Part 6
The Appointment and Mental Chess

William Byrd with Rowan · Illustrated edition · October 23, 2026

Story illustrations are AI-generated under William Byrd’s direction. Original Holy Wars card artwork is hand-drawn.

The Appointment

Sloane’s reply arrived while Adrian was reviewing an estimate for the ceiling repair.

He opened it before finishing the contractor’s explanation of why the damaged section needed to be replaced.

Mr. Vale,

I can offer a consultation two weeks from today, at ten in the morning. Please allow ninety minutes. Send your current outline beforehand, including what you have access to and what you are proposing to obtain. I can discuss whether an assessment is practical. I cannot offer a completion estimate from the description you sent.

Mira Sloane

Adrian checked his calendar. The morning she had offered was clear.

He began a reply asking whether an earlier appointment might be possible. Halfway through, he stopped. She had read the proposal. The referral had established that he was prepared to pay. Another explanation of its importance would give her nothing she did not already know.

He deleted the request.

Ten o’clock works. I will send the outline ahead of our meeting.

He accepted the appointment, then returned to the repair estimate.

The contractor had included photographs. Adrian enlarged the one taken above the damaged ceiling. A pipe ran behind the stain, and beside it someone had placed a ruler to show the extent of the wet material.

He forwarded the estimate to his assistant with approval to proceed.

Then he opened the notebook he had taken to Ellis.

Rowan’s name was still boxed at the top of the diagram. Adrian had no more access to him than he had when he drew it.

Below it, Ellis had written questions beside the other two components. Adrian turned to a fresh page and copied those questions down. He left room under each for answers.

There was no reason to spend two weeks asking only about Rowan.



By late afternoon, Adrian had accumulated eleven open browser tabs and very little he could use.

The Center’s pharmaceutical supplier had its own quantum computer and offered remote access. Another company sold advisory work. A third offered both, until its form asked which academic institution he represented.

His commercial contact arranged the research call.

The woman who eventually took the call asked what he intended to calculate.

“I direct a rehabilitation center,” he said. “We’re looking at coordinating placements and transport across several providers. There are more variables than our staff can reasonably track.”

“How are you handling it now?”

He explained the calls, the records, and the afternoon a patient had left before transport arrived.

“That sounds worth improving,” she said. “It doesn’t tell me whether you need a quantum service.”

“I’ve heard that.”

“From someone advising you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’d keep them involved.”

Adrian moved his pen to the margin.

“What would you need from us to determine whether there’s a use for it?”

She described a preliminary discussion, followed by a written account of the problem and the information available. When he asked about access, she explained that a business could purchase computing time without purchasing the machine.

“So my team could submit work remotely.”

“Subject to the service agreement and the technical requirements, yes. But someone has to develop the work you submit.”

“I’m arranging that.”

“Good. Bring that person to the discussion.”

Adrian looked at the appointment in his calendar.

“Send me the requirements first. I’d like to make use of the time before we meet.”

After the call, he crossed out a line on his page.

Buy quantum computer became Obtain access. Have Sloane assess use.

He had expected a purchase to be the difficult part. Instead, he needed someone who could tell him what to ask the machine.

His assistant appeared at the door carrying a folder.

“The grant amendments need your signature before five.”

“Leave them here.”

“One changes the transport allocation.”

Adrian held out his hand.

She showed him the relevant page. He read it, checked the amount, and signed.

“Who handles introductions to our technology donors?” he asked.

“Which donors?”

“The ones with defense work.”

She considered it. “I’d have to check. Is this for the scheduling proposal?”

“It’s for the broader assessment.”

“Should I tell them that?”

“Tell them we’re exploring advanced decision-support systems for the Center. I’m interested in firms with experience coordinating resources under pressure.”

She wrote that down.

“And ask which ones develop their own systems,” he added. “I don’t need another demonstration of software we can already subscribe to.”

The first introduction produced exactly that.

For twenty minutes, a representative showed Adrian a dashboard with colored boxes for staffing, admissions, and appointments. Adrian asked what happened when the information in two boxes conflicted. The representative opened another screen.

Adrian watched him search for the answer.

“We can arrange a follow-up with our technical team,” the man said.

“Please do.”

When the call ended, Adrian closed the presentation without saving it.

The next firm had worked on logistics for a defense customer. Its representative was careful about the distinction between supporting a customer and supplying the systems that customer used in combat.

Adrian asked who did the latter.

“We wouldn’t be the people to advise you on that.”

“Even for an inquiry?”

“Especially without knowing the intended use.”

He thanked her and waited for the next introduction.

Over the following days, he learned to ask about the company’s work before explaining his own. He read public project descriptions and checked which claims appeared on the company’s pages rather than only in its sales material. Several promising firms turned out to be subcontractors supplying something quite ordinary.

His assistant brought him a shorter list on Monday.

“These three have confirmed development programs,” she said. “I haven’t asked for introductions yet.”

Adrian read the names.

Aegis Defense Systems appeared second.

He opened its website while she was still beside his desk. The public material described autonomous aviation research, simulation, and work associated with a future fighter program. Most of the page concerned testing. A photograph showed a laboratory station with no aircraft in sight.

“Who knows them?”

“A member of the donor committee knows one of their commercial directors.”

“How well?”

“Well enough to forward a message. I wouldn’t assume more.”

Adrian read the page again.

“Ask for an introduction.”



The Aegis director called two days later.

He had read about the Center. He mentioned a recent fundraising event and asked after a donor Adrian knew. They spent several minutes discussing that man’s recovery from surgery before the director asked what Adrian wanted to explore.

Adrian described the Center’s difficulties. By now, he could explain them without referring to his notebook.

“We’re considering a system that can coordinate several specialized services,” he said. “One component would evaluate changing conditions and help decide where resources should go.”

“For clinical decisions?”

“For coordination. Our clinicians would remain responsible for care.”

“And you believe one of our systems could do that?”

“I believe it’s worth asking the people developing them.”

The director accepted that with a short laugh.

“Fair enough. But our aviation work isn’t a product we can license to a rehabilitation center.”

“I’m not asking you to send it over this afternoon.”

“What are you asking?”

“A technical conversation. If there’s a civilian application, I’d like to know what a properly funded development arrangement would require.”

The director became more formal.

“Which program are you referring to?”

Adrian named the one on the public page.

“There are limits on what I can discuss.”

“Understood.”

“Some of the work is contractor-developed, but that doesn’t make it unrestricted. Any involvement would need review.”

“What kind?”

“Legal first. Security, depending on the scope. We’d need to establish who’s financing the proposal, who would participate, and what access you’re seeking. An introduction doesn’t authorize any of that.”

“Then let’s establish what can be authorized.”

The director said he would send the appropriate initial documents.

Adrian asked whether private financing had a role in the company’s broader development plans. That kept the conversation going for another twelve minutes.

When they finished, he had no promise of technical access. He did have a second call arranged, and the name of the person his attorney should contact.

He added both to his notebook.



His assistant read the follow-up message standing beside his desk.

“They want a description of the proposed organization,” she said.

“They’ll have it.”

“Is that the Center?”

“For the initial inquiry.”

She looked up from the screen. “And beyond that?”

“We may need a separate entity for research. I haven’t decided.”

“Then the description should say that.”

Adrian put down his pen.

“Have the attorney draft it. I want the Center’s work described accurately.”

She nodded and scrolled farther.

“They also want to know who will receive technical information.”

“Me.”

“And Sloane?”

“She hasn’t agreed to take the work.”

“Should I leave space for her?”

“Yes.”

The request from Aegis was longer than he had expected. He read it after his assistant left. Financial disclosures, proposed responsibilities, restrictions on onward sharing. Some requirements depended on the access under discussion; others appeared to apply before anyone would discuss access at all.

He forwarded it to his attorney and asked which parts could proceed immediately.

Then he opened Sloane’s email again.

The consultation was still ahead.

The outline he had promised her still contained the same diagram. He began revising the notes beneath it.

Beside the quantum component, he entered the provider’s name and the requirements for an assessment. Beside the military component, he entered Aegis, followed by Discussions only. Access subject to review.

He paused at Rowan.

No contact.

He disliked seeing it written so plainly, but Sloane had asked what he actually had.

Adrian attached the revised outline to a brief message confirming their appointment. He read it once before sending.

A reply from his attorney arrived as he was closing the file. The disclosures could begin that afternoon. Several provisions needed discussion with Aegis counsel.

Adrian called his assistant.

“Schedule the legal call,” he said. “And keep Sloane’s appointment clear. If something else comes in, move it.”

After she left, he returned to the repair invoice waiting in his inbox. The ceiling work had been completed. The displaced appointments could return to their usual room in the morning.

He approved payment and asked the Center manager to confirm that the room was ready before staff began moving patients back.

Then he opened the first Aegis disclosure form.

The forms came back twice.

First, Aegis wanted clarification of the proposed financing. Then its counsel asked Adrian to distinguish the Center’s existing operations from the research arrangement he was proposing. His attorney called while he was between meetings and went through the questions one at a time.

Adrian answered them. When he could not answer, he asked what needed to be decided.

He also began calling potential investors. He described a development opportunity, made clear that access was still under review, and arranged introductions between their representatives and his attorney. By the time Aegis accepted the financial disclosures, he had assembled a financing consortium its directors were willing to discuss.

As the review continued, the background investigation took longer than he liked. His assistant handled requests for records; his attorney handled questions about what those records established. Adrian asked for updates every morning.

The next call from Aegis concerned conditions for direct program access.

He read the summary his attorney sent afterward. Legal and financial review had advanced. Technical permissions would remain limited to an approved scope. A separate suitability assessment was still outstanding.

Adrian called the attorney back.

“Can you resolve that last condition?”

“I can ask what it requires.”

“Please do.”

His assistant placed the appointment in his calendar when the instructions arrived. He saw the notification during a funding call and dismissed it so he could return to the figures on his screen.

On the morning of the evaluation, she came to his office to remind him.

Mental Chess

The Opening Position

“Your appointment is at two.”

In his corporate office, Vale read the report on his tablet.

His assistant stood several feet from his desk, close enough to be heard but far enough away not to interrupt the view behind him. Forty stories of glass separated Vale from the city below. From where he sat, traffic became silent patterns and people became movement without identity.

“I don’t have an appointment at two.”

“You have the psychological suitability evaluation.”

Vale looked up. The pause was intentional. People often corrected themselves when silence gave them enough room to become uncomfortable.

His assistant did not.

“The evaluation required by Aegis Defense Systems,” she continued. “It is the final condition before they authorize your access to the military-AI integration program.”

“I was under the impression that their attorneys had resolved that.”

“They resolved the financial disclosure and background investigation. The psychological evaluation applies to everyone receiving direct access.”

Everyone.

The word was designed to make an insult sound like policy.

“Who authorized it?”

“Their Enhanced Access and Reliability Protocol was approved by their board and federal security office. They will not waive it.”

“Everyone has a price.”

“They aren’t asking for money.”

Vale studied her face for signs of satisfaction. There were none. She had learned not to enjoy being correct in front of him.

“Who is conducting it?”

“Dr. Evelyn Mercer. Independent occupational psychologist. Twenty-one years in security and executive-risk evaluations. No disciplinary record. No public political activity. She has rejected candidates represented by people more influential than we are.”

More influential than we are.

Another sentence that would have sounded insulting from anyone less useful.

Vale rose and fastened his jacket. “Send me everything you have on her.”

“You leave in twenty minutes.”

“Then send it in five.”

Dr. Evelyn Mercer’s office was not what Vale expected. Two identical chairs faced each other at a slight angle. A legal pad, two pens, and a glass bottle of water rested on a small table between them. There were no family photographs and no objects that offered an easy path into her private life.



No obvious hierarchy. Deliberate.

“Before we begin,” Mercer said, “this is not therapy. Aegis retained me to conduct an occupational suitability evaluation related to sensitive program access. My report will address judgment, reliability, interpersonal functioning, risk management, and your ability to comply with security requirements.”

“I understand.”

She wants the limit stated before I decide how close to it I can stand.

“You may decline to answer, but I may note that in my report.”

“Of course.”

Refusal becomes evidence. Cooperation becomes exposure.

“What interests you about the Aegis program?”

Power is unusable. Profit is shallow. Public service sounds rehearsed. Give her responsibility, then humility.

“The technology has enormous potential. That potential creates obligations. I have resources, infrastructure, and experience bringing complex systems into practical use. But military applications require safeguards beyond ordinary commercial development.”

Mercer made a note. She did not reward the answer.

“What safeguards concern you most?”

“Human misuse.”

“And machine autonomy?”

“A system does not need ambition to become dangerous. It only needs an objective poorly defined by someone who does.”

“Have you made poorly defined decisions?”

She turned the theory back toward me. Clean.

Vale described an early expansion of a rehabilitation program: high demand, available funding, and a management structure that was not ready.

“What did that cost?”

“Money. Time. Trust.”

“Did anyone get hurt?”

Vale allowed his expression to tighten—not because he felt pain, but because an absence of emotion would be remembered.

“Some patients experienced disruptions in care.”

Do not say relapse. Do not say overdose. Do not give her a word that belongs in a report.

“How many?”

“Fewer than twenty.”

“Closer to two or closer to nineteen?”

She is narrowing the room.

“Twelve.”

“And what responsibility did you personally accept?”

“I approved the expansion.”

“That describes your authority. I asked about responsibility.”

Too much remorse looks performed. Too little becomes the answer.

“I moved faster than the people around me could safely support.”

Mercer tilted her head. “The people around you?”

She heard it.

“That was poorly phrased. I moved faster than the organization could safely sustain.”

“Why do you think you phrased it that way the first time?”

Vale looked toward the window, as if searching himself rather than searching for language.

“When I can see a solution, I sometimes become frustrated when others cannot move at the same pace.”

“Because they are less capable?”

“Not necessarily.”

“But sometimes?”

Vale smiled gently. “Sometimes people are less capable, Doctor. Pretending otherwise would not make me compassionate. It would make me dishonest.”

For the first time, Mercer smiled back.

It was not admiration.

The Middle Game

“Tell me about someone you respect.”

“My mother.”

“Someone who is currently part of your life.”

Vale considered several names. His attorney was intelligent but replaceable. His chief financial officer was precise but timid. His assistant was competent, although respect was too generous a word.

“Brian Sloan.”

The name entered the room before he had fully approved it.

“How long have you known him?”

“Since college.”

Vale had kept the connection alive through occasional calls, investment conversations, and invitations Brian considered signs of an old friendship surviving success. Brian's advice was useful. The things he revealed without realizing they mattered were sometimes more useful.

"What do you respect about him?"

"His mind. He understands systems. He recognizes weaknesses other people overlook."

"How does he respond when he believes you're wrong?"

"He tells me."

"And what do you do?"

"I listen."

Not always. Enough to make the statement defensible.

Mercer asked about an acquisition Brian had advised him against.

"Did you follow his advice?"

"We changed the structure."

"That wasn't my question."

She stores exact wording. She does not permit substitutions.

"No."

"What happened?"

"The acquisition was successful."

"And what did you learn from his warning?"

"That he had identified genuine risks."

"But your decision was still correct."

"Yes."

Mercer wrote something down.

Do not ask what she wrote. Curiosity would concede authority.

"Do you need to win, Mr. Vale?"

The question felt careless. Therefore, it was not careless.

No becomes evidence against every achievement. Yes becomes rigidity. Reject the premise.

“That depends on what you mean by winning.”

“What do you mean by it?”

“Achieving the intended outcome.”

“At any cost?”

“No.”

“What cost would be too high?”

“An irreversible one.”

“Death?”

“Yes.”

“Whose?”

The bottle touched the rim of Vale’s glass with a quiet click.

An ordinary person says anyone’s. A liar says mine. A philanthropist says the innocent. She is watching how I construct the answer.

“Any life.”

Mercer waited. Vale waited with her. Neither rescued the other from the silence.

“Earlier, you said patients experienced disruptions in care. Were any of those disruptions fatal?”



Twelve patients. Two deaths within ninety days. One overdose. One suicide. The records do not establish causation. She may know. She may be testing whether I believe she knows.

“Two former patients died in the months following the restructuring.”

“Why didn’t you mention that when I asked whether anyone was hurt?”

“Their deaths were not determined to have been caused by the restructuring.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

The words were quiet. Almost gentle.

Vale felt something cold beneath his ribs.

Not guilt.

Exposure.

“You’re correct,” he said. “I interpreted your question too narrowly.”

“Why?”

“I have spent years in environments where imprecise language creates legal consequences.”

“Is that the only reason?”

Vale lowered his eyes for exactly one breath. “No. It is difficult to discuss decisions that may have contributed to another person’s suffering, even when the connection cannot be proven.”

The sentence was elegant. Restrained. Human.

It was also almost entirely true.

Mercer turned a page. “When was the last time you needed someone?”

Vale’s mind produced no immediate answer.

Employees needed him. Patients needed the institutions carrying his name. Investors needed his access. Public officials needed his donations. Brian needed his capital, whether he admitted it or not.

Need flowed toward him.

It did not flow away.

“My father’s death.”

“How long ago?”

“Eleven years.”

“You haven’t needed anyone in eleven years?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You chose an example from eleven years ago.”

She is evaluating the distance.

“What happens when you need someone now?”

I delegate turns intimacy into labor. I ask requires an example. I don’t know surrenders the square.

“I make certain that I am never in a position where one person’s absence can destroy what I’ve built.”

“And does that answer my question?”

Vale almost smiled.

“No.”

It was the most honest word he had spoken all afternoon.

Mercer made no note.

That concerned him more than the writing.

The Report

The evaluation lasted another forty-three minutes. Vale offered faults carefully selected for their resemblance to strengths. He described anger without describing rage, loss without describing grief, and relationships without surrendering the name of anyone capable of injuring him.

Mercer never accused him of dishonesty.

She did something more difficult.

She remembered.

When his later answers altered the shape of earlier ones, she placed them beside each other and asked him to explain the distance. She did not chase him when he redirected. She waited at the place he had avoided until the conversation returned there.

By the end, Vale had learned almost nothing about her.

That alone made her dangerous.

“Aegis will receive my report within five business days,” she said.

“And your recommendation?”

“Will be in the report.”

Vale gave her the expression that had reassured boards, donors, grieving families, and government officials. “I appreciate directness, Doctor.”

“I believe you appreciate useful information.”

At the door, Mercer spoke once more.

“Why this particular system?”

He had answered that question during the first five minutes. They both knew it.

“As I said, its potential carries responsibilities.”

“No. You told me why someone should guide it. You never told me why that person needs to be you.”

For the first time that afternoon, Adrian Vale had no prepared answer.

His silence lasted less than two seconds.

“I suppose that is what your report will help them decide.”

He left before she could respond.

Five days later, Dr. Mercer signed the final page.

RECOMMENDATION
Not recommended for unsupervised access. Any participation should require compartmentalized permissions, continuous monitoring, and independent technical oversight. The subject demonstrates high functional capacity alongside persistent efforts to control information, redefine accountability, and position personal judgment above institutional constraint.

She did not diagnose him. She did not call him evil. She documented the risk and placed her name beneath it.

Vale read the report once.



“She didn’t reject you,” his assistant said.

“No.”

“She recommended restrictions.”

Aegis needed the financing consortium Vale had assembled. Its directors could defend conditional access as a compromise: Mercer’s warning respected, every safeguard accepted, every risk contained.

No single person would need to overrule her. They would only need to believe that a carefully restricted version of yes was not the same as ignoring no.

“Find out who defines *unsupervised*,” Vale said. “And who approves the compartments.”

His assistant hesitated. “You told her human misuse was the greatest danger.”

Vale looked toward the city below.

“It was the correct answer.”

The evaluation had ended.

The game had not.

Fiction and research notice: Adrian Vale, Brian Sloan, Dr. Evelyn Mercer, Aegis Defense Systems, and the events in this story are fictional. The evaluation is presented as an occupational suitability assessment for unusually sensitive access—not as ordinary therapy or a universal requirement for independent contractors. Mental-health treatment or diagnosis alone does not determine a person’s trustworthiness.