

# The Frayed String On The Stretched Forefinger Of Time

by Lloyd Biggie, Jr.

*Here's a delightful blending of science fiction and mystery writing: a story about a future where murderers are stopped by the police before they commit their crimes, and of one potential murderer who poses a problem no one had foreseen. As science provides new ways of lengthening life, so does it offer new ways of ending it: sic transit in excelsis.*

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

Inspector-Commander J. Harwell Graham sat at the center of his complex police web like a massive, bespectacled spider, alertly poised for frenzied action at the faintest electronic quiver—but Graham's actions were mental, and he *thought* his prey into entangling cocoons fashioned of their own intended misdeeds. The inspector-commander was a brain that plugged itself into the world during duty hours, and then, because he found defiance of the law in all men, withdrew defeated.

He finished his afternoon dictation with an intimidating glance at the clock. The dictowriter spat the final memorandum onto his desk. Graham scrutinized it, signed his name, fed it back to the machine for copying and distribution.

"Ten minutes to tour's end," he informed the box. "Let's see what Pre-Murder has picked up."

"Ready to roll, sir," his secretary answered immediately.

Graham thumbed a control, settled himself comfortably against yielding pneumatic contours, and watched the day's accumulation of Pre-Murder information flash across the wall screen.

Newly appointed Assistant Inspector-Commander Roger Proller gaped at it. It was his second day on the job, and already he was stripped of illusions. The inspector-commander suspected that Higher Authority appointed assistants in the hope that one would prove capable of snatching his job. He treated them brutally and used up four a year, and for the wrong reason. Higher Authority considered the inspector-commander irreplaceable. The assistants were told frankly: Guard him, save his energy whenever possible, and preserve him from failure at all cost because failure could destroy him.

Words and numbers flicked past so rapidly that Proller could only snatch at disconnected phrases:... will lunch in London tomorrow with... Case 2936 no report... her order for seventeen... case 3162... failed to attend... activity routine... no report... Case 3299... will not return until... The inspector-commander, who not only read this minutiae but also memorized it and filed it away in his labyrinthine brain, would, as soon as the run was completed, mercilessly examine Proller's memory and find it wanting.

A red star flashed into view, and the blurred procession of words slowed to a halt. Clingman, Walter, Case PM 3497. Placed order for two dozen mannequins. Doctor Stilter again recommends closing file.

Proller consulted his notebook. Pre-Murder suspects were always odd, but this one seemed spectacularly so. He had invested a small fortune in plastic, life-sized images of a business rival, and he arranged them in various postures about his estate and each evening strolled around throwing knives at them. The doctors thought this a healthy purge of murderous impulses. The inspector-commander had a hunch that Clingman wasn't purging himself of anything; he was just having target practice.

"Clingman, Walter, Case PM 3497," Graham's voice rasped. "Medical recommendation declined. Continue surveillance."

Words and numbers flickered again, picked up speed... 3545 action routine... discharged three employees... Case 3601... visited law agent... returned yesterday's purchases...

Another red star, Stamitz, Christopher. Case PM 3742. Felix Manellow called at suspect's office at 14:36 this date. Left at 15:10. Immediately apprehended for questioning, claimed his visit concerned a private business matter, refused further comment.

Graham snarled at the box. "Sergeant Ryan! Immediately!"

Ryan appeared *almost* immediately. He had dived into the nulgrav shaft, and he floated into view head first. Graham kept his eyes on the screen while Ryan righted himself and came to a salute.

"Sit down, Ryan. So Stamitz has acquired a hand weapon."

"It's possible, sir. They should have searched Manellow *before* he saw Stamitz, but neither of the men on duty recognized him until he was leaving."

Graham gestured impatiently. "Manellow hasn't delivered a weapon personally for years. He learned not to the hard way. How much money did he have?"

"One one hundred, three fifteens, and a seven. Two and a half in small change. He couldn't have collected more than a token down payment."

"Or a token last payment." Graham turned to the box. "I want a financial survey on Christopher Stamitz, PM 3742. Specifically, I want to know if he's been diverting money to an illegal account. He'll have been planning this for at least five years." He leaned back and fixed his gaze on Ryan. "Fifteen-ten. Stamitz has the weapon by now."

"The men are being very alert, sir."

"Correction. He has access to the weapon by now. Neither Manellow nor Stamitz are fools. The weapon will have been left at the place agreed upon. That constitutes delivery." Graham meditated for a moment, brow furrowed, plump fingers tapping his desk. "I'm a bit disappointed in Stamitz," he announced. "He's a scientific genius and the most brilliant Pre-Murder suspect we've ever had. I never suspected that he'd resort to a clumsy hand weapon." He pivoted toward Ryan. "Has Bryling been notified?"

"Yes, sir. He was offered full-time protection. He refused, of course. Made a joke of it. Not afraid of Stamitz, hand weapon or no. The usual."

"But he has his protection anyway? Good. Excuse me while I finish the Pre-Murder run."

When the screen finally darkened, Graham tilted to a half recline, eyes closed, and a moment later he pushed himself to his feet. "I'll have to see Stamitz. It may be premature, but I have no choice."

Proller bounded forward anxiously. "Couldn't I do it, sir?"

The inspector-commander thought this unworthy of comment. He said, "Come along. Both of you."

It was a street of old, old buildings of real brick, and odd, esoteric businesses: a furrier who brashly asserted that the trimmings on the garments he sold came "direct from the animal to you"; a natural food firm that claimed to have real coffee and sugar in stock, which puzzled Proller less than the implication that someone might want them; an old-fashioned medical doctor whose faded M.D. sign creaked in the slight breeze beside that of the inevitable apothecary who sold the concoctions the doctor foisted onto his unsuspecting patients; two antique shops, one catering to a clientele that had nostalgic yearnings for

articles fashioned of plastic. None of the buildings had roof parking, and they had to walk from the nearest public arena. Graham set a waddling pace that belied his weight and age, and Proller, perspiring, watched him with concern.

Stamitz's business was as shabby and as esoteric as the others, but it looked to the future rather than the past. Sus-an, the sign read, and it was Stamitz's fumbling attempt to compete with John Bryling's plush studio that displayed its multifaceted facade in the next commercial ward, life suspension unlimited. Sus-an's display window contained only a few dusty pamphlets, but Graham paused to study them. Proller wondered if his chief was uncertain of how to proceed. An interview was the most touchy part of a Pre-Murder investigation. Handled properly and with correct timing, nine out of ten Pre-Murderers were jolted back to normality. Handled ineptly, months of solid police work could be ruined.

A buzzer sounded when Graham opened the door and cut off when Ryan closed it behind them. Stamitz sat at a desk in one corner of the room—a small, untidy, sad-looking person with too much hair on his head and not enough on his face. Few would accord him a second glance, many would overlook him entirely, but Graham had called him brilliant. Proller studied him curiously, wondering if this withered remembrance of a man was indeed capable of secreting his own web and watching it with the invincible patience of genius.

He scrambled to his feet and offered his hands, which Graham touched perfunctorily. "Christopher Stamitz," Stamitz said softly.

Graham quickly pronounced introductions and placed his credentials on the desk. Stamitz blinked at them and then regarded Graham with eyebrows arched innocently. "Really? Has one of your suspects popped himself into suspension?"

Graham scowled at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"Please sit down," Stamitz said apologetically and dropped into his own chair. Graham and Proller occupied the two worn visitor's chairs; Sergeant Ryan was left standing. The only other item of furniture was a low table carelessly stacked with the same pamphlets they'd seen in the window.

"I've wondered about it," Stamitz went on. "Man commits a crime, puts himself into suspension until the statute of limitations expires. The way the present law is drawn, there's nothing that could be done. A legal suspension can't be cut short except for medical reasons, and in the single instance where a medical problem did develop, the suspendee was already dead. I take every reasonable precaution, but I have neither the time nor the money to properly investigate my customers. On the other hand, since suspension requires the presence of two medical technicians, an application certified by a registered law agent, and approval by a district justice, most criminals might think it a risky venture."

"The justice normally orders a police investigation before approving an application," Graham said. "That's not my problem, though. I head the Pre-Detection Squad."

"Ah! You work on crimes before they're committed. Yes, I suppose it would be possible for someone to make all the arrangements for a suspension and then commit a crime on his way to the lab. He might be under before anyone knew there'd been a crime."

"Interesting idea," Graham murmured. "I'll look into it. Specifically, I'm investigating the pre-murder of John Bryling."

"Bryling? Bryling has been—"

"Not 'has been.' Is going to be. Naturally I intend to stop it."

"Naturally," Stamitz echoed, "but I don't understand—"

“Of course you do.” Graham passed around his pack of smoke capsules, popped one into his own mouth, bit the seal, and puffed deeply. Stamitz blew a slender thread of smoke at the ceiling and turned an innocent gaze on Graham.

“I’m sympathetic,” Graham said. “Morally, Bryling is a monster, but he’s a law-abiding monster. He stole your company and your scientific processes, maneuvered you into bankruptcy, got you fined and imprisoned for doing private research on the processes you developed yourself, ruined your family in ways too obnoxious to mention—and he did all of that without breaking a single law. Now you have to lease the processes he stole from you in order to operate this scruffy enterprise, and lately he’s been indulging in price cutting in an attempt to ruin you again. I haven’t been able to figure out why. Have you?”

Stamitz smiled wistfully. “I think he’s afraid of me—afraid I’ll devise some scientific sleight-of-hand that will let me do unto him something of what he’s done unto me.” He smiled again. “I believe in a Higher Justice, Inspector-Commander. That’s the only reason I’ve survived.”

Graham said dryly, “In spite of its many conspicuous failures, the only justice I have faith in is that defined by law. I have to protect Bryling, and by extension I have to prevent you from ruining what remains of your life. Are you willing to submit to hypnotic analysis?”

Stamitz blurted bewilderedly, “But why?”

“To expose the details of your plot against John Bryling.”

Stamitz chuckled. “If I have a plot against Bryling, it’s buried so deeply that I know nothing about it. I’d be as interested as you in finding out what it is. Of course I’ll submit to your hypnotic analysis.”

“When?”

Stamitz shrugged. “At your convenience. No, let’s say at our mutual convenience. I can’t afford to neglect the little business that I have.”

“Tomorrow afternoon?”

Stamitz opened an appointment book and held it up to show a blank page. “Any time tomorrow.”

“How about this evening?”

Stamitz turned a page. “I have two suspensions scheduled. My biggest day in months. But any time tomorrow—”

Graham scribbled on a card and handed it to him. “My office in Police Central. I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

As they left the building and turned toward the arena, Proller observed, “He seems cooperative enough.”

“He’ll be cooperative enough *tomorrow*,” Graham rasped savagely. “That was what I had to find out. He’ll be cooperative tomorrow because he intends to murder Bryling tonight.”

Higher Authority, more commonly known as Commissioner Eustace Jevan, glared at Proller and said testily, “If the inspector-commander says Stamitz is plotting murder, then you can take it that Stamitz is plotting murder.”

“It seems so incredible,” Proller protested. “Who can say why Manellow went to see Stamitz?”

Maybe he was getting an estimate on a suspension. The inspector-commander didn't even bother to ask Stamitz about that."

"In all of his long tenure, this jurisdiction has never had a premeditated murder," Higher Authority said coldly. "He intends to make certain that this case is no exception, and you make certain that he succeeds."

The private lake was ringed with tinted lights, their reflections rippling halos in the choppy water. The underground mansion's terrace was a square blotch of light on the dark expanse of forest. A police patrol guided Proller to a landing near the command van, which was parked in a small clearing.

The unit captain greeted Proller sourly. "Do *you* know what's going on?"

"Inspector-Commander Graham is preventing a murder."

"*He's* preventing a murder! Then what are *we* doing out in this wilderness?"

"Bryling is going to be murdered by a suspended animation expert named Stamitz," Proller said. "At this moment Stamitz is at his place of business in the central city, along with two medical technicians, a law agent, and a deputized clerk of the district justice. Stamitz is preparing two clients for suspension. Bryling, as you know, is at home entertaining friends. Neither of them will be going anywhere soon, but Stamitz has a hand weapon and could be plotting a proxy crime. Your job is to make certain that *no one* comes near Bryling tonight."

"Including his guests, I suppose," the captain said bitterly. "If I had four times as many men, I could do a sort of job—maybe. Headquarters made the assignment on the standard meters-per-man formula, and headquarters has never heard of trees. I'm using every man I have; they'll have to spend the night out there without relief, and when I spaced them along Bryling's fence, they were so far apart that anyone with an infra detector could have walked right between them. The undergrowth is so thick that a man can see about as far as he can reach. I just ordered the men up to the clearing around the house, which means that they're trespassing, and Bryling will have all of us in court tomorrow. It's impossible to walk through that mess quietly, and every third step one of my men trips and falls with a crash, and Bryling and his guests jump up and spill their drinks. I'm surprised he hasn't called the police."

"The object is to have him alive tomorrow—in or out of court. What is it?"

"The inspector-commander wants to talk with you."

Graham's voice snapped at Proller. "Come on in. I've just canceled the watch on Bryling's estate."

"But why?"

"Aren't you fools in communication with the men on watch? Bryling took off in his private craft five minutes ago. He's headed for the central city. Stamitz placed a call to him, and Bryling left immediately, which is what we've been expecting. He's going to see Stamitz."

"Why did you expect that?"

"Because Stamitz was so smugly confident. He knew we could easily keep him away from Bryling, but he also knew there'd be no possible way for us to keep Bryling away from him if Bryling wanted to meet him. Obviously he was certain he had a way to make Bryling want to meet him."

"What did he say to him?"

"We'll never know. Bryling's viewer is equipped with a classified scrambler, and Stamitz is evidently

using one he built himself. The lab won't even try to decode it."

"Then there's nothing more to be done here?"

"No," Graham said. "Come on in. If Bryling can leave Stamitz's office alive, he won't need protection at home."

The old buildings seemed curiously shapeless at night. Only Stamitz's establishment was lighted; the closest reflector was a mile away, and the half moon, when the clouds did not cover it, provided almost as much light.

Proller crouched in the doorway of the furrier, watching Stamitz's windows and wishing Graham would hurry. The inspector-commander had gone looking for a justice from whom he might be able to coax a preventive-arrest order. He had nothing to offer in evidence except his own insights, and the prospect was not promising.

Bryling had arrived long before Proller, and he was followed shortly by a man whom the watch detail identified as his law agent. There was now a conference in progress in Stamitz's office: Bryling, Bryling's law agent, the two medical technicians Stamitz had hired for his other cases, Stamitz's law agent, and the justice clerk were engaged in a long and apparently complicated discussion. Stamitz seemed to be playing no part in it, and when it finally concluded, with much flourishing and endorsing of papers, none of the papers were passed to him.

Stamitz waited, politely patient, until Bryling's law agent had ceremoniously folded the papers and tucked them into his folio. Then he produced his own stack of papers and the two law agents began to scrutinize them.

Two dim figures waddled along the shadowed street: Inspector-Commander Graham and a portly, petulant justice. "Justice Klinger," Graham said, performing introductions. "He wants to see the evidence himself before he issues an order."

Proller described what he had witnessed. The justice snorted. "Sounds as if Bryling is taking a suspension. Naturally there'd be a lot of papers—when a multimillionaire undergoes suspension, there are multitudinous contingencies to be provided for."

"With a competitor?" Graham demanded. "With his worst enemy?"

Even in the shadows the justice's massive shrug was visible. "Stamitz is the acknowledged authority, and a man of his professional stature is not likely to let personal considerations affect his work."

"In ordinary relationships, perhaps not," Graham agreed, "but when you ruin a man, common sense should tell you not to entrust your life to him."

"The law is not conceived as an instrument to force a man to act with common sense," the justice said dryly. "Let's go in."

They walked in on an array of blank faces that quickly sorted into contrasting expressions: irritation for the specialists, fury for Bryling, and mild amusement for Stamitz. Proller muttered to Graham, "He expected this."

Graham nodded.

Stamitz said mildly, "Our appointment is for tomorrow afternoon, sir."

"That was based on the assumption that Bryling would be alive tomorrow afternoon," Graham growled.

Bryling flushed and said angrily, "I told your men earlier today—when I want the police meddling in my affairs, I'll ask for them."

Justice Klinger waved for silence. "The inspector-commander has made a grave charge," he announced. "He wants a preventive-arrest order issued for Christopher Stamitz, attested reason being the protection of the life of John Bryling. Are you here of your own free choice, Mr. Bryling?"

"Certainly."

"Do you consider that your life is in danger?"

"Certainly not!"

"The assumption is that you're here to undergo suspension. For what term?"

"The maximum. Five hundred years."

"I now ask the witnesses: Is it your opinion that John Bryling is at this place and pursuing this action of his own freewill?"

They nodded gravely and answered in chorus. "Yes."

The justice fixed the clerk in a stern gaze. "Are you prepared to certify that the subject's action is both legal and voluntary?"

"I have already done so."

The justice turned to Graham. "One of the witnesses is his own law agent. You may examine."

"When did you make this voluntary decision?" Graham asked Bryling.

"I've been considering it for years. Everyone connected with our profession does."

"You didn't answer my question. When did you finally decide?"

"This evening."

"This evening, in the middle of a party at which you were the host, you suddenly decided to take a suspension, and you contacted your business rival—"

"He contacted me. He said he was processing two cases; he had the necessary witnesses on hand and could do three as easily as two, and he reminded me that I'd told him long ago that someday—"

"What inducement did he offer?"

Bryling did not answer.

"What threat did he make?"

"None," Bryling said. "It was my own decision."

"There is no legal basis for interference," Justice Klinger announced.

"I have one request," Graham said. "I'd like to place the department's own medical expert as an observer."

"At whose expense?" Stamitz demanded.

"The department's."

“Then I have no objection. If he can get here within an hour, he can observe or take part or whatever he wishes.”

“Is this satisfactory to you?” the justice asked Bryling.

“I don’t see that it makes any difference,” Bryling said.

“Very well. With the department’s medical technician in attendance, the suspension can proceed. I so rule.”

He nodded perfunctorily at Graham and waddled away.

“And that,” Graham muttered, “is the best that I can do. Tomorrow, when Stamitz comes in for his hypnotic analysis, we will find out what really happened.”

The law agent was firm and politely contemptuous. “In return for his cooperation with the incredible whimsies of your department, inspector-commander, my client was subjected to an outrageous and illegal harassment. I have here a justice order forbidding further interference with his lawful private and professional activities. Christopher Stamitz will *not* appear for hypnotic analysis, and you are commanded to abandon all surveillance of his person and property.”

“I have a Pre-Murder authorization approved by three justices,” Graham said stiffly.

“Since the alleged victim has taken a suspension, he hardly needs further protection from your department.”

“Present your order to my secretary, and he will make the necessary arrangements,” Graham said. The law agent departed, and Graham slumped forward in his chair and muttered, “Beaten!”

“Three medical technicians certified that the suspension proceeded normally,” Proller observed.

Graham shook his head. “Bryling is dead.”

“The postsuspension examinations have indicated that the subject took the suspension very well.”

“No. He’s dead.”

Higher Authority glared at Proller. “Your only order,” Commissioner Jevan remarked coldly, “was to make certain that he did not fail. Did I need to explain that you were also to make certain that he did not *think* he had failed?”

“No, sir,” Proller said, “but at this moment all anyone *knows* is that something very peculiar happened. The inspector-commander’s instinct calls it murder. The tests and procedures of the medical technicians show that Bryling took a normal suspension and is in perfect health. All I want is a requisition for lab work so I can find out the truth.”

“If your tests are negative, nothing will be proved or disproved, and the inspector-commander will continue to think that he’s failed. If your tests are positive, he’ll *know* that he’s failed. Kindly explain to me what these tests could possibly contribute to the carrying out of your assignment.”

“But sir—”

“The inspector-commander has prevented hundreds of murders. He’ll prevent more if only his career isn’t terminated by this one ridiculous case. Your assignment, Proller, is to save the inspector-commander’s career.”



“Yes, sir.”

Stamitz scowled. “You’re Graham’s assistant. I obtained a justice order—”

Proller waved his hand indifferently. “I’m not harassing you. I just stopped by to offer my sympathy.”

“For what?”

Proller said soothingly, “After all Bryling had done to you, it must have been a terrible feeling to have to preside over a suspension that would take him completely beyond the reach of justice. He’ll be laughing at you when he revives.”

“Your sympathy is wasted,” Stamitz said. “I have no feeling at all about Bryling except that I’m grateful for the business he gave me. A maximum-term suspension is a highly profitable operation.”

“I can’t help wondering what he’ll think when he opens his eyes five hundred years from now. ‘I escaped! I have my millions compounded and Stamitz has been dust for hundreds of years and can’t touch me!’ What do you think he’ll think?”

“I have no feeling about Bryling,” Stamitz said again. “Like I told you before, I believe in a Higher Justice. I’m satisfied to leave Bryling to that.”

“Does Higher Justice have a reach five hundred years long?” Proller asked.

Stamitz did not answer.

Proller burst into Graham’s office and exclaimed, “Stamitz has confessed!”

“I doubt that,” Graham said flatly. “Why would he?”

“To save his neck. He just took a suspension, and if that doesn’t amount to a confession—”

“*Stamitz? Took a suspension?*”

“Yes, sir. Obviously he was afraid we’d find out what he did; so he popped himself completely out of reach of the statute of limitations.”

“How far out of reach?”

“Four hundred ninety-nine years and eight months.”

“*You blithering idiot!*” Graham leaped to his feet and paced the floor excitedly. “That’s not a confession, that’s an admission of failure! It proves the suspension was perfectly in order. Stamitz will be out just long enough ahead of Bryling to plan a murder. Since he invented the suspension process, the gullible scientists of the future will no doubt let him study its results, and he’ll have great fun working with the team reviving Bryling!”

“Then—you were wrong about Bryling being murdered?”

“I was, and it’s the kind of mistake I don’t mind making,” Graham said jubilantly. “I want you to place official information with Stamitz’s medical records. The technicians who revive him should notify the authorities that Stamitz underwent suspension in order to commit murder. And you can close our file.”

“Yes, sir. For what official reason?”

Graham smiled. “The principals are no longer in this jurisdiction.”

The lab technician held only a grade-two rank, and he was torn between a desire to pull off a complicated analysis all by himself and a fear that he'd be skinned for unauthorized use and/or waste of government property. He said, "I ran all the tests again. It's got to be mercury-base compound M 4939."

"If it's an industrial compound, where would Stamitz get a hold of it?"

"A research chemist of his stature could manufacture it in his sleep, and he had all the necessary chemicals."

Proller nodded thoughtfully. "He had the chemicals, and because that compound was once in common use, there'd be a quantity of medical literature concerning its toxic effects."

"For anything as complicated as a suspension, he'd need specific information."

"In the past two years he's used large numbers of experimental animals," Proller said. "He was licensed for work on a new suspension process."

"So how did he manage to fool three medical technicians and not you?"

"The technicians ran their own tests on each batch of fix as it was prepared. I swiped a few of Stamitz's test tubes, and when he wasn't looking, I took samples of each batch *after* he'd pumped it into Bryling. The poison was in the final batch. Obviously he managed to add it after the technicians completed their tests."

"So we have a murder to report."

"There hasn't been a murder," Proller said. "The contrary—Bryling is in perfect health."

"His life is in danger, then. Someone ought to do something."

Proller shook his head. "As long as he's in suspension, he's perfectly safe. When he's revived, whenever it is, he'll have only a few minutes to live after his bodily processes start again, and most of it will be excruciating."

"Then someone should get a justice order and have him pumped out."

"He's in deep freeze. You can't pump out any of him unless you thaw out all of him, and that means reviving him. It wouldn't help anyway—the poison has already reached his vital organs, and he went under just before the effects could be detected. Didn't I tell you Stamitz experimented with animals for two years? When he's revived, he'll live just long enough to die—painfully."

"How the devil did Stamitz get Bryling into his shop in the first place?"

Proller smiled wryly. "He had help—from us! He paid Manellow to make a social call, and Inspector-Commander Graham took the bait against his better judgment, which he had to do, and gave Bryling massive protection against the hand weapon Manellow didn't sell and Stamitz wouldn't have used anyway. All the protection accomplished was to scare Bryling half to death. Then Stamitz placed a scrambled call to Bryling and said, 'I have a quantity of hand weapons and men who can use them. They're watching you right now.' And Bryling, who had just been listening to four companies of police clomp around in the forest near his terrace, probably came close to expiring on the spot. Stamitz gave him a choice of coming in at once for a maximum-term suspension or dying immediately."

"Sure," the technician said. "Why didn't he just run for cover?"

“The assassins in the forest would have shot him before he got to the house. He did just what Stamitz told him to—stayed in sight and made no false moves while notifying his law agent and ordering out his craft. Then he flew straight to Stamitz’s office because Stamitz told him he’d be followed, and of course he was—by a whole police fleet. Once he got there, he knew weapons would be pointing at him from concealment; so even when the police came, he made no attempt to escape. He’s been deathly afraid of Stamitz for years—it shows in everything he did. He’d be certain Stamitz would use a hand weapon if he had one, and the police told him Stamitz had one. He thought the only alternative to instant death was a suspension, and once he’d accepted that, of course he took the suspension voluntarily. He wanted it as quickly as possible.”

“Why’d Stamitz take a suspension?”

“To have the supreme pleasure of watching Bryling die. Why else? For a time I thought I’d talked him into it, but that was before you finished your analysis. You’ve done a splendid piece of work, and I’m sorry I have to tear it up; but if Inspector-Commander Graham sees it, he’ll know he’s had his first Pre-Murder failure.”

“We ought to do *something*” the technician said stubbornly.

Proller shook his head. “No. Nothing at all, and I’m ignoring Graham’s order to place information with Stamitz’s medical records. Look, we don’t know—yet—what the natural mortality may be on long suspensions. Neither man may survive to be revived.”

“That’s so,” the technician agreed.

“And either man may die shortly after revival due to the after-effects of the five-hundred-year suspension.”

“Maybe so, but a man was murdered, or is being murdered, or is going to be murdered. Shouldn’t Commissioner Jevan decide something like this?”

“He already has. He gave me my orders, and I’m following them. I’m also thinking that the inspector-commander himself called Bryling a monster. He stole Stamitz’s company and his scientific processes, maneuvered him into bankruptcy, got him fined and imprisoned for doing private research on the processes he developed himself, and ruined his family in ways too obnoxious to mention—all without breaking a law. He even made Stamitz lease back his own stolen processes in order to operate a marginal business, and then Bryling tried to ruin him a second time by price-cutting. All that, and the law is still on Bryling’s side. What do *you* think?”

“I get you. A murder five hundred years in the future is nothing to lose sleep over, especially when the victim is a skunk like Bryling. In this case you and I will be the Higher Authority and tear up the records.”

“Not ‘Higher Authority,’” Proller said with a smile. “Higher Justice.”

### **Notes and proofing history**

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