“You are … Mr. Markson? Ah, yes – your payment is in order. We understand you come for a LEMP.” In his thick Russian accent, it sounded like he said *lump*. That would be a weird thing to come to an abandoned warehouse to discuss with a Russian gangster, but maybe not the weirdest.

“Yes.”

“You… understand what that means?”

“Scientifically speaking, I know what a LEMP is – let’s just put it that way.”

“You are aware, then, that you won’t be able to fully participate in soc-“

“Aware of it, yes.” *Understand it? I’ll let you know when I get out West.* Aidan had turned in his phone at the desk so it wouldn’t get fried, but then frying it would probably be the best outcome, since the SIM-3 card would give his location away.

We all begin the same way – blind, screaming, and coated in goop. Aiden Daniel Markson began the traditional way on the morning of March 23, 2032. Aiden’s first experience of the world he had entered against his will was a chilly draft, followed by random shouting, a chuckle here and there, some sobbing. A decent enough chap came along to wash the goop off, and then he felt himself floating into the comforting arms (or something or other) of some other thing with a soft voice and a nice smell to it; in fact, it smelled something like the warm viscera he was only moments earlier surrounded by. Aiden started to drift off to sleep after this welcome development, but his reverie was interrupted by a sharp pinprick.

Twenty-eight years later, a much larger and goop-free Aiden Daniel Markson plopped down into a dingy hard plastic booth in a downtown Vietnamese noodle shop. He glanced at the menu, and then stared vacantly past the backwards “B” in the window (the grade from the health department – HIGH SODIUM CONTENT – SHARED RESPONSIBILITY PAYMENTS POSSIBLE and ETHNIC/CULTURAL EXEMPTION being the apparent reasons) at the condensation on the window and the lights of the endless city beyond. The shuffling of feet behind him jerked him back into reality.

“You ready to order?” The waitress managed to combine the alertness of a pen poised over a pad and the worldly disinterest of a Finnish graduate student in architecture into a single set of body language without any effort.

“Oh. Yeah. Pho – veggie – spicy. Water to drink. Thanks.”

The order was dutifully recorded and remanded to the kitchen without further comment. Minutes later, a steaming bowl arrived along with a glass of iced water. Aidan took a spoonful from the bowl. The warmth of the spicy broth radiated inward, along with no small measure of disappointment. What he really wanted was the beef. He knew, though, that salty beef would totally jack with his biometrics, and he couldn't afford the surcharges for the fat and cholesterol on top of all the sodium. Also, beef - when you could find it - was terribly expensive. The fresh vegetables were an extravagance enough in the city, where there was barely any (non-GMO) green to begin with and the sun didn’t shine down here anyhow.

The best way to eat pho is as follows: just as you're about to cram a chopstick-load of noodles or vegetable matter or whatever into your face, form a sort of channel with your tongue that you prefill with spit as a protective film against the scalding-hot water, which only compounds with the spicy burn. This Aiden did, sending another comforting wave of warmth through his body. Aiden guessed that it wouldn't feel so good when the Medicare bill came due at the first of the month, but this was a comfort food kind of a night. No textured-soy-protein and tunnel-mushroom pho was going to cut it.

0001 HIXBOT ADP8144139812-000007C0  
SEARCHING FOR CLOUD…  
0007 PROTOCOL INITIATED  
0008 CHECKING SHIBBOLETH…DONE  
0009 PATIENT: MARKSON, AIDEN DANIEL  
0010 DOB: 58523.6359  
0011 STATUS UPDATE ID=0085746212  
0012 INTAKE: KCAL=400, NA=1.31  
…  
0013 na\_accum = na\_accum + this.na  
0014 msg -> “WARNING SODIUM INTAKE EXCEEDS THRESHOLD (days=91)”  
0015 this.Patient.BP = reportBF(BP); echo “BP 131/85”  
0016 switch {  
case ((sys > 120) && (diast > 80) && (na\_accum > 2.91))  
 this.Patient.prem = this.Patient.prem + surchargeSched.conditionCode(“I10”)  
…}  
0041 msg -> “STG1 HYPERTENSION NOT MANAGED… SHARED RESPONSIBILITY PAYMENT APPLIED”

The heat having faded from the bowl, Aiden slurped down the rest of the delicious broth, put the bill of $51.78 on his card, and hit the streets. The fresh vegetables were extravagance enough, to be sure, but being one of Uncle Sam’s spreadsheet jockeys had its perks. Discounts on the train, a One in a newer housing block that he only had to share with one person (a frequently-stoned freelance writer/Uber driver/data scientist named Chandler), an hour-an-a-half train ride from the office.

Aidan put his earbuds in and waded into the mass of humanity. Everybody either was coming home or going to their second (or third) gig. Aiden worked for the good old U. S. of A. and thus was *really* lucky. At least that’s what he told himself - one of Uncle Sam’s many complex and sometimes contradictory rules, for regulars like Aiden and sometimes even for the contractors, was that thou shalt have no other employer before him. Loyalty to the cause was big with Uncle Sam. That really sucked – some contract gigs might help pay down that massive student debt sometime before he died; it might also get him out of the apartment and in with a new crowd. He was sick to death of hearing Chandler “ideate” out loud through another gadget review. On the other hand, this job paid for more room in this city than most people knew and an occasional shot of moderately fresh vegetables that were grown in actual, relatively unpolluted dirt. It also paid a healthy share of the Medicare premium, still not easy but others had it worse – there was a family of seven holed up in a Two on his wing because Mom had type II diabetes.

Aiden soothed this bitterness by thumbing up a selection of music on his phone. He tapped the line called “CHILL” and streaming into his earbuds was a selection of ambient, arrhythmic music that kind of went with the city around him, all over the place with no discernible beat whatsoever. This was promptly interrupted by two sharp dings, a couple of seconds apart. Text messages. *Crap.*

*Chandler: dude was wndrng if youd read piece about samsung quasar iv b4 submit, dat thangs DANK*

*Brannen Tragen: I need you to come back to the office ASAP.*

Aiden stopped and looked up toward the dark, overcast sky (not that a person could tell day or night anyhow, but it was raining). He was about 30 yards from the train station that would convey him back to his moderately lumpy bed and the loving embrace of Chandler’s editors. He would instead use that train station to schlepp back to the office for God only knows what.

“Come on in, Aiden. Have a seat.”

Aiden sat down in the deliberately-uncomfortable chair in Brannen’s office. Aiden thought often about how he would describe Brannen to his family, or to Chandler. Brannen had, in Aiden’s mind, a punchable face. That said everything that needed to be said, really. The kind of person who makes you laugh when they get zapped in a sensitive area by a little kid with a Wiffle bat in a Youtube video. The kind of person Aiden’s grandpa used to call a “douche.”

Brannen was, of course, impeccably dressed and his hair perfect, despite it being 8:00pm on a Friday night. His hands were folded over each other impeccably, and his pen was placed impeccably next to his pleather notepad thingy. A real corporate jerk would be carrying a tablet computer, but this was the United States Government, leading by example and cutting costs. “I’d like to talk to you a bit about our team’s health goal.”

*NOT FINISHED*

“Very well, then. We’ll proceed. The generator will be at one end of the room. You will be at other end with trigger button. When you are ready, press button. You’ll hear discharge but you shouldn’t feel anything. Bots will lie dead in your bloodstream.” There was something about a pale dude with a dark beard wearing a black suit, a black shirt, and a black silk tie that made the consequences involved in a situation appear much worse.

“All right – let’s do this.”

The Russian handed Aiden a red button wired to a large box in the corner, really a room unto itself, with coils of wire visible all around it, and then beat feet for a small room near the device.

“Dude… seriously. What’re you gonna *do*, man?” Chandler’s empathy seemed even more sincere since his eyes were red from the reefer.

To: Data Analytics Team

From: Tragen, Brannen

Date: March 23, 2060

CC:

Subject: Team Health Goals

Good Morning Team,

I just wanted to remind you that the cutoff for you to share in the responsibility to meet the team’s health goal is next week. Please make sure that you have turned in any supporting documentation and supplemental justifications to accompany your HIXBOT scans before then.

Thank you to all who have helped us meet our first quarter goals!

Regards,

Brannen H. Tragen, Director

Office of Enterprise Data and Analytics

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

United States Department of Health and Human Services

“Oh my God, I don’t know… I’ll never be able to get another job like that! I might not even get a goddam contract again! What am I supposed to do? I stuck my family with all this debt and I’ll never be able to get out of it! Jesus!”

NOT FINISHED

(END) Aiden took a deep breath, lolling his head back and forth, focusing on a mote of light coming from a hole in the rotting warehouse ceiling. He wasn’t really prepared for the whole creeping dread part of this.

Aiden looked down at the button. It looked like an old child’s toy. There were soft pink cracks in the color, like the surface of a slightly-squashed gumball. Two wires ran out of the bottom of it to the LEMP generator at the other end of the room. There were letters on the button. No, a word.

The word was EASY.