

“Hello?”

“Good afternoon, Miss Brooks! This is Evan, and I’m calling from Admetus’ Endurance Insured to wish you a happy holiday season.”

“Ah? Okay, thanks. You too.”

“Now, our records show that you recently made a generous donation to Unicef’s Leaders of the Future Program.”

“Yes?”

“Yes ma’am. We wanted to call to thank you.”

“Well, you’re welcome. Merry Christmas, and all that. You know.”

“Indeed! If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you a few questions about your involvement with Unicef. Is that okay?”

“Yes. Well, alright. Who are you again?”

“Evan. The remainder of this call will be recorded in order to better serve you. First off, Miss Brooks, can you confirm the date you filled out the donation form online?”

“Ah.”

“It’s okay; a guess is fine.”

“Before last weekend.”

“Great, thank you. And Miss Brooks, can I ask what led you to donate?”

“Well, I just felt as though it being the holiday season and all, that it was the right thing to do, you know. So.”

“You have no particular connection to the Leaders of the Future?”

“No, no I guess not.”

“Great, great.”

“One of my cousins works with Unicef, though. Or she used to, when she was in school.”

“Great, great. That would be Eveline, right?”

“Yes, did you work with Eve?”

“Indirectly. Now, Miss Brooks, I have a few more important questions for you!”

“Sure-”

“Have you told other about your contribution, or asked others to match your donation?”

“Oh, no. I never thought to.”

“Independent, great. And were you pleased with the service you received?”

“Yeah, yes. Actually, what do you mean?”

“How has donating affected you, personally?”

“Oh, well, it feels good. Doing the right thing and all that.”

“Yes, yes. And.”

“And, you know, I’m glad that I helped.”

“Do you know who directly received your donation?”

“Well, I take it the organization, right? Unicef did. Whoever they have that handles that kind of thing.”

“Of course! And is there anything else you’d like to say specifically about the Leaders of the Future initiative? What led you to donate to it?”

“Well, like I said, Eve worked for Unicef, so I guess they’ve been in my head for some time.”

“Yes.”

“And, well, I knew they were a good one.”

“Right, of course, Miss Brooks. You felt that the amount was manageable?”

“Sure, yes.”

“Are you planning on donating again?”

“Oh, well-”

“It is okay ma’am, remember, you’ve already done your good deed for the holiday season!”

“Hah, yes. Well, to tell you the truth, no, I thought like you there, that was about all I could manage right now. But I’m glad I did it, you know.”

“Great, yes ma’am, Miss Brooks. Have you ever given blood?”

“Yes, multiple times.”

“And can I ask if you are an organ donor?”

“I am.”

“Would you be willing to give your life for someone else’s?”

The conversation paused for a beat, two, and then three. Finally, Miss Brooks spoke: “What?”

“I know the proposition is a little unexpected, yes, maybe surprising, so take some time to think. We want to know more about giving for quality assurance purposes, to better serve donors and altruists like yourself. Just think, if we told you that you could make a kind of trade?”

“Well.”

“Yes ma’am?”

“Well, you know. I guess it depends.”

“Yes, of course, it depends. On what?”

“Oh, you know, they’ve got to be really good. They’ve got to deserve it.”

“Right, of course. What do you think could make someone deserve it?”

“Hah, well, I’d have to say, someone, very – ethical. You know, morally uplifting and a community leader.”

“Yes ma’am. What about the president?”

“The president? Yeah, well, I’m not exactly the secret service, am I?”

“Indeed! I think I see what you mean now. What about someone more in your community, Governor Brown?”

“Hah, not likely.”

“Right! Not likely.”

“Now don’t hold that against me, you know. You’re not a McCarthy type, are you?”

“Oh no no, no ma’am. Don’t you worry.”

“Mhm. Good.”

“What if we took, for example, your cousin Eveline?”

“What, Eve?”

“Just for an example, Jennifer.”

“I don’t get it. She isn’t really, you know, important.”

“Well, suppose, just because we both know her, we think of her as an example. Just let me hear your reasoning?”

“Seems a bit crazy.”

“It does, Jennifer, I know!”

“But sure, I mean, Eveline and I are family-”

“Yes?”

“She moved to the east coast a few years ago, when she got married, and we haven’t really spoken since, but to be honest you know we didn’t speak that much when she was here.

We had been close, I think—I think after her mom passed, I think I was a little confused—like I didn't know quite how to talk to her because of that. That's why she joined Unicef, then the Peace Corps, then some others, I really forget. I guess that's one way you know a person, how they deal with grief I mean. She wanted to make the world a better place. She's gentle, you know. And she just had a little kid a couple years back. So, you know, it'd be like trading for two? Now, just so you know, I'm happy myself, so, right, no one's perfect, but I don't think I'm worse than her, you know. It just, well, sure, I'd give up my life for Eveline. It seems like the right thing to do."

The door knocked, the phone cut off, and Jennifer Brooks stood up too quickly to stop her laptop from falling to the ground. She cursed as she picked it up, and quickly began to laugh at herself.

"Coming, coming!" she said as the knock strengthened. Were there any carolers last year? She couldn't remember. She remembered caroling as an undergrad, when she and her sisters and dates would drink and sing in front of the freshman dormitories—but those weren't exactly religious songs.

A final series of knocks, much louder than the previous two, stopped her memories. These must be serious carolers.

"Yes?"

Two men stood at the door, grinning. The one on the right stared past her into her home. She could only think to describe his face as scrunched, like a play-doh head that a child had squeezed to small, and the hat on top looked silly on him. The other man, the one on the left, nodded his head slightly and held out his hand to shake. He had dark skin but very light, almost white, hair.

"Hello, Miss Brooks," said the second man.

Jennifer liked him immediately. She always felt as though her gut was a finely tuned machine when it came to judging people at first impressions, a skill that came in handy whenever her friends asked her about their new boyfriends. She could tell that his man was trustworthy already. She reached out her hand to his and felt his fingers tighten, and his other hand grab her forearm.

"You'll be coming with us," he said as his hand jerked her out the door.

"Excuse me?"

"If you could just follow me, we won't get the authorities involved." The other man was behind her, guiding her by the shoulder.

Her gut had known to be wrong about people on occasion.

"I don't understand. What did I do?"

"There won't be any trouble if you could just get into the car. Okay, good, watch your head." She shook her head as the engine started and again when they began driving.

"Now," she began, and she clenched her hand on her knee, "now wait just a minute."

The man who had grabbed her hand before turned around in the passenger seat. She saw the cross necklace he wore and convinced herself it was another reason not to be worried. Of course, she didn't believe in religion, but he was probably more trustworthy because he did.

"Don't worry, Miss Brooks. We're just escorting you to the office to help you get situated." He grinned at her and started nodding, and instead of protesting she let him continue. "We understand that sometimes it can be disorienting, so we decided to come here personally to make sure you feel at home. We used to just send a note to new employees with all the details, but we've found that it really makes someone feel like a valued community member from the

get-go if we swing by to pick you guys up! Now, we know you've probably got a few," he laughed, "a lot of *questions* for us, but we promise that we'll make things clear once we get there."

She shook her head again, and again, and mumbled a thank you. He told her she was welcome as he turned back around and buckled his seat belt. What he said made sense, or at least, he was right that she was disoriented. She did have a lot of questions—*questions*, like he said. But, he sounded just like her favorite morning radio show. She sighed and felt herself getting angry at her own confusion. She should have known what was going on around her.

They looked comfortable in the front and began joking and laughing with each other. This was something they did often, she could tell, and they were doing it to help her, but she still felt angry. She thought it would be too embarrassing to ask why they took her from her home, or where they were going, or for that matter who employed her. She knew that she should be able to remember these kind of things and that she had no right to be angry at the two in the front, just doing their job. The driver was singing and the other man humming along. She recognized the tune, but couldn't remember how it went exactly or where she had heard it before. Her face was turning red, she could feel it, and she was for some reason very worried that they, who looked like they were enjoying themselves a great deal, would see how embarrassed she was getting for not understanding what was going on, and it could spoil their mood, so she smoothed out the wrinkles on her shirt sleeves and looked out the window, trying her hardest to remember if she had signed up for something like this and forgotten.

She watched out the window as the suburban trees gave way to highway signs and then again to the rising walls of the city, the raised walkways and reflective windows of the dominating office buildings. They drove through the city that had become hers these past twelve years, and she enjoyed being taken for a ride. When was the last time, she tried to remember, that someone else had driven her to work? It was a luxury, and she began to smile for it. Her anxiety seemed silly, and she giggled at herself. The passenger turned to smile at her.

The car pulled into a parking garage underneath one of the skyscrapers, and they descended, passing rows of cars and bikes, into the darkness then artificial lights of the concrete substructure. Saturday's seemed to be a workday for most of the building if she could judge by how full the lot was. The floors were lettered instead of numbered, but it wasn't the alphabet Jennifer expected. Her sorority days popped back into her mind as they moved down through level alpha... beta... gamma... They found a parking place on theta and the driver jumped out of the car to open Jennifer's door for her.

It was the passenger who spoke again: "It's exciting, isn't it? If you can follow us, we'll be going on up and you can start meeting everyone."

Jennifer said nothing as she got in the elevator. The walls reflected the group into infinity in every direction, making a constellation out of the buttons as they lit up on the panel. It struck her for the first time that neither of the men had introduced themselves to her, but both seemed to know her name. She turned to the passenger, the one who had been speaking with her.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I forgot your name." The two looked at each other and smiled.

"First thing, Miss Brooks, you are too polite. I don't think that you've forgotten; we just didn't bother to introduce ourselves. To be completely honest with you, I think my name's changed so many times that I've forgotten it myself. Everyone around here calls me Ed, but it doesn't much matter to me. Now you don't cause any trouble."

He led Jennifer out of the elevator and indicated a bench at the end of the hallway, then turned around and rode off. She took it that meant she ought to sit, but without Ed's company she

began to feel uneasy. That was it? They just had left her. She took a step forward and heard her heel hit the polished floor. Her eyes followed the echo as it reverberated down the hallway. Machines, she guessed air conditioners, buzzed behind the walls or underneath her, and she shivered. She looked to the hallway in front, where Ed had indicated she move.

Maybe thirty yards ahead, a door opened.

“Miss Brooks? Please come in.” His voice bounced down the hallway with the same reverb as her shoe had, and she smiled at the echoes as she scurried to him.

She walked into the office and wanted to leave immediately. Stacks of binders piled almost to her waist seemed to grow out of the floor at random, intertwined with loose papers and the wires—wires so knotted they turned into a spider’s web that she was walking into. Some seemed to simply come through one wall and go out the other without being plugged into anything, and more emanated from the computer on the desk than she could even count. She traced a chord from a printer to a cluster of... pencil sharpeners? Back toward what looked like a small speaker, then under the desk in the center of the room and toward the curtain on the back wall that blocked any natural light from coming in, until the wire just disappeared into the floor. Cables hung from the ceiling, some dangled off of the desk, and more still were duct taped to each other in bundles and to any surface they were near. She stepped over and through the tangle to the chair he indicated across from his desk where he sat down. He immediately stood back up again. The man bothered her more than the room. His wire glasses magnified his eyes so much that he looked like a cartoon, and his pressed suit seemed out of place in the office room.

“Well, Miss Brooks, it is my job to deliver the so-called spiel. Do you know where you are?”

Jennifer shook her head, and he nodded, walking towards the door behind her.

“Right. Well. First thing’s first, Miss Brooks. You can call me Ferris. We are in one of the hubs of Admetus’ Endurance Insured, which I’ll assume you’ve at least heard of.”

“The man that questioned me on the phone.”

“Yes, he was one of our employees. You have a sharp memory, Miss Brooks. I hope that you remember your conversation with Evan well and that you were listening carefully, because he’s absolutely one of our best. Now, if you recall you made an agreement with us.”

“Excuse me?”

“An agreement. He offered, and you gave your verbal consent.”

“I’m not sure I quite remember.”

“Sure, sure, that’s perfectly understandable. Well, Miss Brooks, you agreed to give up your life to us. Basically. And we intend to take it. In fact, we already have, more or less.”

They were both silent for almost a minute.

“What,” she began, “I mean,” she almost smiled, “now, what the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s always difficult to gauge how you people will receive this. The basic fact of the matter is that you gave verbal consent to forfeit your life to our company, and we certainly intend to capitalize on that opportunity. We’ve recorded the entire call, so there’s really no use protesting.”

“I never signed anything.”

“You didn’t need to, believe it or not. We have some very good lawyers and your recorded voice that will argue for us in this case.”

“I’m not just going to work here because of some offhand remark I made on the phone, you know. That’s it? You want to make me some kind of slave? Not likely.”

“Well, you don’t quite have it. In fact, Miss Brooks, you are free to leave anytime that you’d like, but I’d strongly advise against it. See, we are probably going to help you more than you realize.”

“Ha. Great. I’ll assume,” she said, “simply for sanity’s sake, you know, that this is some sort of reality show? You don’t expect me to believe that you own me or something.”

“Well no, we don’t own you. Just try and listen-”

“Ha, no. No. No, I won’t just listen. How about you try and talk sense, you know? I don’t know who you are, and I don’t think I really care, but you need to tell me what is going on here. You people kidnapped me, didn’t you?”

“There’s no need to be alarmed, Miss Brooks. I assure you that you are free to leave at any time, and we certainly did not kidnap you. Ed picked you up and escorted you here without protest, if I am not mistaken. They even tell me that you sang along with them on the car ride. And besides, you’ve made an agreement with us—you must remember—your life is ours.”

“I don’t believe you. This is some kind of game.”

“Listen, Miss Brooks. You don’t have to believe us; it’s really all the same to me. To be honest, you’ll be just as dead regardless of what you do. But I’d counsel you to stay. Perhaps this will make more sense if I tell you a story.”

“What? You’re crazy. That’s it. You’re fucking crazy, huh?” She tried to push her chair backwards to stand, but the leg got caught on a bundle of wires and she toppled over. Ferris looked at her like a child who would not admit she had done wrong. From the ground, she repeated herself and struggled to stand up, but her hand got caught under one of his wires and she was yanked down again. Ferris had by that point righted her chair and was offering her a hand. She allowed him to pull her up and yelled into his face, “You are joking me, right? Or are you, actually, a, fucking lunatic?”

“It is not my job to listen to your abuse, Miss Brooks. It’s my job to explain what is happening and help you to cope. Now if you’ll be quiet, I can do my job. If not, you can leave and die. I think I can make things much clearer for you. Let me speak. I’m going to tell you a story.

Jennifer frowned.

“First off, I take it you don’t know much about ancient mythology?”

No response.

“Well, Miss Brooks, there’s an old story about a man named Admetus. Do you know it? He was one of Jason’s men; I assume you at least know the tales of the Argonauts?”

She sat down.

“Well, Admetus, after he was done with the fleece business, returned home to Thessaly and lived as a young prince. He was admired by lovers of virtue for his hospitality and athletic ability, not to mention his looks. His fame meant that he could choose any woman in all of Greece for a wife. He invited the finest noblewomen of all Hellas to feast with him, but met none his equal. Admetus decided then that to find a wife and continue his father’s line, he had to search the world. He traveled to the land of the Phoenicians, to the old walls of Troy, and so far through Asia that men marveled at the whiteness of his skin. For seven years he wandered, all for seven years of disappointment.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Please, Miss Brooks. This will make sense, I assure you. Try to stay quiet. Now, Admetus returned home knowing that he was destined to live the rest of his days alone. He told his father Pheres of his troubles, and the old man perked up in listening. ‘My son,’ Pheres spoke,

‘my beloved and only Admetus! If only you’d have come to me before traveling! Here I thought you only sought to see the world, to explore and experience. Why, I’ve heard tell of just the woman that you need, my son. Her name is Alcestis, and she is as beautiful as the goddesses of Olympus. You must gather a crew, your best men, and sail to the land of the Ethiopians. Ask for Alcestis and no one will lead you astray, but do not expect her father to part with her easily!’”

“You’re a fucking loon. It’s as easy as that, huh? Now you listen to me, I don’t care how your company got its stupid name, and I don’t care about your stories. Tell me why you brought me here and what the hell is going on.”

“I promise you,” Ferris responded, “there is much more at stake than a name, and you certainly should care about stories. They run your life, you know.” He reminded Jennifer of some professor she had hated. Not really any particular one, just one that she really despised.

“Now, to summarize, because I see your patience wearing thin—and you really must read the story when you get a chance—Admetus accomplished every labor that Alcestis’ dad could think of to win the daughter. There was a great feast and friends from all over the world came to celebrate the wedding, and it was in all a very happy day for everyone involved. Now, if I were telling you the children’s version of the story, it would end there. But, Miss Brooks, because you are no child, I am obliged to continue.”

Jennifer butted it, “you’re really not going to stop? You’re serious?”

He ignored her. “You see, Miss Brooks, Admetus was cursed, or blessed some would say, by the love of a goddess. Aphrodite, with whom I’m sure you are familiar, had watched Admetus his entire life, but had promised Zeus she would never interfere with him. That story is longer and more complex than I have the time, or you the patience, to go into. To simplify, Aphrodite could do nothing but love Admetus from afar, and she was happy doing so until the man took a bride. Jealousy drove her to act.

“So, angry Aphrodite plotted and schemed. She could not steal Admetus, but she could interfere in Alcestis’ life. After nightfall, the goddess revealed herself to Alcestis in a dream, lamenting and sobbing the fate of mortals. Even in her sleep Alcestis was pure and good and begged to help the apparition, to find out what was wrong.

“Finally Aphrodite spoke: ‘Curse the Fates’ cruel hands! Curse those who wove such a short life for one so sweet, when in his prime he will be cut down! Don’t they know how well he is loved? Oh Admetus, how I mourn for you from above!’ And Alcestis was moved by the speech. Already she was on her knees to comfort the goddess, to no avail. She spoke words as only the kindest mother or sister could, but the cruel goddess only hardened her resolve.

“‘Your thread, poor Admetus, will soon be cut! And you, gone from the world of the mortals, taken by cruel Hades under the earth and away from those who love you best. The only way to save you... oh unthinkable!’

“And Alcestis could not but ask the goddess, ‘How? Tell me the unthinkable! How can I save my love? I can do the unfathomable for this alone! There is none more dear to me than Admetus, best of all the suitors and greatest of the Greeks. To steal him from me now, out of our wedding bed! It’s too much!’”

It all sounded familiar. An outline of the story was coming back to Jennifer. She leaned forward in her chair and felt her stomach turning. She knew what came next and she did not want to hear it.

“Aphrodite responded, ‘Oh gracious Alcestis, worthy among mortals for fame! Apollo, acquaintance of the Fates, has spoken that Admetus’ life can be saved, but at the greatest cost. His life saved if yours is forfeit!’ And Alcestis awoke, soaked to the bone with sweat and shaken

beyond her core by the goddess' words. She left her lover's bed and called upon her handmaiden, to whom she told all. The woman begged her master not to do anything drastic, but by the time dawn had arisen, Alcestis had run a dagger through her heart to save her love."

Ferris paused to look at Jennifer. "Now, Miss Brooks, to explain how this matters to you."

She was shaking her head subconsciously, fingering the coffee cup she held and breathing quickly.

"As it turned out, Apollo was not very happy that Aphrodite used his name in her schemes, and he was rather partial towards Admetus. He in fact did strike up a deal with the fates: because Alcestis had given her life prematurely, Admetus' was extended by her remaining time on earth. Of course, his life for years after was nothing but mourning. He left his home again to wander the earth but grew jaded, believing in nothing and desiring nothing. Apollo took pity upon the man and explained to him what had happened—a revelation that sent him further towards madness in despair.

"But eventually, our leader came to his senses. Alcestis was gone, yes but he was not. He could not summon Apollo to ask about the limit of his agreement with the fates, but he could test them himself. It started with his closest friends. He asked them what they had to live for and if they truly loved him before asking that fatal question: would you die for me? Being so well loved by so many, he quickly accrued the lifetimes more men than many ever come to know. Without his beloved, life meant almost nothing. Elongating his own became a kind of game and obsession. Those he tricked were only means to an end to him. For centuries he wandered, a hermit and a vagabond, occasionally growing some great fortune and watching it dwindle; raising families one day only to watch them all die around him the next. None of the gods could interfere because his life was being extended by the Fates—an older, more powerful force."

"So..." started Jennifer, "so what? What are you trying to tell me?"

"Well, Admetus figured out how to live forever by tricking others into giving up their lives."

"No, hah, no" said Jennifer. "Wait a minute. You aren't trying to tell me that this same man has been living for 2,000 years? Are you? Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"Oh no, Miss Brooks. He's lived for about 3,000 years, actually. You see, it took a few centuries of exploration before he learned the exact limitations to his gift, but—"

"Oh yeah? Well if I gave away my life, why am I still here? Explain that to me."

"I was getting to that, Miss Brooks. Admetus did figure out how his gift could be extended to others. He even learned that with help, he could pool together the remaining lives of many people and extend them to those that he choose. Do you understand? Don't you remember, Miss Brooks, that you did not give your life to Admetus, but to your cousin Eveline? When I said that you promised us your life, I was slightly oversimplifying. Really, you gave your life to Eveline, who had already given hers to us via someone else. Your remaining years were added to a pool, just as hers were, and you are currently living off the life-force contained in that pool, from millions of our donors around the world. As I said, Miss Brooks, you are free to leave anytime you like, but if you leave, we simply cut off your access to our pool, and, well. There's the end of Miss Jennifer Brooks."

"And... If I stay?"

"Well, at first of course, you'll work in the call center for a few years, or perhaps in one of our new online developments. Either way, your job will be the same. We need more lives, Miss Brooks, and we need more people to agree to join us. For every year you add to our pool,

you earn a week's extension to your own life. There are no limits, and you can opt out anytime you choose. Those rates will rise, if you do well here. If you do poorly, well, I'll just say that you won't do poorly for very long. But that is almost never a problem. In fact, most employees end up really enjoying their job. You must think of it as a sort of game of cat and mouse, only the stakes are your life. Every conversation is really life and death. Do you understand me? It is your choice to make: your life, or a stranger's."

"You're insane. This is insane."

"Yes ma'am, Miss Brooks. I really can't argue with that."

Neither spoke for a minute. Ferris tapped his small finger on his desk.

"Do I... You know," Jennifer whispered, "do I have to make my decision now?"

"Yes ma'am, Miss Brooks. Now."