedom of information request will tell you he researches the anthrax bacillus. True, as far as it goes. For you, it goes that far."

The speakers fell silent, but the smiley face still filled the screen so Scudamore waited.

"Let us move on," Bok said at length. "Suspect C?"

"He's not a suspect."

"Suspect C," Bok repeated. "What can you tell me of his work?"

"He investigates clean-up methods for nerve agent attacks. No money worries, little in the way of a home life, spends a lot of time in the lab. Loves his job. Devoted to it, to the point of workaholism. We have nothing on him, except he likes a drink."

"Which I take to mean he is a functioning alcoholic as well as workaholic. Does that not concern you?"

"The director ordered him to take a medical. I told you, Melchior looks after his staff."

"Perhaps C sees it differently," Bok said. "A medical examination imperils his job. He might seek information with which he could threaten the director, force Melchior to change his mind."

"Dr Bok, I repeat: our eyewitness rules out the chemist. And the biologist. And the neuropsychologist."

"Ah yes, N. Tell me about N."

"He's brighter than you," Scudamore said, savouring the taste of the words. He imagined the yellow smiley turning green. "N investigates super-identifiers. People who can recognise an individual amongst a crowd."

"I know what a super-identifier is," Bok snapped. "What else?"

“He founded the Institute.”

“And then Melchior replaced N? Tell me why.”

“I told you, before my time. A dispute over research direction, I believe.”

“From what I know of researchers, N must hate Melchior. All three thus possess motive. B wants money. C wants to blackmail. N wants revenge.”

“But none did it,” Scudamore insisted.

“Do you have photographs of the three in their typical work garb?”

“I suppose.” The conversation had started to bore Scudamore. He pulled up a database and shared three images. Three bland, bloodless, bespectacled men. Dark hair worn short; five-nine, five-ten in height; blue lab coats draped over white shirts.

“Three peas in a pod,” Bok observed.

“Look at them,” Scudamore bellowed. “Do you think Tipstaff couldn’t identify one of her colleagues?”

“Tipstaff. I should like to talk to her. Your working day ends at five, correct? Arrange a meeting for then.”

The face dissolved like the Cheshire Cat. Scudamore imagined the grin, persisting. He shoved the screen away and it toppled into the window. Fine. Estates could fix the crack while they fixed the damn leak in the ceiling.

## 5

A tangled spaghetti of wires bulged out of the flimsy partition wall that divided an unused storeroom into two poky interview rooms. Scudamore found an audio connection and jammed it into his laptop. Bok’s whine began at once. “I presume you have ruled out the obvious solution?”

Scudamore separated the wires and tried, one after another, to connect to the room’s video feed. He wanted Tipstaff to address her replies to him, the human in the room, and spare her the ordeal of staring at the rictus grin of Bok’s yellow smiley face. On his fifth attempt the screen came to life. He set the laptop on the table. “The obvious solution?”

“Namely, that Ms Tipstaff herself bears culpability.”

“Tipstaff?” Scudamore said. “Makes no sense. I’d be unaware of the break-in if she hadn’t contacted me. Why bring about an investigation?”

“Spite, perhaps. Imagine, for example, Tipstaff and Melchior conducting an *affaire de coeur*. Imagine, furthermore, their office dalliance ending in rancour. If you are correct, and reports of an intruder could lead to Melchior’s dismissal, then her entire story might be a concoction, the result of a lover’s tiff. Hmm?”

Damn him! How did Bok know about the affair? “We have no reason to suppose Ms Tipstaff is dissatisfied with her relationships, professional or otherwise. Pick another tree up which to bark.”

“As you wish,” Bok said. “Let us not keep the good lady waiting.”

If he ever got within punching distance of that man, Scudamore thought. But he opened the door and Tipstaff marched past him. “I have a train to catch,” she muttered.

“This will not take long,” Bok said. Scudamore turned down the volume on the speakers. “First, your relationship with Charles Melchior. How long has that persisted?”

Tipstaff exuded a sense of composure, serenity almost. Her blonde hair and long neck attracted immediate attention, but that soon gave way to an appreciation of the stillness in which she clothed herself.

“Are you asking how long I’ve worked for the director?” She levelled her question at Scudamore, seemingly unfazed at having to converse through an intermediary. Her voice carried the trace of a northern accent.

“No. I ask about your romantic entanglement. When did it begin?”

Scudamore squirmed as Tipstaff stared at him, her chin high. “I accompanied the director on a business trip to America the year before last.”

“Do you recall details?” Bok pressed. “Do you remember the date?”

“October 10 to 15, if you insist. We stayed in a motel in Stowe.” She smiled, a hint of colour in her flawless cheeks. “The trees were ablaze. The mountain air so clear you could see to eternity. We discovered we had feelings for each other.”

“You were the personal assistant to the previous director, I believe.”



“Yes.” Tipstaff’s hands, fingers intertwined, rested motionless in the folds of her tartan skirt.

“You had a personal relationship with the previous director too.”

“I resent the insinuation.” Tipstaff’s voice remained level. “He asked me to dinner, once, and I accepted. At my request he made no such further offers. Do you understand, whoever you are?”

“In every respect,” Bok replied. “Let us move on, then, to the break-in. At what time did it occur?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there. I left my desk between 11.50 and 11.55 to take a call in another room.”

“I can confirm,” Scudamore said. “The call came from our stationery supplier.”

“I placed an order for toner cartridges,” Tipstaff added. “You can check.”

“Not necessary,” Bok said. “Did you return directly to your office?”

“No. I went to the canteen, bought a ham sandwich, cherry yoghurt, and sparkling water. I returned to eat lunch at my desk but I didn’t get there because I noticed the director’s office door was ajar. I looked in and saw a stranger. The wall clock, directly behind his shoulder, showed 12.17 p.m. I asked him who he was, what he was doing there. He stared me in the eye then walked out into the corridor.”

“Did he run?”

“No. He ambled, like he had no care in the world.” Tipstaff frowned, as if puzzled at her own reply. “I dashed into the office to see whether he’d stolen anything. When I went to challenge him, he’d disappeared.”

“I commend your remarkable memory,” Bok said. “But you have a train to catch, Ms Tipstaff. Let me detain you no longer.”

Tipstaff turned back to Scudamore. “Is that all?”

“Apparently so,” Scudamore said. He closed the laptop. “I’ve had enough for one day too.”

## 6

Scudamore ticked off time zones in his head as he pushed a bagel around his plate. Breakfast time here, so dead of night over there.

He'd hoped to avoid this, but he could no longer put it off. He ate his bagel then put through a video call. The webcam showed a small hotel room with magnolia walls and a single bed. "Boss? Sorry for disturbing you."

Melchior shook his head. "Rebecca told me. I return later today. Set up an appointment with the minister and take me straight to him. He needs to know."

"Agreed." Scudamore paused. "The safe. Did it hold anything that could cause embarrassment?"

Melchior tugged at his trimmed, grey beard and forced a smile. "Nothing that could embarrass the department. Personal embarrassment, perhaps."

Divorce papers, Scudamore thought. It wasn't only Bok who possessed powers of deduction. "Would you like me to hush this up?"

"I'll pretend you didn't say that. Just do your job. Have you made any progress? Rebecca mentioned some outside help."

"I've engaged the services of Januarius Bok. He comes highly recommended. Do you know him?"

Melchior frowned. "I've heard the name. Other departments have used him from time to time, following a hack, a ransomware demand, that sort of thing. His price can exceed what the hoods hope to extort. Don't trust him."

Scudamore stared out of his office window. Estates had examined the cracked pane and concluded that a strip of transparent tape constituted a repair. The ceiling still leaked. "I'll pick you up at the airport."

"Rebecca has the details." Melchior removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He looked old.

Scudamore killed the call. He paused, pressed another number. A smiley face appeared. "Dr Bok? I pick up my boss tonight. You have the rest of the day to make something of this case. Do you have any ideas? Any at all?"

"Manifold," Bok said. "Ideas grow like grain. One must winnow them, so truth alone remains. In pursuit of which, organise another meeting with the divine Ms Tipstaff. Let us agree to meet at noon, sharp."

Scudamore ushered Tipstaff into the interview room. Save for her outfit and his underwear, the room and its contents were unchanged since yesterday. Estates must have prioritised the taping of his window over the cleaning of this room. He switched on the audio. Bok's voice at once began to drone.

"Ms Tipstaff. I need to know, in detail, what you observed during the intrusion. The future of Melchior's career depends on what you tell me. Do you understand?"

Tipstaff offered a slight nod.

"Good. Let us start with the director's office. The intruder left and you entered. Describe your impressions."

Tipstaff's eyes, the colour of a darkening sky, lost focus as she recalled the scene. "The desk was disarranged. Not hugely so. Three paper files were not where I had placed them. A coaster had been moved from the right to the left side of the desk. Two drawers were half open. But, as far as I could tell, nothing was missing. The wall safe worried me, though. An oil painting, a rather florid landscape, hides the safe. I could tell someone had moved it. That painting always hangs askew, you see. It had been askew earlier that morning, when I left those three files on the desk. Now its edges aligned with all the posters and certificates and noticeboards that hang on the wall. That's how I knew the intruder must have tampered with the safe. That's why I called Security. I called from the director's phone."

"I can confirm that," Scudamore said.

"Good." Bok dragged out the syllable. "Now tell me about the interloper. What did he wear?"

"Blue, knee-length lab coat. Black trousers. Black shoes."

"Height?"

"Half a head taller than me."

"His face. Describe his face."

Tipstaff shuffled in her chair. "I... average, I suppose."

"He had an average number of eyes, noses, and mouths? Come come. Try harder."

Tipstaff pulled a lace handkerchief from her skirt pocket and began to tug on it. "I... I suppose I didn't see him too well."

“But you said he stared you in the eye, walked straight past you. I ask again: describe his face.”

Tipstaff dabbed away tears then looked at Scudamore. “I’ve told you all I can. May I go?”

Scudamore nodded, but Bok’s voice overruled him. “A final question. You worked for the first director. Did he give the Institute its name?”

“Area 37?” Tipstaff got to her feet. “I believe so. But I have no idea why.”

Scudamore waited until Tipstaff had left. “A memory like a steel trap, and yet she claims not to remember the guy’s face? Seems she’s involved after all.”

“Apply a modicum of rigor to your thought process, Scudamore. Her love for Melchior shines bright. Therefore, as you yourself noted, she gains nothing by bringing this episode to your attention.”

Scudamore bit down on a reply and forced a smile. “Then you leave me with my locked-room mystery, Dr Bok. And I need a solution before I meet Melchior.”

“In which case expect my call this evening. I must first confirm a detail or two.”

8

Scudamore’s phone shivered against his chest. He rested his forehead on the limousine window, watched his breath fog the cold glass. In the condensation he drew two dots and a curved line, then encircled them. He wiped away the smiley with a handkerchief. The phone shivered again. When he took the call, Bok’s voice filled the car. “Are you free to speak?”

Although his driver had clearance, Scudamore raised the internal window. He wanted as few people as possible to know about Bok. “Well? Do you know how he got into the building?”

“No one got into the building,” Bok said, his tone one of exasperation.

Scudamore could see air quotes around those words ‘got into’. He told himself to breathe. “I meet Melchior in ten minutes, Bok. So tell me. Do you know who entered his damn office?”

“Of course. N, the neuropsychologist.”

“How? Why?”

“The ‘why’ should be obvious,” Bok said. “We have established his motive: revenge. He led the Institute, even gave it its name. Along with the post came a personal assistant, the formidable Ms Tipstaff, with whom he was in love. Melchior took all this from him.”

“But Tipstaff saw the intruder and she didn’t recognise him. Are you saying she lied? Or that N wore a mask capable of fooling her?”

“The latter,” Bok replied. “Tell me, have you heard of Brodnam Area 37? Or of proposagnosia?”

“Heard what now?”

Bok sighed. “Brodnam Area 37 resides in the brain’s temporal cortex. N has spent his career investigating the fusiform gyrus, a structure within Area 37. He named the Institute after his research interests.”

The limousine glided to a halt in the short-stay area of the arrivals terminal. “Speed it up, Bok.”

“You told me N researched super-identifiers.” Bok’s languid delivery showed no signs of accelerating. “His research led him to a contrasting phenomenon. Proposagnosia. In common parlance, face-blindness. Clinicians have long known that trauma in the fusiform gyrus impairs a person’s ability to recognise faces. A stroke can bring about the damage, as can a tumour. Whatever the cause, the patient sees a head, a hairline, two eyes above a nose above a mouth. They understand the concept of a face. But they cannot distinguish one face from another. Your friend N has developed a way of exciting Area 37 and thereby inducing short-term face-blindness. His technique, I suspect, involves ultrasound of a particular frequency. A person within range will feel nothing, but the excitation of that person’s fusiform gyrus induces temporary proposagnosia.”

“The perfect mask,” Scudamore said. “And he used it to get access to the wall safe?”

“Safecracking demands an entirely different skill set. No, he stole nothing. Except perhaps Ms Tipstaff’s peace of mind. And yours.”

“But then what did he...”

Bok interrupted. “He entered the office, rearranged items

on the desk, then walked away when he knew Tipstaff would see but not recognise him. He knew Tipstaff would call you, and you would investigate. He believed, with good reason, that you would fail to elucidate the mystery. But your report would be sufficiently damning to have Melchior removed from post.”

“What he didn’t know was that I’d call you,” Scudamore said ruefully.

“Indeed. N possesses an ingenious mind. Ingenuity, however, does not equate with infallibility.”

“Seems he committed no crime.” Scudamore paused. “What do we do?”

“A decision for you and Melchior.”

Scudamore got out of the car and entered the terminal in time to see the director’s familiar frame striding towards him.

“We never agreed on money.” Scudamore stared at the grinning avatar on his phone. “How much?”

“I waive my fee,” Bok replied.

Scudamore felt his guts clench. Melchior had told him not to trust Bok. “If not money, what is it you want?”

“I presume you will recreate a device based on N’s work. Well, I should like one. A mask such as that will prove ... useful for me.”

The smiley face disappeared.