

CAMPAIGN SEASON: A NOVELLA

by

Jason A. Bock

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Ron Rundo Advisor

6/1/11 Date Approved

Laura Jean Baker Member

6/1/11 Date Approved

Pamela Zeme Member

6/1/11 Date Approved

PROVOST
AND VICE CHANCELLOR

Jan R. Grew

6/2/11
Date Approved

FORMAT APPROVAL

Marci Norderf

4/26/11
Date Approved

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To Michelle, Mom & Dad, Wordy, Kevin & Amanda, Ben L., and Journey, none of whom ever stopped believing.

Science Fiction and the Novella: A Logical Union

Science fiction has existed as a genre for nearly two hundred years or more. Its popularity has exploded so much and into so many mediums in the last seventy-five years, in fact, it has become challenging to separate the good from the popular in sci-fi. When one considers the volume of science fiction writing and film being produced in the early years of the 21st century, there seems little doubt that human beings enjoy speculating about their future, imagining tales where the rules of the physical universe are bent to their limit, and hearing stories of adventure in far-flung places. At its best, a science fiction story challenges its reader to consider the possibilities of the future as well as the complications of the human condition in the present. At its worst, a hastily constructed set of rules for a made-up universe barely supports a shallow protagonist whose agenda stretches no further than the barrel of a laser gun.

There have been attempts to draw science fiction into an ancient literary tradition stretching as far back as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, but such attempts are misguided: science fiction relies on fantastic elements, and wholly imaginary beings and/or places to tell its stories, but the mere existence of some unexplained phenomena and mind-bending plot devices do not a sci-fi story make. If that definition were true, the Bible would qualify as science fiction. In defining the genre, it is essential to remember that the first word is *science*, implying that such a story contains elements that are based in scientific fact. The second word, *fiction*, of course, implies that the writer is presenting an imagined reality that extends plausibly from presently known scientific facts. A story about magicians, dragons, and spells is not science fiction; it is fantasy. Even one of the most prominent

examples of sci-fi in modern culture, the *Star Wars* movie series, is hard to classify as true science fiction: the characters exist in a made-up universe, and the principle force motivating their actions is an invisible, unexplained, mysterious entity that receives no plausible scientific explanation. Compare *Star Wars* to Carl Sagan's *Contact*: the latter is the story of an American scientist on the planet Earth who realizes the success of an actual scientific study that continues even today, searching the radio frequencies of deep space for evidence of extra terrestrial intelligence. Imagining the world's reaction to such a momentous event is in the truest spirit of science fiction.

This is not to say that the roots of the genre do not go deep – some of the principle themes of science fiction have existed in literature since the earliest days of the written word. The protagonist of the 10th century Japanese narrative *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* is a princess from the Moon, sent to Earth for safety during a celestial war. At the end of the story, her extraterrestrial family transports her back home on a machine that bears similarity to a flying saucer. In the Middle East, several stories within *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* contain proto-science fiction elements. One example is “The City of Brass,” which tells the story of a group of people on an expedition to find an ancient lost city in the desert. Along the way, they encounter humanoid robots and automatons, self-animated marionettes without strings, and a brass robot that directs them toward the city. “The Tale of the Ebony Horse” has a robotic horse capable of flying into outer space.

The Age of Enlightenment, and later, the Industrial Revolution, brought a more thorough understanding of science and common use of technology to Western

civilization. A number of writers and works that could truly be classified as science fiction appeared during the 19th century. In his book, *Billion Year Spree*, Brian Aldiss suggests that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818, is the first work that can legitimately be called science fiction. Later in the 19th century, Jules Verne published the likes of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Notable in Verne's work, and distinct from pronto-sci-fi stories of the Middle Ages and earlier, is the thoughtful and logical application of science to the fantastic situations presented in his novels. Not long after, H.G. Wells became a pioneer of another science fiction style, wherein elements of science or technology are used as a narrative device to comment on present day society. In *The Time Machine*, the details of the Time Traveller's device are somewhat glossed over, in order for Wells to quickly move into a story that criticizes the stratification of contemporary English society.

By the middle of the 20th century, the rise in popularity of the pulp magazine led to a "golden age" of science fiction, spearheaded by writers like Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke. The magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* churned out escapist sci-fi that led readers on exciting space-faring adventures, or introduced them to strange and terrifying creatures. The 1960s and 1970s produced a "new wave" in the genre that echoed the social upheaval of the time. Writings of this period turned toward surrealism, psychological drama, and began to caution readers through dystopian visions of the future. Some of the best examples of this type of sci-fi are in film: Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* memorably features the self-aware computer HAL, but beyond the machine's unyielding devotion to his programming even at the expense of his human

crewmates' lives, the story begs the viewer to consider the ultimate fate of the human species and its larger place in evolution. During the same period, writers such as Philip K. Dick explored the metaphysics of thought in a sub-genre of "soft" science fiction, which could best be related back to the work of H.G. Wells: in many of Dick's stories (*The Minority Report*, *Adjustment Team*, *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale*), the science takes a back seat in the narrative to the fantastic and often chilling extremes to which his characters must push their minds.

Beginning in the 1980s, and arguably through today, the large measure of mainstream science fiction being produced could be attributed to the cyberpunk sub-genre. The shift to writing that is focused on the technology that envelopes our daily lives and the "punks" that inhabit the imaginary future's underworld has permeated sci-fi not only in traditional fiction (the novel *Daemon* by Daniel Suarez) and film (*Gattaca* and *The Matrix*), but also less traditional mediums like graphic novels, anime, and video games. The cyberpunk genre is marked by stories of social upheaval, often in the near future. Suarez's novel *Daemon* explores the realistic possibility of a computer program that becomes sentient, and turns on its erstwhile programmers' colleagues. *Gattaca* imagines a near future where medicine has perfected and simplified the mapping of the human genome to the extent that parents can select offspring with only the most advantageous qualities. In *The Matrix*, Thomas Anderson learns that his life as he knows it is merely a computer simulation of the world before humans went to war with machines.

One of the uncanny realities that emerged in this study of science fiction and the

novella is that the two appear to regularly intersect. From H.G. Wells to Asimov and Dick, not to mention in the pages of contemporary graphic novels like *Watchmen*, the abbreviated form of the novella appears to be an ideal size for some of the best that the genre has to offer. My contention is that a very good bit of sci-fi should leave the reader with things to contemplate when the story has concluded. It is heavy-handed for an author to paint a complete picture and explicitly tell the reader what his or her reaction and opinion should be to the speculative work. The very purpose of constructing a narrative about fantastic events that could occur is to let the reader become immersed in those ideas, while leaving room for a variety of conclusions; after all, when a fictitious work is based on speculation, there are no hard and fast rules for how things should turn out.

The term “novella” was coined well after the form was in practice. The word made its first appearance in the Oxford English dictionary in the late years of the 19th century. In her 1975 survey, *Forms of the Modern Novella*, Mary Doyle Springer dances around the question for a while before forcing herself to quantify the space novellas should occupy as being between 15,000 and 50,000 words. By applying this criterion, then, we could be free to re-classify any work of fiction that fits as a novella, whether written ten or a hundred years ago. To do so, however, would be a cold, statistical method for eliminating the criticism of novellas as a scholarly endeavor. As tends to be the case in literary criticism, there is a qualitative element to measuring the novella, which stands as a greater measuring stick than a simple word count.

The novella's tentative straddling of the conventions of both the short story and the novel is what makes labeling them so difficult. It is a bit longer than the former, a bit shorter than the latter. That very trait is what begs the question of length, and oftentimes brings the debate to a halt. Once qualified as a novella by length, a critical study of a given work could easily degenerate into an assessment of which category (short story or novel) is the particular novella's closest neighbor. A nudge in one direction or the other could push the work into one of the adjoining categories. While it may seem cynical to do so, it would be scholastically arrogant to ignore the role of economics, and to some extent, ego, in the classification of a work of fiction as a "novel" or "novella." Quite frankly, a novel sounds like more of an accomplishment. A novel is something that a publisher can sell at a predictable price. A novella sounds like it's a little less. I feel that it's important to acknowledge this fact, but as Springer discovered in her survey, there is more to it.

Beyond just a "feeling" about a story, Springer draws up a series of five sub-genres that seem best served by the novella. These are her "forms of the modern novella." She begins with "the plot of character," which focuses on a single character's revelation or growth. Next, "the degenerative tragedy" is identified as a main character's deep and relentless plunge toward misery and death. The third form is "satire," which in the case of a novella, Springer says would focus on a single, specific object of literary ridicule, rather than a laundry list of humankind's transgressions. The fourth is "apologue." I find Springer's description of this form to be the most difficult to summarize (and it seems she did, too, given the number of words she spent trying to

describe it). From a more strict definition, an apologue is a moral fable where some of the principle characters are either animals or inanimate things, but Springer sets it up in opposition to a story where some action is the driving force behind the plot. Finally, “the example” is actually described as a sort of sub-category within apologue, where the main character is a stand-in for a larger human “type.”

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was first published in 1899, and it stands up as a prime early example of the novella, at a time before the label would formally have been applied. Springer catalogues it in her book as an example of apologue. The label fits, as the main action of the story is relatively passive, and centers on the civilized Englishmen’s journey into the uncivilized. The jungle itself is the inanimate main character of *Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz could be read as either the personification of the jungle’s lawlessness, or (better for the purpose of teasing out apologue) the ultimate depth of inhumanity to which the jungle can drive a once-civilized man.

Certainly too long to be classified as a short story, *Heart of Darkness* still carries at least one element of the shorter form: it is one episode of Marlow’s time in service of the Company, albeit a time-consuming one. The whole of the work could possibly be drawn into a larger piece about Marlow, Kurtz, or the Company. Leaning more toward the novel’s convention, though, this novella is divided into three distinct acts. Part one is the construction of Marlow’s opinion and knowledge of Kurtz. Part two is Marlow’s journey to reach him, and part three is the two characters’ interaction and finally Kurtz’s death.

The bottom line is that Springer made a sound judgment of *Heart of Darkness* as a novella. The only notion that I would call into question is whether apologue is absolutely the appropriate form for this work. It may also fit as a “degenerative tragedy,” with Kurtz read as a more principle character.

In the science fiction realm, the aforementioned works of H.G. Wells stand as the best example of early science fiction novellas. *The Time Machine* is short for a novel, but at about 33,000 words, fits in the wheel-house of the novella. This story also fits the apologue description, as the Time Traveller visits Earth’s distant future (the year 802,701 AD) and encounters two distinct species that evolved from humans: the Eloi, and the Morlocks. They are intended to represent the aristocratic and working classes, respectively. The bulk of the story is narrated by the Time Traveller, as he recounts his journey to a group of dinner guests. It is a cautionary tale, for both the fictional guests and Wells’ contemporary readers. Similar to *Heart of Darkness*, *The Time Machine* employs certain conventions of the novel. For example, its episodic account of the Traveller’s journey over a period of several days (and several trips further into the future as well).

My science fiction novella, *Campaign Season*, fits the quantitative and qualitative measures that Springer sets forth. It comes to the finish line at around 30,000 words and would best fit into the “plot of character” form: the main character, Jacob Reilly, struggles to maintain a grasp on conventional humanity, even as his mechanically-enhanced mind pushes him further away. The story culminates in Reilly’s final resolution: that the essence of what he wishes to be is not lost, regardless of what

physical form he might take. Reilly comes to believe that the definition of humanity will evolve, just as the species will.

I would have to credit countless writers and stories, as far back as my first encounters with science fiction and fantasy as a child, for propelling me on a course toward this writing. Over the years, I've observed my tastes oscillating from *Buck Rogers*- or *Star Wars*-style space opera, to the new wave social commentary of *Star Trek* to contemporary popular cyberpunk, and back through the cycle again. While my interest in the genre is diverse, a closer examination of some specific elements in the narrative of *Campaign Season* reveals some distinct, if not intentional influences from my own sci-fi past.

There is a spirit behind Gene Roddenberry's vision of the future in *Star Trek* that is perpetually optimistic. It's a tempting attitude, and one that I have clung to for a long time. Roddenberry's future assumes that the best elements of the human condition (empathy, understanding, respect, free will) will rise to become the lynchpins of our society; the unsavory elements of greed, jealousy, ambition, and hate will no longer inspire our leaders. I like to think that even though such a utopian vision requires immeasurable courage on the part of all of humanity, and thus, seems improbable, there will always be people that hang on to the hope that such a future *is* possible. In a way, Jacob Reilly is that person in *Campaign Season*. Jacob recognizes that the world is at a crossroads, but refuses to believe that it will lead to a violent or catastrophic end.

Another major aspect of *Campaign Season* is probably rooted in my childhood consumption of comic books. Many heroic characters with special powers struggle to

maintain their “normal” lives in the pages of comics, but in Marvel's various *X-Men* titles, that struggle goes as far as being political from time to time. The “X-Men” themselves are humans with mutations that have given them special abilities. Those abilities vary from telepathy, to telekinesis, to cellular regeneration, to superhuman strength, and teleportation, just to name a few.

The X-Men routinely find themselves at odds with the normal humans, who fear the extraordinary potential of the mutants’ abilities, despite the heroes’ stated objective to create and promote a world where all people can live together peacefully. In the *X-Men* series, doubt is sown among the general population by the likes of the villain Magneto and his Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. They harbor their own fears toward normal humans, and work on an agenda of gathering power and influence. The central conflict in the world of the X-Men revolves around the philosophical struggle between Magneto and the X-Men’s leader, Charles Xavier. Magneto feels that the mutants are the future of humanity, and he will stop at nothing (not even mass murder) to insure that he and his brethren are granted their rightful place in the world. Xavier favors a world of diversity where humans and mutants are able to co-exist, and evolution, if that is what’s at work, can take its own natural course. The struggle between Xavier and Magneto is echoed in the philosophical disagreement of Jacob and Bingham, respectively, in *Campaign Season*.

Although there are shadows of plots from other stories in my novella, I would have to say that my enjoyment of the science fiction genre as a whole comes from a long-standing interest in science fact. I don’t think that the experience is unique; a good sci-fi writer needs to have at least some interest in speculating about the future and

contemplating the role that new technologies will play in the fate of humanity. Reading the popular works of physicists like Brian Greene and Stephen Hawking, one finds that the actual physical universe is every bit as breathtaking and amazing as the most imaginative works of sci-fi that have been written. I, and no doubt other sci-fi writers, find a great deal of thought-provoking inspiration in scientific non-fiction.

For this particular piece, I found significant influence in the writings of Ray Kurzweil, a computer engineer and futurist who has been (very accurately) predicting the future of technology for thirty years. Kurzweil's 2005 book, *The Singularity is Near*, painstakingly details his contention that the law of accelerating returns predicts continued exponential growth in computer technology and sophistication that will ultimately lead to a technological singularity: a hypothetical event where after the future becomes nearly impossible to predict. The concept of the singularity is not Kurzweil's exclusive domain, and there are other futurists with a variety of ideas for how such an event could take place. Across the board, though, a singularity is typically associated with a tipping point in technological progress that leads to super-intelligence. Some writers theorize that super-intelligence will rise from the continued development of artificial intelligence (AI); Kurzweil subscribes to the notion that super-human-intelligence will be a result of the merger of humans and machines. Kurzweil's book posits a variety of scenarios that could lead to such a change in great detail. Plotting the exponential growth in sophistication of computer processors over the last forty or so years, he surmises that computer processors and digital data storage will have the necessary speed and size to simulate the function of the human brain by around 2045. From there, the notion of instilling computers with

simulated human intelligence, and the subsequent successful creation of an interface for a physical human brain and a computer would herald the coming of Kurzweil's concept of the singularity.

One of the things that make Kurzweil's work so interesting is that he not only makes wild predictions about the future, but also demonstrates how the history of technology has treaded a path that leads to the singularity. Early in his book, he shows how the growth of computing power can be plotted logarithmically, showing a steady, consistent upward climb, from the days of electromechanical punch-card machines to the present and beyond. In one of the charts used to demonstrate the consistency of exponential growth of computing power during the past century, Kurzweil relates the potential of computational capacity in terms of possible calculations per second per thousand dollars—that computers have gotten *exponentially* more sophisticated and less expensive over time. He further explains:

The exponential growth of computing is a marvelous quantitative example of the exponentially growing returns from an evolutionary process. We can express this exponential growth of computing in terms of its accelerating pace: it took ninety years to achieve the first [one million instructions per second] per thousand dollars; now we add one [million instructions per second] per thousand dollars every five hours.

(70)

Another very interesting bit in Kurzweil's work is the very realization that science fiction writers have been toying with ideas that relate back to his concepts for decades: Asimov spawned an entire sub-genre of robot sci-fi with his Three Laws of

Robotics, laying the groundwork for speculation on how humans and artificially intelligent life could interact. The entire cyberpunk movement in sci-fi has its basis in fictional worlds where technology often becomes more than a passive tool for humans, and instead assumes an active role in shaping the world. Science fiction is expected to look at the world through a speculative lens; to understand the present limits of science and technology, and then to push them beyond.

At the same time, this is something that I found challenging in writing a work of science fiction. Sci-fi is often predicated on “big ideas” or sweeping philosophies. There is probably either a large philosophical question or a significant technological advance (or a combination of both) behind the events in the story. It’s important, and sometimes difficult, to remain focused on the events in the story themselves, and avoiding the temptation of making your characters simply a mouthpiece for those big ideas. Although science fiction is a platform, the thing that makes the ideas interesting is considering what their affect will be on people who encounter them. At the end of the day, a reader needs to feel invested and related to the characters in order for any sort of story to have resonance. In *Campaign Season*, the questions and ideas that I present for the reader center on the nature of humanity in light of the possible singularity. Many of the disagreements that people or nations have with one another in today’s world focus on things like political borders, religious philosophies, or how to care for the planet and its resources. These disagreements are founded in a static view of the nature of humanity, and humankind’s place in the history of the world and the universe. But, what if the fate of humanity is in further evolution, beyond what we can imagine? What are the essential

things (beyond biology) that make us human, and are they, too, subject to change?

Finding that balance between emotional relatability and futuristic speculation is what I ultimately strove for in *Campaign Season*. Kurzweil's book does a marvelous job of describing the form of the singularity and justifying the author's assertion of its inevitability. My story tries to imagine what the implications of that event are for an average person that might be living at the time. What will the reaction to the coming of the singularity be? Will the change be a sudden, massive shift, or will it appear to some future historian to be a gradual, inexorable ascent? What of the fates of humanity's long-held and treasured beliefs?

Cyberpunk's seemingly endless perpetuity is likely to blame for the bad rap that I have seen the genre receive on occasion in working with other writers. While the shadows of the cyberpunk movement might be cast across the entire genre as long as we live in a technological society, one of the satisfying aspects of sci-fi as a whole is that elements of each significant movement throughout its development remain intact. The core of quality science fiction continues to be the timelessness of human experience explored through a vivid imagined world created by the author. It is ideal for one who wishes to explore the questions of philosophy, religion, morality, and ethics in a hypothetical space. Many of the big questions that we deal with as a species have a polarizing effect on opinions when examined within the confines of current events. I strongly appreciate sci-fi's ability to put our most basic questions on a stage where they can be externalized and evaluated from an objective point of view. The genre also gives us the chance to evaluate certain questions about our future, before changes come to pass.

By questioning ourselves in the present, regardless of whether or not the imaginings of science fiction ever come to fruition, we give ourselves the opportunity to make a better future. The self-reflection that is invited by the best that this genre has to offer can lead to change, which, for me, yields hope.

Prologue

The Intelligence Simulation Lab at General Robotics was not exactly what Katie would have expected on her first day of work. She had been through three interviews and two proficiency tests before finally landing the job as a tech in this room. It was the premiere artificial intelligence laboratory in the United States, but the chipped, faded paint on the walls, the dents in the furniture, the stains on the tables, were all about the same as the lab she had come from at school in Ann Arbor. Despite the appearance, she knew that this was a place where exciting work was being done, and she was tremendously proud to be a part of it; plenty of her classmates had to settle for jobs doing level-one or level-two support, but the work she invested in school was paying off. Katie's job title included "engineer," straight out of college.

She stood near the elevator for two or three solid minutes before one of the other techs noticed her.

"Hey," he started, "It's Katie, right? Sorry, wasn't expecting you until eight," the forty-something man pulled a hand out of the pocket of his lab coat and extended it in Katie's direction.

"Sorry, I'm always early on the first day," she apologized, as she returned the introductory shake.

"Well, I'm going to be showing you around here a little bit. I'm Joe, one of the lead techs."

Katie followed Joe past the receiving desk, through a pair of swinging doors, and out onto the floor. It was a nearly wide-open space, with a few cubicles lining the walls,

but mostly just worktables and equipment strewn about. A small army of computers kept the room hot enough that even now, in the middle of winter in Detroit, it was necessary to keep the air conditioning on. Men and women squinted into terminals and banged on keyboards. Some machines were tethered to robotic limbs; others to six-foot nano-processing cores; still more were managing virtual intelligence simulators.

“So obviously,” Joe began, “It’s been a helluva interview process, and you know what goes on here for the most part...”

Katie wouldn’t have been able to land the job if she wasn’t extremely well-versed in the General Robotics story and mission. She knew all about how the company started, way-back-when, as a car outfit. She knew about the Honda buy-out in 2015. How they had started making tiny, simple machines that did amazing things, but since intelligence simulation—the invention of a computer that could successfully simulate the thought process of the human brain—they now wanted to make tiny machines that were amazingly powerful.

“Right,” she said. “I can’t imagine how they could ask another question in those interviews without getting *way* too personal.”

“Oh, I know,” Joe nodded. “I’ve been here since the GM days, but even then it was tough to get into this division.”

Joe stopped, turned, and slapped a hand on one of the taller server racks in the room. Katie noticed that it held just one machine, around which was wound a complex array of plastic pipe, copper tubing, and small electric motors.

“So this is one of the simulators,” he explained. “Wanted to show you one while it’s actually in use. We call him Randall.”

Katie glanced down at the monitor on the workstation next to the rack, and watched text on the screen scroll by, too fast to read more than a word or two at a time. The desk was vacant as it worked. Joe had another question for her.

“Now, you came from...?”

“I was at Michigan.”

“Nice,” he nodded. “Go Wolverines, right?”

“Right,” she smiled.

“So, did you actually have a chance to work on one of these while you were there?”

Katie tried not to let her nervousness show. “We had an older model, and just one. It was pretty tough to get time on it, especially as an undergrad.”

“Sure,” Joe nodded again. “So what kind of problems did you work on?”

This was the part of her work history that wasn’t as strong.

“Well,” she started, “in the course that I took, the time on the simulator had to be budgeted pretty carefully, so we worked out hypothetical, historical models. I recreated the Manhattan Project.”

Joe was still nodding. “OK, well that’s fine. I mean, the principles are all the same, right? The nice thing, actually, about working on a problem that’s already been solved is that you can judge the simulator’s outcome. How did it do with that?”

“Pretty well. You know that the original project was on for almost five years, right? My simulation solved the enrichment issues and had a feasible bomb design in less than five hundred hours.”

Joe smiled at the rack and gave “Randall” another pat.

“It’s pretty amazing, isn’t it?” he said. “The potential that’s right inside our heads if you give the brain the computational speed and efficiency of a computer... It still gives me chills sometimes.”

This was exactly the sort of work that Katie wanted to do: figure out the real-life problems that would’ve taken a team of researchers a decade or more to solve. She knew that a lot of CEOs, boards of directors, or even presidents, for that matter, had big ideas and liked to see results. What they often lacked was the patience to let science take its course. Intelligence simulation gave them the best of both worlds. Funding was being cut from a project in six months? No problem – Randall or another simulator like it would have it solved in three.

Katie settled in to her workstation, met the team supervisor, and by the afternoon of her first day, was back to shadowing Joe on his current project.

“You have experience with nanobots?” he asked as they got started.

“Not actual ones.”

“They’re pretty cool,” he smiled as he slid a one-inch square circuit board under the lens of a very large microscope. On his monitor, Katie watched as a few dozen cylindrical blurs move around the screen. Joe adjusted the settings from his keyboard, and the nanobots came into focus.

Katie had worked with computer-simulated virtual nanobots in school, but this was her first time seeing the machines in action. They were shaped like short batteries, and they seemed to swim around the surface of the circuit board, propelling themselves on hundreds of tiny caterpillar-like feet.

“What are they working on?” she asked.

“Processor assembly,” Joe said. “They’re going to build twelve cores on that board.”

He sounded like a father bragging about his children.

“Yeah,” he continued, “this is max magnification right here. You’re looking at machines that are about ten nanometers.”

A hair on Katie’s head was eight million times wider than the nanobots they watched work on the screen.

“We’re just going to let these guys roll for a while,” Joe said as he pushed his wheeled desk chair back over to Randall’s server rack. “Let’s check up on Randall.”

Like the intelligence simulators that Katie had worked on in school, “Randall” was able to logically work through problems, but it needed a complete data set to start with; a human programmer or engineer needed to give the simulator all the tools it would need to successfully solve a problem.

“We’ve been trying to find a way,” Joe continued, “to build a nano-colony that’s self-sustaining and self-motivating. We need to be able to move this technology into places where you don’t need to lug around a half-ton processing core just to feed them commands. Obviously, though, at this size, storage capacity becomes an issue.”

Katie nodded in agreement, “That’s what it’s working on now?”

“He’s been at it now for...” Joe craned his neck toward the monitor, “God, almost seventy-three days.”

“*Seventy-three days?*” Katie repeated. In her classes, simulations had to be cut off after six hundred hours, about twenty-five days. The lab time was tough to come by.

“Yeah, it’s not an easy simulation.”

Katie imagined the implications. “So self-motivated nanobots... theoretically, they could work indefinitely, right? As long as they had an energy source.”

“That’s what we want to do,” Joe said. “Just think if a person had a nano-colony injected to preemptively watch out for infection, or to correct hereditary disease.”

“In school, I had a bioengineering professor who thought that the first person who would live to be two hundred would be born during his lifetime,” Katie mused.

Joe’s face became more serious than it had been since they met that morning. “Quite seriously,” he said, “that’s going to be just scraping the surface.”

Chapter 1

The photos were taken between March 2018 and May 2021. They were from the house on Marshfield Avenue. Although Jacob was a toddler in most of the photos, he remembered each moment with perfect clarity. Jacob's *first* memory was from the womb.

He could remember the exact moment that his full memory coalesced. It was April 18, 2036, at 1:37 PM. He was seventeen. One of the intriguing things that he found after his procedure was that the moment of the first nano-injection did not constitute a boundary or a barrier for his memories. Instead, the procedure was just another moment, and it was as though each moment before *and* after had always been perfect. In the recollections of the first five years of his life, there were other markers that signaled a “pre-nanotech” capacity for reason or understanding, but the memories themselves had gradually been sewn together so completely, that there was nothing he could not recall.

Some people assumed that when he said “complete memory,” he meant “photographic memory,” but they were not the same thing. Photographic recall was short-term, and it remained a two-dimensional experience, like replaying the movie of your life. Jacob could allow his mind to reoccupy every moment he had seen; to re-experience each second of his life. If he were not simultaneously aware of the physical space that he occupied at a given moment, he could have lost himself in the reality of his memories. When he was younger, he would forget that his parents didn't remember things the same way. It was not intentional; it just slipped his pre-teen mind, and his

mom would remind him that the thing he was talking about happened eight months ago, not that morning. There just seemed to be so little difference. It was as though there were ten billion tiny historians constantly dusting off books and quietly doing research in his head. They were creating inferences and linking articles together that seemed to have been forgotten.

He could remember being born, and taking his earliest steps across the kitchen in his parents' home on Marshfield Avenue. He could remember what the doctor and his parents talked about in the office when he was five years old and was diagnosed with leukemia. The thing missing from those earliest memories was adequate analysis, understanding, and introspection. He felt that, while it was easy enough to recall the events that happened at the earliest moments of his life, he only truly benefitted from the experience later. Afterwards.

Jacob knew that he was fortunate to have successful, well-educated parents. If his mother had not been a vascular surgeon and his father not the chief of staff in the mayor's office, he probably would have died, tragically, at a very young age. They had the means, the contacts, the knowledge, and the access that made his procedure possible, when it was still at a very early stage of scientific development.

“Doctor Reilly,” the doctor had said to Jacob's mother when he was five, “I don't know how much you keep up on the nanotech industry—”

Jacob's mother had nodded, half to the pediatric oncologist, half to her husband.

“Yes, obviously, the potential applications would reach into virtually every field of medicine that there is, but from what I've read it's still very experimental.”

“Well, that’s true, to a point. It’s an untested technology with human hosts, and the full potential of the machines hasn’t been explored. I have a good friend from med school working out in Baltimore on this research.

“The laboratory experiments we’ve seen published have been with lower mammals and primates, low-tech, first-generation machines, so on. We’re talking about the nanocolonies that are controlled through a central processor; sort of a remote control for the masses. But Johns Hopkins is ready to consider human testing. They are looking at a new type of nanobot now that works completely internally and takes direction from a network of machinery that lives inside the host. It might actually be a lower-risk procedure, because there are fewer injections, and the treatment is more sustained.

“General Robotics in Detroit is growing colonies of specialized nanobots for specific diseases and conditions, and they’re doing very well in simulations. The thing that can only realistically be tested in a live biological environment is: how beneficial could this treatment be over time? The machines are learning, they’re adapting the whole time they’re in there. The tests that have been done simply haven’t left them in a living host indefinitely.”

Jacob could remember his father clutching his shoulders, kneading them gently as he listened. In Jacob’s original memory of that conversation, he tried to put his young mind at ease with the thought that perhaps his parents and the doctor weren’t talking about him. His mom was a doctor, and he heard her and his dad talk about hospital work before. It hadn’t affected him in the least. But young Jacob also knew he was sick. He knew that his dad had told him it would take a long time, and lots of trips to the doctor,

but he didn't want to think he was the subject of this conversation with the new doctor he'd never met.

Jacob remembered there were a lot of tests and needles and hospital gowns at home in Chicago when he first got sick. He remembered the train ride to Baltimore, and seeing Chesapeake Bay for the first time. He could remember thinking how nice it was at the apartment on the campus, the way that he and his mom and dad were together nearly all the time. Even at the hospital, there were so few moments when it was only him and a nurse or doctor. He recalled those days and that togetherness very fondly.

After one hundred ninety-three days, and twenty-two treatments, and daily visits to this office or that, they went home to Marshfield Avenue. Jacob continued to feel better, just as his dad said that he would. Two hundred seventy-one days after his first treatment in Baltimore, they visited with the pediatric oncologist again, who declared Jacob cancer-free.

“The danger, of course, is to attempt to remove or eradicate the machines at this point. The cancer is in complete remission. The machines did exactly what they were designed to do. With a map of how a healthy cell should look and operate, they went in and deactivated and repurposed the cancerous cells. Those very cancer cells were used by the nanobots for their own replication and ultimately, reconstruction of healthy cells. They actually put you back together even better than you were before, Jake!”

Jacob's mother stroked her son's hair as he sat in her lap. “We knew there was a good chance that the machines wouldn't be able to be removed afterwards. But now, how do we know what will happen next?”

“We can only know with time. As of today, those machines know Jake’s body better than any of us do, and better than any test we can administer could hope to figure out. They’re fighting for you, Jake. As long as they keep fighting for you, you’re going to be just fine.”

Jacob visited twenty-six other doctors on a total of ninety-eight occasions after that day. But he was never sick again a day in his life.

He sat in his parents’ den, flipping through pages of printed photographs, remnants of a bygone era; an analog collection of memories, from a time when so much sensory stimulation was needed to access fuzzy bits of the past, imperfectly and inaccurately. Jacob imagined his parents’ unmodified brain cells like the corners of yellowing photo album pages, turning up and growing frayed with time.

“Why do you look at those books?” his mother asked as she entered the room, handing him a glass of water.

“Thanks, Mom,” Jacob took a sip. “I like to look through them. It’s interesting to see the moments that you and dad thought were important.”

Jacob was nineteen and visiting his parents on a weekend in June. His father’s retirement party was that afternoon. After a few days to visit, he would return to his internship at the Senator’s office in Washington. He was due to graduate from Brown after the fall term. His concentration was in political science, to the extreme disappointment of the math, engineering, computer science, and physics departments. For Jacob, math was too easy, physics too obvious. Poli-sci incorporated the vagaries of human emotion, the philosophies of government, and the skill of rhetoric. These were

disciplines with vastly greater variables that changed moment-to-moment in practice. Problems that were static, Jacob found too simple to solve.

“How is the internship at the Senator’s office going so far? I want to know everything!”

“It’s great, Mom. Senator Pahlow’s committee work is really diverse, and with the years he’s been in office, he’s got a lot of colleagues all over the city. I’m getting to meet all sorts of people. I’m looking forward to learning a lot this summer.”

“I was talking to my friend Triena the other day—you remember her, she used to live in the building next door on Marshfield?—I told her about your new job, and it turns out her daughter, who’s going to be a freshman in high school this year, is really interested in politics. So I told her you’d give her a call this weekend.”

“It’s not really a *job*, Mom, just an internship. I’m not sure what I would tell this girl.”

“Well, c’mon, you can give her some advice, things to do, classes to take, whatever. You know all this stuff, Jake.”

He shrugged. “OK, I’ll call her.”

Jacob had overcome a lot, at least in his parents’ minds. *He* knew that he was still getting started, and that there was some knowledge that he just didn’t possess. His mom didn’t see it that way. To her, his life was a miracle, and his potential, unlimited. By the time he reached college, he has rationalized that miracles did not actually exist. Every event that seemed “miraculous” could be explained through examination and deduction. Jacob’s cure was not a miracle, but rather a reasonable evolution of the medical

technology that was available to people like his parents at the time that his cancer presented.

“I want to hear more about the internship, but I’ve got to finish getting ready, and make sure your dad is set, too. You’re OK with just water?”

“Yes, thanks, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? We’ve got juice, I have diet soda, we have—”

“Really, Mom. This is fine.”

“OK, suit yourself.”

Jacob sipped his water and flipped through a few more pages of the album, recalling the events depicted in his parents’ pictures. The still images were a poor facsimile compared to his recall. He put the album down and rose to peruse his father’s plaques and books. His recollection of his own life was complete, but these were references to his father’s work, and some elements of them remained mysterious; they depicted events that Jacob had not experienced. He did know that his dad could have pursued a higher-profile job, given the years of service he had in a major metropolitan government, but Chicago was his home, and his dad was glad to have stayed there. Jacob had inferred that despite his own relatively healthy childhood (after the procedure, anyway), his father continued to feel a strong desire to stay close to home, and look after his family. Jacob could appreciate the sentiment.

Later that fall, in his final semester at Brown, Jacob would quickly wrap up his class work and look forward to returning home. Between his dad and the Senator’s

office, he knew that his career would continue along a solid trajectory. The weeks could not pass quickly enough for a young man who had grown disillusioned with the process of higher education. He knew that the school was not to blame, but the truth was that courses grew easier and easier for him over time. He discovered during his short, five-semester stay (plus the summers, of course) that the greatest conventional challenge of higher education was retention of all the knowledge disseminated over the balance of one's career. This was not an issue for Jacob at all. If a person has read enough books, and remembers every word, then passing tests comes fairly easily.

He had time to work on a number of side projects and ideas in that last year. He began to consider what a logical course in public service would include as he worked his way toward the US Congress. During that last fall, he would turn twenty years old, which meant that he could begin a campaign in four years, so long as he would be twenty-five by the time he was sworn to office.

Jacob found others at Brown who were like him, living in long-term nanotherapy, for a variety of reasons. During his last semester, the total at Brown climbed to fourteen. They knew each other casually and coincidentally, of course. Brown wasn't keeping that sort of demographic data any more than they were keeping a list of all the diabetics, or the asthmatics, or a tally of all the students who were near-sighted. At one point, George Shapiro had suggested forming a fraternity of NEBEs—nano-enhanced-bio-entities—but the group decided that to apply for recognition through the school would draw unnecessary attention. From the outside, they were simply a study group; the fourteen of them gathered to exchange information and ideas from their classes, and to discuss the

individual projects that they were working on. Anthony Bingham had started in the same semester as Jacob. Jacob considered him a colleague and reliable classmate, but stopped short of classifying him as a friend. Friends, he decided, needed to share trust. Jacob drew a distinction between reliability and trustworthiness, and Bingham was on the wrong side of that very thin line.

The group met on a Thursday evening in October at the French Quarter, the same bar where they had met for the last three years. The new freshmen were explaining the problems they were having with several professors; class work that was unfulfilling. Experiments they had already completed. Ideas that they had already processed to conclusion. Jacob offered the idea that a light traditional course load left ample time for private study and additional projects. Bingham's frustration had been percolating for two-and-a-half years; it finally erupted.

"Reilly is right, you end up with plenty of time to do your own work, but who is guiding it?"

Jacob had seen the frustration building in his classmate for some time and anticipated his argument.

"We are here to guide it. The group guides it. Isn't that what we're doing here?"

"My point is, are we here because we like to talk, or is there something that we can do? We spend these Thursdays masquerading as average students when it's so obvious that this work is below us."

Jacob appreciated being challenged, but he consistently fought off Bingham's technocratic ideology. Jacob's father was a public servant. He understood what

government by the people meant. He valued the contributions of everyone, regardless of how small some contributions could be.

“You know that I think you go too far. To dismiss average human knowledge as irrelevant... You’re dismissing the biological roots of your own mind. You’re human, Anthony, whether you like it or not. Everything you’ve learned, the things you’ve read, they come from the human mind.”

“But did they? You said that we—the group—are here to guide each other, and to fill in the gaps where this system falls short. Why do we need *anyone* else, when there is more knowledge being created, right here in this room?”

“That might prove true, but what makes you so anxious? Do you have so little regard for your fellow man that you would toss aside everyone that’s not like you?”

“Jacob, you’ve seen this change coming as much as any of us. More nano-therapy patients are implanted every day. The world will be different, and we have the capability to make the future whatever we want.”

The rest of the group was accustomed to the debates. Although some of them were older than Jacob or Bingham, these were the two that had lived with the nanobots the longest. Their positions held the strongest foundations.

“I think that your disregard for the sanctity of life is evident in your argument.”

“I think that your struggle with irrational emotions undermines yours.”

Jacob hoped that their debates would continue after leaving school. Or perhaps he wanted to hope, in order to give the desire an emotional resonance. In truth, he *knew* that they would continue.

Chapter 2

On a Thursday morning in March, David Adamovich was riding in the back seat of his sister's Volkswagen, across from his nephew. David's brother-in-law was behind the wheel, headed for the church. David hadn't been to a mass since Christmas, and before that, it was years. He glanced over to his nephew, just a couple months more than four, running his toy *Hot Wheels* car around the edges of the his window. It crashed into the back of his dad's seat three times before his mom spoke up.

"Julian, that's enough. If you're going to play with the car, do it on the seat next to you, please. Dad is driving."

"He's OK," Julian's dad countered, "it's not bothering me."

Julian's mom tried to distract her son with another topic.

"Julian, why don't you tell Uncle David about what you're learning in school?"

Julian sheepishly looked at his feet, kicking his seat with the backs of his heels as he slowly ran his toy along his leg.

"What did you learn how to do last week?" his mom prodded him.

"Mmmmm..."

David looked as interested as possible, at the same time remembering that when he was four, he didn't like talking to relatives that he hardly ever saw, either.

"Go on, tell him."

Julian stayed tight-lipped, but lifted his right leg and pointed to his foot.

His mom explained, "Did you learn how to tie shoes?"

Julian was struggling to not be proud of his accomplishment; the embarrassment of being in the car with his uncle was just enough to keep him from saying anything about the event. He nodded affirmatively and continued to stare at his toy.

“Wow, high-five, buddy! That’s pretty neat!”

Julian reluctantly slapped Uncle David’s open palm. David thought about the other things that he missed day-to-day, living so far away.

“So, did you tie your shoes this morning?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

Julian looked down at his laces again as he continued to kick the seat with his heels.

“Well, good job,” David continued, “Gosh; soon, I bet you’ll be getting up early to make breakfast for mom and dad, right?”

“No,” Julian knew his uncle couldn’t possibly be serious.

“And you’ll probably start doing all the laundry for mom...”

“Noo!” Julian laughed at the hilarious implication.

“Well, OK, but you’re going to keep practicing with those shoes, right?”

“NOOO!” Julian gleefully smiled and yelled as loud as he could.

“All *right*, Julian! Calm down now, we’re going to see Grandma in a few minutes, and I want you to be good in church, OK?”

David gave his nephew a playfully stern look, silently mouthed the words ‘be good,’ and gave him a wink.

“Julian, did you hear me?”

“Yeeeeeeees...”

The boy turned back to look out the window as he kept kicking the seat. David, too, was shaken back to reality and began to think about how they were just minutes from saying good-bye to Mom for good.

He tried to tell himself that the futile struggle with breast cancer had been his mother’s choice, and it wasn’t worth it to dwell on the possibilities that never would have happened. Yes, the diagnosis was something that, in the middle of the 21st century, could have been dealt with easily, but there were certain choices that his parents had made—about where and how to live, and in this case, how to die—that he couldn’t do anything about. David and his father disagreed about a wide array of things, but what made it so goddamned frustrating for him was that they never disowned him, or stopped calling, or offering advice and guidance. It was as if David’s completely reasonable and rationale world-view was a phase that he would get through, and his folks were willing to simply watch him struggle, and wait. Even in his mom’s waning days, when David called them, furious, begging his mom to reconsider, after old-style traditional medicine had run its course and there was still time for nanotherapy, they seemed so at-peace with him, and with this disease.

“David, I’m sorry,” she’d said, “I hear what you’re saying, but I can’t do that.”

“Mom,” he had pleaded, “this isn’t just up to Dad. It is *your life*, Mom. It’s *literally* your life! Mom, you are so young and this doesn’t have to happen.”

As he remembered the conversation, his eyes began to well again, and his throat seemed to close.

“I can’t... believe... you’re telling me,” he had said, “that you would rather die.”

His mom, the one who was only days from dying at that point, still comforted her son.

“David, it’s OK. Honey, you know how your dad and I feel about these new treatments. When you go down that path, it’s... you’re just not really human anymore.”

“But, Mom, I’m telling you—”

“No, David, please. I know that you think it’s a small thing. It’s another step for technology, for modern medicine, I know. I have *heard* you. But David, it is *not* the same thing as having a pacemaker. It’s *not* the same as a prosthetic limb. It is having living, growing machines inside of you. And when you are combining human flesh and blood with a machine, then *you* are not the same thing.”

David hadn’t been able to speak through his tears.

“Honey, no one can live forever. And the ones who say that you can... they don’t believe in God, David.”

His mom had managed to calm him down a bit over the remainder of that last call. They talked about the house, and Dad’s trees, and plans for the summer. She brought up memories that helped him forget that she was sick: Cub Scout meetings, and swing sets, and summer croquet games in the yard. He didn’t want to resent his parents for the choices they made, but he felt like the world was ready to see that there was simply no reason for such ignorance and fear.

David was numb the first part of the mass. He had been to enough funerals. He

knew the readings. He'd heard them before.

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples. On this mountain he will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations; he will destroy death forever...

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans.

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, "Abba, Father!" The spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him...

The luncheon after the funeral was well-attended. His parents knew nearly every parishioner, and it seemed like each one of them at least stopped by. The last time David had been to the Knights of Columbus Hall was for a high school reunion. The place was more packed for his mom's funeral.

Some of the well-wishers stopped by to talk to him, but most spent their time with each other, or with his dad. David didn't get back to Mom and Dad's too much, so the only people who knew him were families from all the way back when he was growing up (precious few by that time), or those to whom Dad had pointed him out.

David leaned over a table with platters of crackers, cheese, and tiny, rolled-up

cold cuts. He picked a few, one at a time, and arranged them casually on the stiff little paper plate. An older woman sidled up next to him and picked up the serving thongs. David was content to ignore everyone else and be alone with his thoughts for a while, but this didn't seem to be the forum where it would happen. Both he and the woman began to reach for the same tiny slice of cheddar, and their eyes met for a fraction of a second. She quickly smiled, and he gestured that she should go first. David watched her hand shake as she gingerly worked the cheese onto her plate. The woman was short, frail, and dark liver spots peppered her skin. Still, she had clearly taken her time getting ready to go out: she wore a spotless, black wool coat, and four neat barrettes in her wispy white hair.

“You're Sandy and Jeff's son?” she asked quietly.

“That's right.”

“I'm so sorry,” she half-whispered, touching his upper arm with one hand, and cradling her plate of snacks in the other.

David nodded continuously, “Thank you. I'm sorry, you are..?”

“Oh, Angie Vugrenic,” she shifted her plate around and extended a feeble right hand. “Yes, hi. Your dad usually brings me communion on Saturdays. I don't drive anymore, so since my husband passed...”

“Sure, I understand. Well, it's so nice of you to come out for my mom.”

“Oh,” Angie shook her head, picking up a few more crackers. “So sad, just very sad, what happened. We've prayed for your family every day, and—”

“Thank you so much,” David wanted to get back to his chair, “Please, keep it up;

we'll need them!"

"Yes, yes," she nodded.

The hall emptied almost as quickly as it had filled. David was sipping bad coffee from a foam cup when his brother-in-law found him.

"Dave?"

"Hi, Erik."

"Could use your help with the flowers, man."

"OK," he swallowed the last of his drink and buttoned the front of his jacket as he stood.

David hadn't had a chance to talk much with his dad during the day. As the deacon of the church, there were so many people who wanted to wish him well; to extend their condolences and offer their help. David glanced over at his dad to see he was chatting with Angie Vugrenic. Dad's eyes were red and swollen, but his face remained calm. David tried to remember if his dad had always been this way; he remembered his childhood so differently.

Erik backed Dad's truck up near the door. It was March, but still chilly; trash bags were stretched carefully over the arrangements to protect them.

"How long are you planning to be in town?" Erik asked as he opened the tailgate.

He threw his overcoat into David's arms and climbed up into the covered bed of the truck, scuffing his shoes and knees, and staining the cuffs of his white shirt. David began handing off the flowers.

“I guess I haven’t decided how long for sure. Couple days, maybe. See what Dad needs.”

“Yeah. I know you’re usually over by us, but I think he’d probably like it if you stayed at the house with him.”

Staying at his parents’ house always got stressful after the first couple days. When Erik and Brianna moved up there, David felt like he could finally return “home” to relax.

“Sure, I can probably do that.”

“I just think he’d really appreciate it.”

Erik knew his dad better than David did. He’d have to trust him.

David’s dad drove the truck on their way back home. The radio was the only thing softly filling in the silence. David looked out the window at the shrinking snow banks along the highway. Grass was exposed at the edges of yards that they passed. David asked a few questions about work, the house, the church. They had short, easy answers. He didn’t look at his dad, or ask how he felt.

Back at the house, the mailbox had cards, sales flyers, and envelopes from insurance companies. Dad thumbed through a couple before retiring to the living room. David opened a beer from the fridge and swiped a thumb through the messages he’d missed on his phone. One from Ben LeClair, one of the local party bigwigs in Chicago. David would have a meeting with a possible Congressional candidate once he got back home. Another quick message from Brianna: “thanks for staying with dad.”

The hours of evening quickly passed. David made them a couple sandwiches near

dinner time; neither of them very hungry. By eight o'clock, Dad announced that he was going to sleep. David said OK and that he would be up for a while.

“I love you, son.”

“Love you, too, Dad.”

Dad got up first in the morning. David awoke to the sound of the radio and the smell of coffee brewing. It was ten minutes to six. He shuffled into the kitchen in his shorts and t-shirt, wincing a little at the light.

“Sleep OK?” Dad asked.

“Not bad, I guess.”

As he sat down at the table, David was thinking about the house, the place that he'd grown up. Things in the house that had certain places to be. Would they still be in the same spot in six months? In a year? He remembered his grandfather passing, and the years Grandma spent in the house alone. That house was a little different with both of them there than it was after Grandpa died, but things just faded, so that you barely noticed. Some of Grandpa's things didn't move for twenty years while others slowly disappeared. He thought about what would change for his dad.

“I have to go into town to meet with Father Jim this morning. I'll probably be back by about ten. You'll be OK here?”

“Sure, I'll be fine.”

“OK. Bri and Erik are coming over later, too. Julian has school until twelve-thirty.”

“Right, OK.”

In the afternoon, Brianna took care of making an early dinner. David and Erik helped a little here and there; Dad played with Julian in the living room. They sat down to eat, and it was sort of like Mom was gone on vacation. Somewhere near six o'clock, David and Dad kissed Brianna and Julian good-bye, and half-hugged Erik. They were alone again, and David thought about how he had two more days before he'd be back home.

They sat together in the living room that night, TV on, Dad flipping through the channels.

“I think I'll head home tomorrow, Dad.”

His father looked legitimately confused. “Oh? Tomorrow's Saturday.”

“I know, I just... maybe I'll be back in a week or two.”

He probably wouldn't.

“Well, whatever you need to do. I have to be at mass on Sunday at eight, so I thought maybe we'd all go, but...”

David was tired of acting like nothing was different.

“I don't really know what you want me to do here, Dad. I mean, you want me to hang around the house with you? Listening to the radio? You want me to, I dunno— should we shovel the roof? Do you want to clean the garage? What are we getting ready for? I don't really understand how I'm helping you right now.”

“Well, I'm sorry,” Dad countered, “This is the first time your mom died, so I'm kind of new at it.”

“But it’s not even like she’s gone. You go to bed at the same time, you get up the same way, we’re doing the same shit. I’m just... Jesus Christ, Dad. Just tell me what is going on!”

David felt tears begin to well up again. Maybe this was why they didn’t talk about it.

“David, I miss her so much.” His Dad began to cry, too. “Do you really think I’ve had a good night’s sleep since she was sick? I don’t remember the last time I slept through the night.

“Your mom was so important to me. But we didn’t need to talk about what we meant to each other every minute of every day. We just knew. If you know how much you love someone, and they know it, too, what do you need to talk about it for? We lived our lives, counting on each other for the things that mattered. We might have worried sometimes about money, or work, or about you kids. At the end of the day, though, we still had each other. Even when we were apart, I talked to your mom at the end of the day, every day, for forty-six years. How can you sit there and say that nothing has changed? How would you know? Should I have written it all down for you? Was I supposed to deliver a monologue at the beginning of every day, so you would know what I was thinking and feeling?

“I was there for her when she needed me, David. She was there for me. We were both there for you and your sister, whenever you needed us. Whenever you would let us. It’s not my fault you went away. We were always here. Every time you asked us for help, we gave it to you. I don’t know what else you expect from me, or what else you

want me to say.”

David could not find any words.

“But if you’re ready to leave, you should go. Your family is here, but if you don’t need us, then just go. Call me when you want something.” David’s dad stood to leave the room.

“I want you to tell me,” David shouted after him, “why you both let this happen! I’m trying to understand what point of this sacrifice is. Does it make you feel better somehow? Does it make you feel more holy? Mom is gone, and the only thing that’s been proven is that you can stay committed to these values. You’ve proven that your faith is unshaken, and once your mind is made up, it’s done. If you’ve decided what’s right, you can never admit that there’s another way.”

His dad crinkled his brow and shook his head. “Boy, you never get this. I’m so sorry for not helping you to see the faith more clearly. But I don’t know what else I could have done. You think your mom died because she and I were *stubborn*? How dare you make such a narrow-minded assumption!”

“*I’m* narrow-minded? Then explain it to me, Dad! Here we are. We’re finally talking about this. Go ahead!”

“Son, if you believe, then you know that this life is not the end. We are less than perfect on this Earth, and it’s only through God and His Son that we can be better, be one with Him again. You have to believe this is true to find any comfort with the cycle of life.”

David’s mind had fought this battle before; fought with his parents’ beliefs, so

true to the faith in which they were raised. He had come to understand a different sort of truth, one based in things that he could see, and touch, and understand. Every religion in the world was at odds with the others to some extent or another. But, the people who put their faith in science—in things that could be demonstrated, tested, explained—they were the ones who had to defend their position the most.

“I know all that, Dad. I just can’t understand why, when you consider how far the Church has come, in so many ways, what is it about this last move that’s so difficult?”

“If I need to explain it to you, David, you don’t have any hope of understanding. If you can’t see the risks in what’s happening with these machines, or know that you need to *die* to live again, then all I can do is pray for you.”

His parents had chosen a simple life. The small things mattered for them. The small things were what made them. David’s dad was not his dad without the house, or the trees, or even the truck, or the yard, or the Church. He was feeling the truth of the distance between them and it made his heart ache. How could people so far apart in so many ways need each other so much? The pain in his chest filled the chasm between them. To cross it, David would have to pave over the top with the mundane and the meaningless. All the things that were so small would have to build the bridge. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to cross it again.

“I’m trying not to resent you, Dad. And I’m hoping I can forgive Mom. I’m just so tired right now.”

His dad began to walk out of the room. “You don’t have to want me to, but I pray for you anyway. I do it every day.”

Chapter 3

Jacob Reilly was fortunate to have excellent mentors when he began his career in public service. The time he spent in Senator Pahlow's office in Washington during college, and the afternoons in and around the mayor's office when he was a boy, gave him models for the behaviors and attitudes that made constituents put trust in him. It was those qualities that allowed him to enlist the services of David Adamovich as a campaign manager; it was the stories that he told during their first meeting. He talked about his father working in the mayor's office, and the importance of community involvement and activism that was imparted to him early on. He talked about the need for the people to have a voice, and a role in democracy, through the story of his time on the city council of Peoria. He described how, if you listen and let your constituents speak through you, *that* is the truth of representative government. He talked about the passion of civic leaders and how he noted that that same passion was absent from Washington during the summer that he spent interning with the Senator.

Adamovich had a desire to bring the best of what he felt his country had to offer to the least of its citizens. He wanted to believe he knew how to do that, and that he could make it happen in the company of the right sort of people. If Jacob was to employ a campaign manager (and for appearances sake at least, he needed to), he needed David Adamovich: someone experienced, but with plenty yet to prove; someone who believed strongly enough in his ideals to ignore the whispers of his own conscience from time to time. Jacob needed a campaign manager who would trust him, perhaps even in spite of himself.

In the spring of 2042, the race for the Sixth Congressional District of Illinois began to take shape quickly, and there were a number of activities that became very important for Jacob to attend to on a daily basis. He had a status meeting with Adamovich every morning, where they discussed the itinerary for the day and made any last-minute modifications that were needed. Early on, the schedule was light. It wasn't long before it began to fill quickly, and the meetings were needed to keep things straight. Adamovich needed them, anyway. Jacob remembered all the details without fail. Even the ones that people on his staff occasionally forgot. Jacob benefited from being a local man, someone with ties to a very popular mayor through his dad. In the brief elected and non-elected public offices that he'd held to that point, he had done the things he said he would do and steered clear of policies or ideas that he said he would. He was easily likeable, easy to read, and frankly: if not for being a NEBE, he might have been too boring to elect. He certainly might appear too young to the casual voting Chicagoan. He needed to rely on a clear, focused message that demonstrated he had the maturity and the knowledge to represent his district in Congress.

The facts of Jacob's past would have troubled older or more experienced party people who, on paper, might have been a better choice for Adamovich's job. When he was a student, interning in the Senator's office, his status as a NEBE was not a fact that he shared with anyone who didn't need to know. For Adamovich, it was near the top of his mind.

"I just... wow. That's really something." Adamovich had said in their initial meeting. "It's not really something I expected to be thinking about again so soon."

“Oh?”

“Yeah, well,” Adamovich swallowed, “my mom, she, uh, she passed away just recently.”

David Adamovich’s mother was a victim partly of choice, partly of circumstance, and medically speaking, of breast cancer. Jacob could *imagine* the pain and confusion of his loss, at the hands of a manageable disease, but his empathy was incomplete. Jacob had not shared a similar experience. At that first meeting, he had apologized for the loss before Adamovich continued.

“Right. Right, it’s OK... God, it’s just, she had cancer, it probably could have been cured, y’know? My folks have really strong convictions, powerful beliefs. It’s a hard thing, and I’ve just been trying not to think about it.”

Later, when it became relevant to the race, Adamovich had recommended that they needed to put his status as a NEBE in the public record from the start. Both men agreed that they didn’t want to come back to it later as a detail they were trying to conceal. Ben LeClair felt that since it was a matter of Jacob’s medical history, it should be left out completely; he thought it would give them more time to prepare to deal with the issue if they let it come out at its own pace, and that they could spin it as an unimportant detail later on. Jacob and Adamovich agreed that it made him a more provocative candidate; someone to talk about. They could generate more buzz around the campaign simply by being “the NEBE candidate.” They were right.

Jacob’s first interview with a national media outlet was just three weeks into his candidacy. He talked to Amy Lundin from Aol-Huff-Po about his family, growing up as a

NEBE, and his experience at Brown. He was surprised by the speed at which they brought up his old classmate, Anthony Bingham.

“You were both at Brown at the same time?”

“Yes, that’s true. We started at the same time, but we didn’t know that we were both NEBEs until we had a course on American government together during our third semester.”

“Your focus was political science; Bingham was there for... chemistry, right?”

“As I remember, that is correct.”

“Do you two keep in touch?”

“We reconnect occasionally, but I haven’t spoken to him in some time.”

“You’re probably aware, Mister Reilly, that Doctor Bingham has actually recently announced plans to establish a NEBE-only university. Had he ever mentioned anything like that to you?”

“I’ve heard Doctor Bingham’s ideas on innumerable topics. No doubt this was one.”

“Apparently, he has the financial backing. There is already a board of trustees, and as far as where to build a new campus, they are looking at this as an urban-revitalization project. They’re going to open the school in downtown Detroit, of all places.”

“A reasonable location for that type of project.”

Being in the same city as General Robotics would be helpful to Anthony’s research, no doubt.

“Mister Reilly, part of your candidacy is this notion that the NEBEs are like everyone else. Here is a colleague—a friend, even—someone with the same educational background, who is in direct opposition to that. He’s advocating isolation, more distance for the NEBEs.”

“I think what Anthony is doing actually reinforces my position.”

“Well,” she chuckled, “that’s interesting. How so?”

“Clearly: there are NEBEs with dissenting points of view. Doesn’t that very fact oppose the conventional viewpoint? That some sort of nanotech-driven hive-mind is going to take over the world?”

“So you do disagree with the idea that there should be an institute of higher learning that is accessible only to a very specific segment of the population.”

Jacob leaned back in his chair and smiled. “I think that it’s easy to get fired up about a proposal—an idea—that we don’t completely understand without thinking it through to the conclusion. Now, Anthony has talked to me about the idea of a school in the past, but the goal, as I understand, is not to exclude, but rather to give those students who need and want the most challenging programs possible a place to excel. I believe Doctor Bingham is talking about a system that benefits *everyone* that much more in the long run. It’s easy to jump to a conclusion that the university they’re talking about would only be accessible to NEBEs, but the intention, as I understand it, is simply to return an extremely high level of academic rigor to an institution that has become substandard for all sorts of people. The NEBEs are not the only ones who are inadequately challenged at our universities. We hear the same thing from all types of students, and not to mention

faculty.”

“You and Bingham are graduates from Brown—one of the more prestigious schools in the United States—you found the academic rigor there substandard?”

“Well, Brown is different, we—”

“You entered when you were seventeen, and you graduated in only five semesters.”

“That’s true, but I think that Brown is a poor example because the students are in such significant control of their program there. Look,” Jacob paused. “Every American student should have a chance to reach his or her full potential. If that means significantly changing the way that we practice higher education, then I think it’s a step in the right direction. Anthony Bingham is creating a model that could potentially reinvigorate and revolutionize our entire educational system.”

“Some people have said that the move to open this university, at the same time that you are running for Congress, is not a coincidence. They think that what we have on the horizon is a precursor to a broader agenda of technocracy.”

“Well, Amy, that is absolutely ridiculous. The idea that we are better governed by those few that happen to be the smartest today, goes against everything that we’ve been raised to learn about our favored system of government. Everything that *I*, and Anthony Bingham, having both been raised in the United States, learned about democracy.

“When we get into conversations like this, it seems like you, or other interviewers want to paint me or someone like Bingham as an outsider; I cannot stress this enough: it is *not* as though we dropped from outer space with an agenda and a dramatically different

way of seeing the world. We are still Americans. I was born in an American household with a father who *worked* in government. I love the United States as much as any of your readers, and you would be hard pressed to convince me (or any of the American NEBEs like me, for that matter) that our democracy, when practiced honestly and purely, is not the best system of government that we know.”

“Oh, that is brilliant stuff,” Adamovich finished reading the column that Amy Lundin would submit to her editor in the morning. “You were able to turn it around on her, and you kept the message of equality and opportunity out in front. Just great work, Jacob.”

“Thanks, David. It’s important to me that we address the school, and the true lack of differences between ‘average’ people and the NEBEs, but I don’t want these things to steal focus from the issues facing the District. Now that we’ve talked about Bingham’s school, I’d like to defer future questions about it back to you, and to our literature.”

“Yes, absolutely. I’m going to start putting excerpts of this interview in our next print order, and I’ll get a staffer to digest the important stuff on the website right away.”

“Both good ideas,” Jacob agreed.

“Oh! Before I forget,” Adamovich continued, “I was just talking with Ben, he’s got us booked for a few more local appearances, just around town, and he says he did get a call from the state party, they want to talk to us about ‘what we need,’ so that’s another step in the right direction. It’s getting exciting around here!”

Jacob smiled. The campaign was proceeding as he expected it to. With the state

party behind him, it meant a much larger share of resources would be available to handle day-to-day campaign operations. Soon, he could begin focusing his message on the incumbent, Representative Clark Bengston.

“That all sounds fine. I’m going to be in my office for a while, but please come and find me if you need anything.”

“No problem.”

Jacob walked back to his office, thinking that he needed to get in touch with Bingham, and soon. He had grown almost too focused on the campaign and his ultimate political goals that he’d lost sight of his old classmate’s agenda. It was a mistake to let Bingham lose touch, but there was still time to correct it. Jacob wondered how many more from the group were part of the movement to open the school. The interviewer had focused on some of the pragmatic details, but Jacob knew that none of these were that important to Bingham’s long-term goals. Once a formal structure had been established for the group to work with the rest of the NEBE population, there would be no need for them to assemble covertly or to attempt to blend in with the rest of society. It was only Bingham’s first move, but an important one. Jacob dialed, and the phone rang twice.

“Hello, Reilly.”

“Caller ID makes your greeting less ominous, Anthony.”

“You know, it *really* surprises me that video calling never took off, either; it has to be because when people call each other on the phone, they don’t want the other person to know that they’re not paying much attention. Don’t you agree?”

“I’m confident that I have your undivided attention.”

“I could divide it as many times as you like, it changes nothing.”

Jacob stood to look out his office window; it faced the floor of the campaign headquarters. Adamovich thought it would look good to staffers and visitors to see their candidate on display, hard at work, in the middle of the room.

“I’ve heard that you’ll be opening your school soon.”

“Of course, you have a standing offer for a faculty position. You’ll understand that I need to retain the presidency, at least for the time being.”

“I’m concerned about the timing. The system that’s been in place has served our needs; yours *and* mine. I can be in Washington in less than a year, and who knows what other progress there could be in that time.”

“I’ve decided—no, I take that back, the *group* has decided—that we do not need to work on other peoples’ timetables any longer. A year might as well be a century, Reilly. Haven’t you felt it?”

Jacob *had* noted that his capacity to anticipate future events was expanding. Part of him had known that Bingham would be opening the school now. He had seen himself having the very phone conversation now taking place. Another part of him wanted to dismiss the premonitions as the musings of imagination.

“I’m not sure that I know what you mean, Anthony.”

Bingham breathed hard into the phone. “Reilly, Reilly, Reilly... What is it that made us so different? We haven’t talked enough. I haven’t seen you in more than three years.”

“With good reason.”

A staffer waved for Jacob's attention on the other side of the window. He held up a hand-written note in marker, "MAYOR ON THE PHONE FOR YOU".

"Look, Anthony, I'd like to talk more about it in detail. In person. Can you come to Chicago?"

"I'm in Chicago now."

Jacob was legitimately surprised. He was not accustomed to the sensation.

"Reilly? Should I call you tomorrow, then?"

Jacob had always had the impression that he was at least a few iterations ahead of Bingham in cognitive evolution. It had given him an edge in dealing with his colleague over the years. He now wondered if Bingham had caught up to him somehow.

"It's fortunate that we can meet, here in your hometown. A few of us have been working on a method to share information that I would love to demonstrate for you. It's something you might have kept up on if we had been meeting more regularly these last few years. But we can get you caught up."

Jacob paused for a beat. "I'll speak with you tomorrow."

Chapter 4

David had spent years honing the skill of not sharing information with his parents if he had even the slightest notion that they would react poorly. To go to his dad, and tell him about the campaign face to face, went against that instinct. This was different than becoming a Democrat, or even moving in with his college girlfriend. The job wasn't that new anymore, and Dad was going to find out eventually. Reilly's campaign was going to be national news. David called his sister for some advice.

"You know how Dad is about the positions of the Church on issues, and how closely he follows everything they say. Since the Pope came out in the NEBEs favor last week, you've got nothing to worry about with Dad," she sounded genuinely reassuring.

"I hope not. I just... I really had it out with him after the funeral. Because of the way that Mom died, the strength of those beliefs, I feel like this is unlike everything else. It's not like when I first told him that I was going to volunteer at the party office in Rockford instead of getting a job after graduation. That, he just thought was a stupid decision, but it didn't affect him directly."

"Yeah, well, I still think you could feel him out with a phone call, but it's up to you..."

"After the last time we were together, I feel like I kind of owe him."

"OK, good luck. Give me a call once you get into town."

"I will. Thanks, Bri."

"Sure. Bye."

With Reilly's campaign gaining some national exposure, eventually all the people

involved were going to become part of the story. It was important for David to have a talk with his dad before anything took the old man by surprise. The change in the stance of the Church was another matter altogether, albeit a related one. Between these things and his mom only being gone for a couple months... David imagined the walls in his parents' house as an echo chamber where all the things hanging on Dad's mind could get louder and stronger and heavier each day. He had considered calling ahead to give Dad some warning about the trip, but he worried that he would lose his resolve, take Brianna's advice, and just try to talk it over on the phone. He and his folks might have had very little in common, but they had always been there for each other. At a time like this when his dad could use some support, he saw it best to go in person.

Like any profoundly good Catholic, Deacon Jeffry Adamovich framed a lot of his worldview around the guidance that came down from Rome. First, was the non-intelligent nanotech: no problem for the Church; they were still just computers. You could turn them off. Then, intelligence simulation: harder to justify, but as long as it was a "simulation" of human intelligence, not a computer that was aware of its own existence, the Church let it slide.

It turned out simulators were only a blip in the technological evolution anyway. An interface for the human brain to an intelligence-simulating machine was very likely possible, but now unnecessary with the advent of intelligent nanotech. Instead of sending a person's brain across a cable and into a machine, science had found it was much simpler to build tiny machines and place them inside the human body. Although someone like Reilly had been infused with the thinking and learning nanobots some

twenty years before, they had only very recently come into popular medical use.

The trouble was that the guidance on nanotech was unofficial. Like a lot of social issues, there would always be purported believers, regular churchgoers and “mostly-Catholic” men and women who took the best parts of the faith, the ones that they liked, and allowed themselves some flexibility for the rest. Conventional Catholic wisdom said that infusing one’s body with reasoning, thinking machines was a modification of the soul. It was not acceptable to tamper with God’s creation any more than it was permissible to end the life of an unborn child. In truth, there were people even in David’s father’s church who were OK with intelligent nanotherapy. But David’s parents’ position was abundantly clear. His mom died because of it.

When the Church finally and officially updated their take, and so soon after she was gone, you could say that it was a blow, but that would be like calling Hiroshima a small, tactical airstrike. At least that was how David saw it. The determination of the Church was that, while nanotherapy was shown to be an enhancement of the body and the mind, the person who had been born of man and woman was still present in form and function. Nanotherapy, his Holiness decided, was akin to a polio vaccination. It was a treatment for disease, and the benefits to the mind, while significant, were not unlike a lifetime committed to study. If the Church could accept the laws of gravity, relativity, and the existence of sub-atomic particles, they would accept nanobots as well. He couldn’t know for certain if it would have changed how they had decided to treat her cancer. That was part of what he was going to his dad’s to find out.

It was late spring, and up north, where the locals quietly hibernated through the

first few months of each year, activity was returning. The weekend population began to swell. Fishing season was in full force the weekend that David went to see his dad, and men pulling boats behind trucks and SUVs dotted the interstate along the way. The leaves of maples, oaks, and poplars were filling in, erecting a lush forest wall just on the edge of the road. The sun remained in the sky longer and longer; even as he drove late in the afternoon, it was far above David's head.

At his dad's house, there wasn't a lot of evidence of things happening since the funeral. The plow truck was still in the yard; by now, it should have been put away for the season. Branches and leaves peppered the yard, though they were being overwhelmed by the growing grass.

David arrived close to dinnertime on Friday, a time of day when he would expect to see his dad working somewhere outside. The house seemed quiet; everything still. He pounded a couple times on the front door before turning the knob open; the doors were never locked.

"Dad? Hey, it's David! Dad!"

An unshaved figure in a t-shirt and jogging pants emerged from the hallway that led to the bedrooms in the back of the house. David's dad looked a little unkempt, but not unhealthy.

"David? Hey, what are you doing here?" he stretched out his arms to embrace his son.

"I wanted to check in with you, see how you were doing. Remember, I said I'd be back in a couple weeks. I know it's been more than that, but—"

“God, I just wish you would have called. I would’ve picked the place up a little bit...”

His voice trailed off as he hastily gathered up a stack of junk mail on the floor near the front door. David looked around the living room to spot dirty dishes and empty cans littering the end tables. The air was stale and musty; like a veil of dust and grime was draped over everything. Just opening up a window would have helped.

“No, don’t worry about it, Dad, it’s OK.”

“How long can you stay?”

“Probably just the weekend. I’ve got a lot happening with work. It’s part of why I came—”

“Boy, I’m really glad to see you,” his dad interrupted again. “Too bad we’ve only got a couple days, but... I missed you. I was sorry about how we left things after the funeral.”

“Yeah, me too, Dad. We’ll talk about it some more, but before that, what do you need help with around here? Why aren’t you dressed, didn’t you work today?”

“I haven’t been going in every day. They told me I could take some time with your mom and all... Oh, let me show you this!” he scrambled into the kitchen, David in tow.

“What is it?”

“Here, this is what we picked for Sandy, err—your mom’s—stone.”

David had seen it already. “Right, yeah, Bri sent me a picture, asked me for some feedback. I think it looks great.”

In addition to Mom's name and dates, the phrase "beloved wife and mother," would be carved, and a bouquet of daisies laser-etched on the side.

"Oh, OK," Dad was focused on the picture. "Yeah, I like how they'll be able to do the flowers. She loved those daisies..."

"Hey, Dad," David took the picture from him and put it back on the table. His father's eyes followed it down.

"Dad, how are you feeling? Are you doing OK?" Brianna hadn't mentioned that Dad wasn't going to work, or staying holed up in the house all the time. Maybe she didn't know.

"How good am I supposed to feel, I guess?" he asked with a feigned smile. "It just didn't really hit me right away. When you kids were here right after she was gone, it helped a lot."

David wanted to reassure him. "You know, Bri and Erik are here for you, if you need something. You can call me whenever you want to, too."

His dad sloughed off the offer. "I don't like to bother you. We're all busy; we've got our lives to live. I just need to work through it."

"But you don't have to do it by yourself."

David looked around the house, out the windows into the yard, and wondered if he could get a couple extra days away from the campaign. He thought that he might be able to get work done over the phone and ask Ben to step in for him if something unexpected came up.

"So, look, it's about five-thirty," David started. "Do you want to hop in the

shower, change your clothes, and we can go out to eat?”

His dad sighed. “We could, I guess. What if you called in an order to be picked up, and we could just eat at home?”

“I think I want to get you out of the house for a little while, Dad.”

“David,” he huffed with mild frustration, “I’m OK. I’m not going crazy or anything. You caught me on a day that I decided not to go to work, and you didn’t call ahead, so the place is a little cluttered up. I know you’re worried, or whatever, and maybe your sister is, too, but really, let’s just... we can relax and enjoy a visit.”

David considered relenting. It was possible that everything was fine, but he wanted to feel like he could be sure.

“I dunno, Dad, I hear what you’re saying, but I also kind of had my heart set on the fish at the Red Man on my way up. Let’s go out. C’mon, it’s my treat.”

They went out to dinner, and David welcomed the familiarity of a Northwoods visit. No matter what else was going on in the world, some things about the people and the places there seemed like they were stuck in a sort of time warp: the Red Man Supper Club (the least politically-correct name of any restaurant in the area) had been there for eighty years, and there was no reason to think it wouldn’t be around for another eighty; the winding back roads were resurfaced time to time, but they never got any wider; and even the names on the mailboxes didn’t change all that much. At the bar in the restaurant, there seemed to be a demographic group that was perpetually middle-aged; fifty-something-ish, maybe a few that were a little older, and a couple that were a little younger. David swore that their faces were the same ones he remembered from when he

was a kid. He and his dad had some important things to talk about, but it could wait until after one nice, average evening together.

David resolved to talk things over with his dad the next morning, but it started like most Saturdays. Dad up early, making coffee. David slept in, until almost seven. A few idle words of chit-chat about fishing season and the status of the lakes. Dad leaving for an hour or so, a couple small errands to town. He was back by nine-thirty.

David started to think that maybe his dad was OK. The visit was feeling profoundly normal. It could be that David got himself worked up about it, and about Reilly and his mom, for no good reason. His dad poured the last cup of coffee before briefing his son on the next task of the day.

“Hey, so, when you got here yesterday, I was on the computer. You’ve got to see some of this stuff that I’m working on.”

David sipped his own cup and said, “OK, sure,” as he followed his dad down the hall and into the third bedroom, which had served as a little office for years.

“First of all,” Dad started as he sat and clicked on the monitor, “I’m assuming you know about the Church publishing their take on the nano-whatevers.”

David just nodded.

“Yeah, so,” he squinted at the screen, tapping windows open and sliding them around with his finger, arranging them in a very particular way, “I didn’t really know how to tell you and Brianna, but I decided I would have to leave the clergy. And the Church. It’s just too much for me to concede.”

All of David’s anxieties rushed back at full strength. “Dad, I—”

“No, no,” he waved his hand, cutting David off. “I made up my mind about this. That’s part of why I’m working less. I haven’t gone in at the church in about two weeks now. Father Jim knows. He tried to talk me out of it, but I told him that I needed time away to think. I guess I wanted to leave things open, in case I ever did decide to go back—if they ever changed their stance on it—but I don’t think that’s going to happen. I don’t know if I’d want to go back now even if they did.”

David’s dad wasn’t one to rush into decisions. He generally took his time to form an opinion, and then stuck with it. This news came way too quickly. His parents were extremely devout people, and they seemed to have grown more so in the years after he and Brianna were out of the house. His dad became a deacon at fifty-three, and after eight years of that sort of service, and study, David imagined it would be tremendously tough to just walk away. Maybe the intensity of his parents’ faith was part of the problem, though. Maybe those casual Catholics had it right; practice your faith, but not too hard, or one day it could betray you.

“Well, it turns out,” he continued to tap open bookmarks all over the screen, “I am not the only one who was a little unnerved by this move.”

The heading on the web page read, “The Ministry of Pure Human Piety for Exiled Catholic Men and Women.”

“Dad, what is this?” David began to skim the page, keying on phrases like “the sanctity of true human life,” and “the necessity of corporeal death before the Second Coming.”

“Look, I know that you didn’t see eye-to-eye with me and your mom about her

treatment, and you wanted us to consider a different path, but it seemed to go against everything that we were taught about preparing for... well, for the Second Coming.”

David could explain the myriad reasons that this was a bad idea. “Dad, I—”

“Stop it, now, listen to me. It’s not fair to have no limit on the space where you can talk about the ‘truth’ of science and leave out all the room for faith. I know that we were both upset when you left last time, but just hear me out.”

David sighed. “I’m listening.”

“Now, there has not been a schism like this in centuries. There are people all over the world, David, leaving the Church in droves. I really don’t know what the Pope thought was going to happen; opposition to the nanotherapy wasn’t written into Church law, but it was so commonly practiced,” he shook his head at the screen, his voice trailing off, “just makes no sense...”

“Anyway,” he focused back on his pitch. “There are some bishops and priests, especially here in North America, who have written about this, explaining why they feel that the Holy Father has been led astray, and well, you know the way information moves across the world these days. A lot of people are reading it. They’re getting involved here. They’re organizing, and I think there might even be a sort of new church forming around this idea.”

“What idea *exactly*, Dad?”

“The idea that life, as God created it, is sacred, holy, and cannot be changed. They are holding on to the original position: nanobots are introducing a second intelligence into the body, and that perverts the intent of God’s creation. This is moving

beyond even just a Catholic thing, David. Look at this!” He frantically thumbed through message board pages, and more web sites, “There are Lutherans, Episcopalians, they all feel the same way.”

David stood in stunned silence.

“This bishop from Toronto, Bishop Haas,” he pulled up a picture. “He’s the one leading the movement. He’s called for a meeting of all former clergymen who have left the Church and feel drawn to this idea, to formalize some articles of faith, and try to become officially recognized as an organized religion. They’re planning to have it in Detroit in late June.”

Detroit. Where Anthony Bingham’s school would be opening as early as the fall.

David pulled the ottoman away from the chair in the corner, up nearer to his father’s desk. He slowly sat down, allowing a few moments of silence to break in. Finally he spoke.

“I would not have thought that this is what you were going to tell me. I was afraid that...”

David realized how ridiculous and benign his fears had been: in truth, he was afraid of his dad committing suicide because of the change in the Church. He was scared of being disowned for not only condoning the existence of the NEBEs, but actually working for one. His sixty-year-old father swearing allegiance to some fringe religious sect had not even been on his radar.

“Dammit, I dunno what I was afraid of. Look, how do you know what this group is *really* about, Dad? Have you talked with anyone? I mean, you show me a bunch of

websites and a picture of some bishop. It sounds kind of,” he didn’t want to lump his dad into the group, but, “well, like some really crackpot, crazy stuff, Dad.”

His dad nodded slowly, slightly. “I know.”

David almost sensed him wavering a little.

“I know, David, but I’ve read everything! I’ve emailed Bishop Haas, I’ve talked to people on the boards here... I think it’s exciting because it *is* so new, you know? If you want to know what their agenda is as an organization, that’s the whole point here: there really isn’t one yet. *I* can help shape that!”

“*You* can?”

“Like I said, I’ve been in touch with the Bishop. He wants me to come to Detroit this summer. They want to have at least a hundred representatives from a variety of positions within the old organizational structure, and they want people from all different dioceses around the world. It’s going to be a very big thing, and I’m going to go.”

David decided it was no time to drop the news about Reilly, the campaign, and his true feelings about the whole idea. He could see that he had stepped in on his dad at a critical, but still early, stage. Maybe he could talk him out of it. Maybe he could get Brianna to help. Maybe even reach out to Father Jim and get his dad back to church, where he could get a dialogue going and sort these feelings out.

“I can’t tell you what to do, Dad. And I wouldn’t assume to.”

“David, I’m your father. I’ve known you longer than you’ve known yourself, OK? I can see that you think I’m nuts, but here’s the truth: no one will ever really know until Christ Himself comes back to Earth.”

David struggled not to roll his eyes, out of habit. “Dad, I’m just trying to have a conver—”

“It *is* true; it is what we raised you to believe. I pray for you always, son, that you will see the way back. But you will not be able to shake my faith.”

David knew that. “I just want you to be careful with this whole situation, and think—pray—really hard about everything before you make a leap. I know that you’re a faithful man, Dad. And I wish you would believe that I am, too, in my own sort of way. I just don’t think there is only one right answer to some of the questions that are at hand.”

His dad smiled, and subtly nodded. “You see, that is what I pray about; some questions *do* have just one right answer. And if you look in the right places, you *will* see that it’s already been revealed.”

Chapter 5

Bingham called Jacob early the day after the Amy Lundin interview. He wanted to meet on Michigan Avenue.

“I haven’t been to your side of the lake before. I wouldn’t mind seeing Grant Park.”

They arranged to meet at three in the afternoon, at the corner of Eighth Street and Michigan. Bingham was waiting when Jacob arrived. He sat on a stone bench, watching the gulls peck around along the sidewalk. Jacob got out of a cab at the corner of Eighth and, without hesitation, began crossing the street, just as the walk signal changed in his favor. Bingham hadn’t looked in his direction yet, but he rose from his seat as Jacob drew closer.

“Afternoon, Reilly,” Bingham had still not turned.

“Hello, Anthony.”

Jacob felt compelled to stop short, a few feet separating him from his old colleague. Bingham began to extend a handshake, but quickly realized that Jacob was not reciprocating.

“That’s fine, let’s just walk.”

Jacob recalled the very first time he encountered Anthony Bingham, in a US government course, in 2035. The professor was Julie Stubbs. The room that the class met in had windows on the east wall, facing the street. It was on the second floor. On the first day of class, the temperature in the room was seven degrees warmer than outdoors. Gregory Nimz, a fellow student, asked for permission to open the window as soon as

attendance was taken. Julie then asked if any student had a chance to look at the text prior to the start of class. Jacob's and Bingham's hands went in the air.

At the time, Jacob recalled how he had read the texts in advance for all of his classes, in their entirety, throughout his academic career. He observed that it consistently made the classroom discussions more relevant and his interactions with the instructors more useful. It was also helpful for the instructors themselves, who could count on Jacob to recall page numbers, the text of given passages, and the full accuracy of minute details without fail. Months later, Bingham had explained that if he read the books ahead of time, he was afforded greater opportunity to focus on his own projects.

“I'm surprised to see you in Chicago, Anthony.”

Bingham looked out toward the water. “Nothing that happens between us surprises me anymore.”

Jacob and Bingham met outside of their first class together during the second week of the semester. Both of them had completed the necessary coursework for the entire term. Bingham suggested they could collaborate on side projects or some more complex problems. Jacob was not quite eighteen when they first met, but Bingham was nearly twenty. He had been in a serious car accident as a teenager and received nanotherapy to help reconstruct his shattered legs and repair an aneurysm in his brain. Bingham referred to it as a “re-awakening” and sometimes referred to his age relative to his initial nano-injection.

“Well, you're the one who asked to meet, Reilly. I suppose you want to discuss one thing, mainly.”

Jacob nodded. "The school."

"You know that this is necessary on the way to the next step. You know that for the NEBEs to become a legitimate segment of society, we can't hide among the rest. We are unique. We're more than the rest of these... people. Don't you grow tired of holding back?"

Initially, the meetings that Jacob and Bingham held were just between the two of them. By their third weekly get-together, Bingham had also brought along Kimberly Watson, another classmate of his, and her friend George Shapiro, who was graduating that term, but planned to stay in Providence afterwards. Next, Anderson Merkel. Ronald Williquette.

"How many of the group are with you?"

Bingham smiled. "Here with us now, or at the school?"

Jacob held a straight face. He couldn't know if Bingham only inferred that some of the others had already merged consciousness with him or if they had truly found a way to do it.

"There are twelve more, altogether. Others will get on board. I wouldn't mind your help persuading a few of them."

The meetings proved to be a forum not just for conducting additional research, or discussing additional problems. They were useful as an outlet for full disclosure. The people in the group had all noted the changes that were occurring: the heightened senses, the lack of illness; for some, feeling like events in the future had already been experienced, or that they were in more than one place at a time. Each seemed to

experience a different set of manifestations at a different pace. Jacob had been in treatment the longest within the group, and could empathize with many of them.

Jacob replied, "I believe you know that I'm not here to champion your 'cause.'"

"Of course not. But I had to ask."

"I know."

They paused, the aquarium visible in the distance. The water of the lake rippled, apparently without pattern, but in perfect order. Sailboats dotted the bay. Groups of children were herded by teachers up and down steps.

"The weather here is just beautiful!"

Jacob disregarded the comment. "Tell me how your work is progressing."

Bingham was a biochemist and engineer. He had stayed at Brown after graduation to work on his research, and within fifteen months, completed a master's degree in engineering, and a PhD in bio-chem. The goal of his work was to improve the efficiency and storage capacity of nanocolonies.

"It's going very well, thank you. In the lab, we've been able to speed generational evolution by over three hundred percent. By moving the storage class machines into the cerebral cortex, we're estimating that we can cut recall completion down to under four weeks, for an average, forty-year-old patient."

Complete recall had taken Jacob twelve years to achieve, and he was just five when he had his surgery. For a person with forty years of memories to reach one hundred percent recall completion in a month was an uncanny achievement.

"And what about interfacing with existing hardware?"

Each person's initial injection of nanobots essentially become like another organ; a colony unto itself. The machines replicated in a particular manner and sequence for a given individual. In the early days of the procedure, additional injections after the assimilation of a host were risky at best, deadly at worst.

"It's effortless now. The new machines can analyze and sync to the neural pathways of any test host that we've used within seconds. An entire colony is replaced with a hybrid generation in under thirty minutes."

"You've done live testing, then?"

"There are always new students in the group ready to push the envelope."

Bingham's work could not proceed without existing NEBEs willing to undergo additional injections. The university might have understood his research to be geared toward helping the sick, but Jacob realized that it went far beyond that. Making normal humans better wasn't enough for him. He sought to become something still greater himself.

"This is how you've advanced so quickly?"

"Well," Bingham chuckled, "I had to catch up with you somehow."

"Are you here with me now, or are you in the lab?"

Bingham's grin grew wider. "Yes."

The group was founded, in large part, by curiosity. Each of them was experiencing an explosion of knowledge, understanding, and ability that was difficult to predict. None of them knew if or when the changes would end. Did the nanobots have a ceiling for their potential? Or was the only limiter the human mind? Bingham's abilities

did not seem to plateau, if he could now project his consciousness across space and time and physically manifest himself as a duplicate in Chicago. Jacob wondered how long he'd had the ability, and if Bingham's true corporeal self was the one at the research lab. He imagined a way to find out—interfacing directly with Bingham's mind—and knew that his own consciousness would not survive the encounter.

At that moment, Jacob reached the conclusion that he had allowed his preference for traditional humanity, and for his treasured interpersonal relationships, to govern his actions for too long. He had foolishly calculated that his rate of development would remain in constant balance with Bingham's, and that time would ultimately favor him. He might have looked further into the future and seen the developments now before him if it was an activity he enjoyed. He might have kept closer watch on Bingham and his activities, if not for his preference for home.

Jacob recalled his father's retirement party, six years in the past. He stood in the study, drinking in the photos on the walls, memories to which he had no access. His father came into the room, looking for Jacob's mother.

“Diana, have you seen my—oh, Jake!”

“Hi, Dad. Mom is upstairs.”

“That's fine; I was just looking for a different red tie. I know I have one somewhere that has,” he held the end of the tie up near his face, “it's got dots instead of swirls, I think. I like that one better.”

“I'm sure you'll find it. I think that one looks OK, too.”

“Thanks.” He wrapped his arm around Jacob's shoulder. “So how about this,

huh? One Reilly ready to leave city hall, another one getting set to replace him? Eh?”

He playfully shook Jacob’s shoulder, trying to get his son to laugh. Jacob obliged him.

“Maybe, Dad. We’ll see.”

“Sure would be a shame to let that internship go to waste.”

“I know. I won’t let that happen.”

“You know,” his dad stepped back, “I’ve been thinking about something that a lot of people have been saying to me lately: that I was lucky to be with the mayor at the time that I was. Or that your mom and I were lucky when it came to you. But I don’t think luck has much to do with it at all. I think it’s more like fate. Like things are just meant to happen a certain way. Like if we could see the future as clearly as you see the past, everything would already be there.”

“I can see,” Bingham continued, “that this is not what you expected. You are so simple, Jacob. You are plain. You let yourself be less, and for whose benefit?”

Jacob’s aspirations would have to be reassessed. His priorities reorganized. This would require all of his attention and effort. The future he had wanted might have been an illusion, or a fantasy.

“There are greater changes yet to come, Jacob, and I had hoped to have you be a part of it. But I see now that you are a part of the problem, rather than the solution. You are... an intermediary. *We*, the rest of us, are bound for *greater* things.”

From then on, Jacob could not afford himself the luxury of looking back. He could only allow himself to look forward. Further forward than he had pushed himself before. He had seen coexistence and mutually beneficial advancement in front of him.

He was certain of it. But in a universe of quantum possibilities, it may have been just one possible outcome.

“The school will likely be opening in the fall, but our work will be moving there in less time. I *have* seen you there. My offer remains open. This will give us the opportunity we seek, to select the strongest of the species to progress. With the advancements that are expected in the coming months, we will be ready for the next stage before this year is out.

“Jacob, it is for the benefit of *all*. We know the course of the planet’s history, the evolution of the species. This is another page. What can you hope to gain by delay?”

Jacob stopped walking.

“I think you should return to your lab, Anthony. I’ll see you there again.”

Chapter 6

David got a call from his sister near the end of June. Their dad knew about his role on the campaign. As he'd sort of always been, Dad was disappointed, but not willing to turn his back on David completely. If David wanted to call him, he could. Dad was going to pray about it. Meanwhile, the summer was going to be the toughest, most grueling part of the campaign. David didn't have time to let his dad's new hobbies or crackpot organizations distract him. There was too much work to do.

"Well, thanks for calling, Bri, just let me know what happens with this whole 'summit' in Detroit, though, OK? Does it sound like there's any chance that he'd be willing to go and talk to Father Jim?"

"I doubt it. He wasn't happy that you told me about it, either."

"I believe that."

"Well, the thing is, Erik feels a little uneasy about leaving Julian with him alone for more than an hour or two now. So that's something else that we're trying to deal with."

It wasn't what David intended. "Damn, I can't believe that."

"Erik and I are talking about it; I just think it's going to be a while before everything settles down."

David sunk down into his chair. "God, I'm sorry. Do you want *me* to talk to Erik?"

"No, don't worry about it right now. We haven't even exactly said to Dad, 'We won't leave Julian with you,' we just go over there and try to visit as a family. I told him

that Julian has a friend at school that he's been having fun staying with in the afternoons instead, so it's not that bad with Dad. Tougher on Julian, probably."

David frustratingly ran a palm across the back of his head.

"Look, I know that I haven't been around a lot, and with Mom gone, it probably seems like sort of a hollow gesture, but I want to be there, y'know? I'm just trying to be part of the family."

"I know that you are. Being part of the family doesn't have to mean literally being here every day. It about being interested, being in touch, being somebody we can count on. That's all."

"I'll do the best I can. I should get back to work, though."

"Right, I know. Bye."

"Bye."

There was a swift double-knock on his door frame. It was Reilly.

"Is anything wrong, David?"

"No, Jacob, come on in. It's nothing," he waved off his boss's concern half-heartedly.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing new, I guess, just my dad. The whole family is having kind of a rough go of it since my mom passed away a few months ago."

"Of course, I remember. If there is anything I can do..."

"Hey, y'know, I appreciate your understanding. That feels like enough right now. But what's up?"

“I think we may need to change our approach with regard to the NEBE school. Or strengthen the stance that we’re taking on it. Perhaps if we went over the information that was published in the last mailing.”

Reilly handed him a printout of an interview with Clark Bengston.

“Oh, what is this now? ‘Bengston Calls for An End to Public Financing for Universities,’ but the school you’re talking about is in Detroit. It’s not even our state.”

“Keep reading,” Reilly prodded him. “Bingham’s group is pushing for a sales tax increase to support construction.”

“Aw, hell. OK, let’s see here... ‘public financing is off-limits to schools with private boards of trustees in thirty-two states, not including Michigan or Illinois,’ OK, ‘says Bengston, “my opponent has voiced the opinion that schools like the proposed NEBE institution in Detroit should be encouraged and supported by the public to raise the standards of higher education across the board. But public dollars should go to public institutions, where the citizens of the state have a voice in how they are managed, through state legislatures,”’ wow, I don’t think we said anything like that, did we?”

“We didn’t *not* say it.”

“Right. God, I can’t believe they are turning this into an issue. We knew that the whole NEBE angle was going to be a hurdle, but I wouldn’t have picked this as the way it would come up.”

“It seems like Bengston’s tactic is to turn all NEBE-related issues in on this race, regardless of their applicability to the state or the district.”

“I agree. I’ll call the *Sun-Trib*.”

“Thank you, David.”

Lois Hutchison was proving to be an ally at the paper. She could probably get them on page one with a response. David rang her desk.

“Lois! Hi, David Adamovich. Yeah, wanna see if you’ve got time to talk to Jacob. What? No, it’s about the piece that you guys ran for Bengston late last night... No, I don’t know what you’re talking about. No, I did not know that. Yes, we’ll definitely want to respond to that. You’ve got me on record? Jesus. OK, no comment at this time, I’m going to let you talk with Jacob, OK? Bout an hour? Fine, yes, you’ve got his number. OK.”

He hung up.

“Shit.”

Reilly reappeared in the doorway.

“David, you spoke with Lois?”

“Yeah, that was her. She’s going to give you a call back.”

“Good.”

“Remember that Amy Lundin piece a few weeks back?” David asked.

“Of course.”

“Have you met with Bingham personally since then?”

Reilly’s perpetually stoic demeanor made him virtually impossible to read. It often worked to his advantage, but there were those few occasions when David wished he could see his gut reaction.

“I did meet with him. Informally. He was in the city visiting a mutual friend.”

David threw up his hands. “Well, this doesn’t look good. People saw you, they saw you together. My guess is, Bengston’s got people on staff just following you around.”

“As I said, the meeting was informal. I don’t think the situation warrants an overreaction, David.”

“Oh, you don’t? Because this is *the* guy that we’re trying to separate you from, philosophically. You ask me to call the newspaper to get things cleared up about this whole NEBE school idea, and I’m hearing it from them that you’re taking meetings with the president of the very same school?”

“I’ll be able to explain the meeting to Lois. I wasn’t trying to keep anything from you, David. It was a casual encounter. There was no agenda.”

David knew that Reilly was much smarter than he was. He considered whether the man could have so much information bouncing around in his head all the time that simple things would just pass by. Could a NEBE’s head get cluttered? Was he some kind of neo-savant genius, or could the truth be more frightening than that: that he didn’t think of these things because they simply didn’t matter? David preferred to focus on what he could understand and control.

“It’s better if we talk about everything you’re doing, OK? There’s nothing you can do at this point that’s not going to be run through this spin-cycle of analysis. I figure, the more heads we have thinking stuff through, the better off we’ll be, especially dealing with the media.”

“I do understand. And I apologize for not telling you about the meeting with

Anthony. I'll be able to smooth things over in the paper. I am expecting this issue to go away sooner than later."

The next morning, David turned on his computer and immediately called up the poll numbers from the previous night. The anti-NEBE movement was becoming a larger issue than David expected. There had not been such a severe ideological divide over an issue of equality in nearly a century. But here they were, living it. In the corner of his computer display, he watched a story on the campaign from CNN.

"Welcome back to 360 on CNN, I'm Kyle Stevens.

"Our topic this evening – the race for the Sixth Congressional District of Illinois between young Democratic challenger Jacob Reilly, and incumbent GOP Congressman Clark Bengston. Reilly now becoming the de-facto face of the NEBE population here in the United States, and to a lesser extent, throughout the world. That's at least the way he's being framed in the stories surrounding this race...and the sort of, coming-out party for the NEBEs that's happening in the context of this campaign.

"Panelists with us tonight: Aol-Huff-Po columnist Amy Lundin; nice to see you, Amy."

"Thanks, Kyle."

"From the Chicago Sun-Tribune, managing editor Jordan Hicks. Mister Hicks, welcome to the program."

"Nice to be here, Kyle."

"Amy Lundin, let's start with you: before the break, our viewers heard just a few

of the stories, not just from Chicago, Illinois, but around the country, of demonstrations being staged, PACs forming up around this issue, and the uncertainty that people are feeling about the NEBE population in general. Taking a quick look at the pictures again now, we've got demonstrators outside a nano-therapy clinic in Seattle, Washington, and here is former Catholic bishop Kevin Haas—his group actually looking at organizing a new Christian denomination around the idea of what they call 'human biological purity.' The thing is, Amy, this isn't something new. Nanotech didn't just fall from the sky yesterday. Why are we seeing the public getting whipped up about this now?"

"I think it's a combination of things, Kyle. You look at Jacob Reilly himself – here is a young man, just twenty-four years old, one of the earliest nano-therapy cases on record, and his initial treatment was nearly twenty years ago. If you really want to talk about the explosion of nano-therapy patients and the birth of a new minority class, it's really just in the last five, ten years or so. I think you see the strong reactions in certain communities because people are looking at their neighbors and wondering, 'well, is that really the person I thought it was?' There's almost a feeling like these individuals have been lying in wait, you could say, and that is troubling a lot of people—"

"Can I step in here for a moment, Kyle?"

"Jordan Hicks, go ahead."

"Amy is right on about the paranoia, the reaction that we're seeing when suddenly folks look around and say, 'Hey—when did this happen?' And the thing that makes this situation unique is: we're not talking about people of various colors or backgrounds mixing together, and it's not about illegal aliens or terrorists sneaking into

the country, things that we have a way of talking about. We're talking about people getting a long-term, medical treatment, and what we're seeing is the early stages of a kind of social and cultural shift that comes about when a lot of new people are being exposed to this for the first time. I don't think you're going to see as much play on this topic years down the road, because all of a sudden, 'Hey, my sister's had that treatment. My boss has had that treatment. My neighbor, my mailman,' whoever."

"Right, the treatment is sticking around, no one really seeing the end of nanotherapy as a legitimate possibility, and if I'm right, Amy, really no negative side effects having been shown at this point. Tough to argue for stopping these procedures."

"Well, that's right, as far as documented cases go, we haven't seen any drawbacks. But there is no denying that this therapy comes with a significant alteration of brain chemistry, and frankly, the process has not yet been around long enough for us to know what those far-reaching, long-term effects are going to look like. I think you're seeing a public that wants to ask, 'What is this really going to mean, not just for me, but for my family, my community?'"

"A cautionary stance, Jordan Hicks, what about it?"

"Kyle, I think there's no denying that medical science has been effectively treating patients with drugs that alter a person's brain chemistry for decades. We've had a lot of people for a very long time taking medication for depression, anxiety, attention-deficit problems, so on. I think it's just not going to hold water long-term, and the more ubiquitous this treatment becomes, the less people are going to worry about it."

"We've strayed a little from our original topic, let's see if we can bring this back

around: Jordan Hicks, you are there on the ground, so to speak, in Chicago, the campaign going on with Jacob Reilly and Congressman Clark Bengston. Somehow or another, the incumbent has managed to make this race more about trust, the emerging NEBE class, the uncertainty that Amy has been talking about, certainly more so than the specific issues concerning the district. They've really put Reilly's camp on defense as we kind of get into the heart of the campaign season."

"That is exactly what's happened. And the way this is playing nationally, really just continues to work in Bengston's favor. You might remember, just a few weeks ago, Reilly was actually polling out to a decent lead, they were feeling good about where things were headed, then you get the news out of Detroit with this NEBE-only university, Bishop Haas and all that going on, this became a much different race now that Reilly basically has to address these national issues, in a campaign that should be a lot more local."

"The story about the new university in Detroit, connected to Jacob Reilly, of course, through Anthony Bingham and their relationship at Brown University... Amy, what's the best possible outcome for Reilly at this point? Obviously still a lot of time, can he get focus back on the issues facing his district and the state of Illinois?"

"I think he can, but he's got to hope that things really calm down around the country. You know, it's not unlike the 'tea parties' thirty-some years ago—at first, they seemed like a real niche movement, but they gained some traction, and ended up really making a political impact for a while there."

David's phone buzzed to life. He glanced at the number on the caller ID. He was

surprised to see Dad's number. His dad called him maybe three times a year: Christmas, Easter, birthday. It was odd for him to ring in the morning on a weekday.

"Hey! Hi! Dad?"

"David?"

"Dad!"

"Hey, I don't use this thing very much, can you hear me OK?"

"Just fine, Dad, what is it?"

"I'm in Detroit! The summit started last weekend, we're wrapping up today or tomorrow."

"Great, Dad. How's it going? What, uh... what are you talking about over there?"

"I wanted to let you know that I'm being ordained tonight."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"A whole lot of us are. I'm going to be the pastor for most of the state of Wisconsin! There's a fellow here, Father Romo, he's from Milwaukee, he's being ordained, too."

"Sounds like there's some progress going on up there."

"It's really something, David. I have to tell you, I've never seen such a contingent of people who felt so strongly about the Eucharist, the Resurrection. It's just breathtaking. I told you they wanted to see at least a hundred former church leaders here, there are nearly *three* hundred! And so many lay-people, they filled the convention center. The hotels downtown here are full. I think it's got to be thousands!"

David clicked the call to speakerphone and set down the handset. He pulled up a feed with the latest US news, and sure enough, fourth story down, the Church of Pure Human Piety was in the mainstream media. He thought about the possible implications for the campaign. Could his dad's involvement be linked back to him, and then to Reilly? What would that mean to their supporters? To Reilly? Or did it even matter? He had been worried about what his dad was up to before, but that was when he was thinking it was just some scheme cooked up by a crooked bishop trying to fleece a lot of angry Catholics for money. Now it was sounding real.

"Yeah, I uh," David skimmed an AP article as he talked. "I'm looking at a story right now, Dad."

David continued reading the article as he listened. Attendance at the summit had far exceeded the expectations of Bishop Haas and the other principle leaders of the movement. It was mostly Americans and Canadians, but there were some that traveled from as far as Africa, Australia, and Eastern Europe. The reporter mentioned the diversity of backgrounds, assembling around a singular purpose.

"What's this about you being ordained, Dad?"

"Yes! There are a lot of leaders from different backgrounds, but they need strong leadership more than anything right now. So they devised a sort of minimum set of requirements, that you had to have been ordained in some capacity in your previous church, and of course I've been a deacon for eight years, so..."

"But what does it mean, exactly?"

"I'm going to be organizing a new parish when I get back home! I'm going to be

in charge of it!”

David kept listening, and reading:

The basis of the proposed new church is found mostly in prevailing modern Catholic beliefs. A notable difference is a codified belief that people receiving ongoing nanotherapy, clinically referred to as nano-enhanced-bio-entities, or NEBEs, are living evidence that the End Times are upon us.

“David? Hello? Are you still there?”

“I’m here, Dad. Look, are you really believing all this stuff they’re saying? You’re being ordained into this church. This is what you want?”

“I’ve prayed about it a lot, son. I feel that I’m being called to be a part of this.”

David’s consciousness struggled between the two halves of his life. He was telling his sister the truth when he said he wanted to come back to the family, to be more present, available. He wanted to get to know his dad again, and watch his nephew grow up. He was also part of his own sort of movement. Reilly was a part of a new American future in politics, and beyond that. How could he turn his back on his father, so soon after his mom was gone? It could be that David had stayed away too long, gotten too wrapped up in his own life. He had reached out, tried to reestablish that connection, but is this what it had gotten him? Caught in a position where he might jeopardize Reilly’s bid for office through an unanticipated connection to the other side?

He would have to choose one or the other. Maybe it was the thing that his parents had been waiting for all this time. He had conveniently straddled multiple worldviews for most of his life, believing in science and reason on its face, feeling a pull to

something else, something they had taught him, but only ever so lightly. It was a pull he could ignore day by day, but his dad was no longer on the other end of that cord. He had let go.

He picked the phone back up to his ear.

“Dad, I hear what you’re saying. Maybe I’m feeling a call, too. I don’t want to lose you to this, whatever it is, but I can’t pretend I don’t disagree.”

“David, we’ve disagreed a lot, about all sorts of things—”

“I know. And I’m sorry that we’re having this conversation now. God damn it, Dad, I’m so sorry that you’re alone up there now. I don’t think Mom would have let you drag her along into this. I don’t completely know what you’re feeling, but we seem so far apart right now.”

“Wait, David, you’re not making sense. You’re acting like this is directed at *you*.”

“I understand what your point has been, Dad. I know that you want me to find a path back to what you think is right, but when what we are believing is so different... I hope you’ll have some respect for me drawing a line.”

“David, I can hear you’re upset, it’s just... I’m not going to have this sort of talk with you on a cell phone while I’m standing in public. I’m going to—”

“Good-bye, Dad. I love you.”

He put the phone down on his desk. He went back to his day’s work.

Chapter 7

The summer of 2042 had drawn to a close. Headed into Labor Day, Jacob was confident the election returns would yield the correct result; Adamovich was taking care of it. Jacob remained focused on the situation with Bingham. Their meeting in Grant Park was Jacob's final opportunity to gain direct access to his research. Or at least, access on Jacob's terms. The other members of the group were solidly in favor of Bingham's plan for a massive dissemination of nanocolonies across the globe. They were persuaded by Bingham's path, steeped in the science of genetics, biochemistry, and evolution. Bingham had effectively conquered the first two, and with that knowledge and ability, he could move ahead to the third. His plans to steer human evolution were not malicious or diabolical, but they were on his terms alone.

Jacob saw himself as a leader; he was a herald of the next evolution, but not a conqueror. Bingham would choose himself as the depository of human knowledge and experience. He saw himself as more than a leader of men, whatever "men" describes; Bingham's thirst for experience was derived from its utility. He envisioned knowledge as something to be consumed, not created. He had abandoned his humanity and embraced a new model of himself; one that he fashioned of his own will and design. The rest of the group was not required for Bingham to reach his imagined zenith; but they were useful parts in the machine.

Jacob could reach his mind into a thousand different futures, whose paths became less and less distinct as he widened the view of time. At a distance of only decades, those distinct lines began to blur, and one found that the ultimate path of human experience had

not deviated significantly from one continuous line since the first homo-sapiens experienced a spark of knowledge and the light of being. The end result of either path, Jacob's or Bingham's, would be largely the same. Still, Jacob realized that choice, or even its illusion, was the core of human experience. He clung to it. His memory refused to let him abandon it. In the view of the universe's history, a single choice means nothing. Jacob understood that. But to each person who makes a choice, it means everything.

The issue that Jacob struggled with was not the variety of possibilities in the future; it was that he labored so much to allow himself to envision it. His memories remained so perfectly clear, and profoundly tempting. The recollections of his experiences were as real as each passing moment. Set adrift in the seas of his consciousness, Jacob lived the past, the present, the future, all simultaneously. Where Bingham's ambition and desire moved him ever forward, Jacob had learned to immerse himself in the depths of his being, and to wrap the fabric of space and time around his mind. In experience and knowledge, Jacob drew understanding, and an appreciation for the harmony of the universe. Bingham was learning the rules to a game that he wanted to master.

So Bingham might exist indefinitely, but what then? What is there then, but being? What is it to occupy the space of universal knowledge? In what corner of infinite intellect is found love? In what activity does all passing knowledge engage, but to be? For one who abandons all human sensitivity, like Bingham, the answer is irrelevant. For Jacob, his memories held him fast. For Jacob, even now, the vicissitudes of human

knowledge and the variety of experience made existence compelling. He could understand the laws of the physical universe, but what would it gain him? Power? To what end? With whom to share it? Why to even use it, but to recreate that which he recalled with pure, unaltered clarity?

Jacob imagined the experience of Earth's fifth extinction. More than sixty-five million years before the dawn of man, gigantic animals that dwarfed human architecture ruled the planet and likely still would if not for a random occurrence in space and time: one gigantic rock, drawn into the Earth's gravitational field, in a collision that covered the world in fire, dust and devastation. If not for this one event, no single moment in human history is allowed to take place. One chance in a billion and the dominant form of life is crushed; swept away like the dust from an eraser. A blank sheet is left to write anew; a fresh chapter to be written, with just the shadows of the past behind it, and the indentations of the old order, barely visible, and quickly forgotten.

The extremity of such a solution nearly made sense, albeit on a microcosmic scale. Jacob imagined a targeted effort, a focused beam of chance in which the lab and Bingham's work were simply gone. Removed. Extracted with precision, allowing the surrounding tissue to heal.

He imagined himself outside the building that housed Bingham's lab, a warehouse with attached offices; an already re-purposed structure that would make way for the center of Bingham's school in the near future. He imagined that he could see an SUV in the distance, approaching the warehouse. Two men were inside. An incendiary device inside a footlocker in the back.

Jacob's mind painted an image of the vehicle approaching a utility gate in the rear of the warehouse. He thought that it would be simple to enter if the security keypad were not functioning. The SUV could be imagined parking near the corner of the building, where the gas and other utilities attached and fed into the structure. The men shut off the motor, get out of the car, and arm a detonator with a simple, timed mechanical servo. From that position, the fuels entering the building would ignite and cause a cascading explosive effect. The warehouse would be gone.

Jacob sat with his thoughts for several moments longer, replaying the drama in his mind, letting it take clearer focus. He dwelled in it, and let his imagination become as firm as his memories. As he continued to ponder it, details sharpened. The time of day: late in evening. He saw the color of the vehicle. The reflections of street lamps in the pavement. He saw the faces of the men. He began to see the rain, and he heard the thunder. He saw a bolt of lightning strike a power pole on the same block, cutting power to the gate. The men are surprised, having assumed they would force their way inside. Each moment grew clearer. As though he were there.

“Jacob?”

Ben LeClair pulled him back from his dream.

“Ben.”

“Hey, you should come take a look at this. It's all over the news; something happened at the school in Detroit. Y'know, Bingham's university.”

* * * *

“God, you can’t be serious...” David mused to no one in particular. A group of a dozen or so staffers working late into the night were assembled around the TV in the conference room. The live pictures showed a warehouse in the middle of Detroit, the future site of the NEBE university, engulfed in flames. They were calling it an accident for the moment, but given everything else that was happening in that city, David would have trouble buying it.

Ben came into the room, with Reilly close behind.

“Jacob, check this out,” David beckoned him forward.

Reilly looked at the screen. “Anthony’s lab.”

“I guess,” David agreed. “So far, they’re just talking about the fire, clearing people out of the area. Most of the surrounding buildings are vacant, too; this is where the school was supposed to be, right?”

David looked to Reilly for insight; this was his old college buddy they were talking about. He didn’t seem interested in those details.

“Was anyone injured?”

One of the junior staffers, who had first caught the story, piped up. “After hours, not a lot of people there. Two security guards in critical condition, a tech who was in one of the labs with some pretty severe burns but should be OK, I guess.”

David moved closer to Reilly.

“Are you OK, Jacob?”

“I’m just sorry for Anthony. So much work to be recreated.”

Ben squeezed through the crowd of bodies as the female anchor reappeared on the screen.

“Hey, turn this up!”

—firemen still on the scene, but to repeat our headline for those just joining us, there has been an explosion at the proposed site of the still-unnamed Nano-Enhanced university, a school whose de facto president, the biochemist and nanotech researcher Anthony Bingham, was not present at the time.

Witnesses near the site have reported hearing what they assume was an explosion; one particular witness reporting a blue, late-model SUV in the neighborhood earlier this evening, although police are still investigating whether or not that vehicle ultimately made its way to this warehouse.

As you can see from our live cameras above, the warehouse that had recently become the research center for Doctor Bingham is in flames at this hour. The building expected to be a complete loss, fire crews at this time just trying to contain the blaze, getting some assistance from a brief thundershower that has now tapered off in the Detroit area.

I am getting word now that we have the fire chief standing by with James Goodnight, from affiliate WMTN in Detroit, at the scene. James?

Thank you, Christie, as you said, I'm here with chief—

Ben muted the set.

Reilly stood near the door, watching the pictures with his usual unwavering stare.

“Jacob,” David said, “do you want to comment on this at all? Officially, I mean?”

Should I make any calls? They're going to want to hear from you on this. Like it or not, people are looking at you as one of the faces of this whole movement. You, Bingham—that's how they see it."

"Yes, I know. I'll have my thoughts formulated when they ask. I think I'll continue watching this in my office for now. Let's not be too hasty about the response; let the press come to us for comment. We can state a position at that time."

"OK," David was looking for more. "Sure. I understand. I'm going to be here for a while yet tonight if you change your mind or you need anything."

"Thank you."

Reilly left the room and the rest of them focused back on the TV.

Ben moved quietly closer to David. "You know," he said, "he's been the last one out and the first one here ever since the day after he had that meet with his friend— this Bingham character. I've never seen him come or go."

"Why is that a problem?" David whispered back. "We're trying to win an election here; I don't mind a candidate that's dedicated."

"I know, I know, it's probably not a problem," Ben hesitated. "I know that one of the things about this campaign that we're trying to get across is that the NEBEs are not a threat; we can all live together, we can get along, we're all human beings, I get all of it."

"So what's your point?"

"I guess all along here and just... more so since that time, that meeting, it really feels like he's different. I mean, fine—you want a candidate who puts in a lot of hours, does a lot at the office, is trying hard to get elected—that's great. But the guy never

seems tired. I don't see a cot in his office or anything. I mean..."

David's glare made it clear; he wasn't impressed with the implication.

"Hey, look—David—" Ben's voice drew the attention of a few of the others watching the TV. He quieted it again. "I'm not trying to stir anything up, but it might be something to keep an eye on."

"Ben, I think you're getting too worked up over this, and that you should go home and get some rest. We could all use some rest—"

"Most of us could," he interjected.

"Jesus, man, come on. Let's come at this whole thing with some fresh eyes and ears in the morning, and then we can see what the next move is going to be. I appreciate your concern, man, but I think it's misplaced. We're all working toward the same thing here."

"I hope we are."

Chapter 8

David slept in his office again. He awoke to the sound of someone putting on the coffee, and lights coming up in the hall. Getting up off the futon, he grabbed a change of clothes from his bottom desk drawer, and shuffled off to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Ten minutes later, he was in the first staff meeting of the day, getting updates about the bombing in Detroit. A few weeks into the investigation, new details were coming to light.

One of the younger workers who had been with them from the beginning spoke up first.

“New stuff this morning is that they did apprehend a couple of suspects. Ukrainian nationals. Word is that they came into the country some time over the summer, around the same time that there was that summit for the... Church of Pure Human Piety.”

David felt heart leap into his throat.

“Wait, I’m sorry, who?”

“The Church of Pure Human Piety, it’s kind of a fringe Christian sect at this point. They’re not formally recognized in the US, and they sort of sprang up after—”

“OK, yeah,” David cut him off. “Yeah, I’ve heard of them, go ahead.”

“Right, so, these Ukrainians are saying that they are with this church.”

David hadn’t talked with father since the day he called at the end of June, or his sister, since before the bombing. He didn’t want to imagine his dad being involved in this sort of mess, but had to concede to himself that it was possible.

“Alright,” he continued, breaking into a sweat, “and who is working on a

statement from our office?”

One of the others raised a hand.

“What have you got?”

“So far, ‘Mister Reilly and his entire staff recognize and appreciate the ongoing efforts by law enforcement personnel in Detroit to bring the perpetrators of the bombing to justice. We join the citizens of the state of Michigan and the rest of the country as a whole in condemning all acts of violence against our fellow Americans. We are hopeful that, if chosen by the people, Mister Reilly can work against targeted acts of terrorism on our home soil, and promote an agenda of peaceful coexistence for all our citizens, regardless of race, creed, color, or background.’”

David was trying to run a Congressional campaign, and he had somehow also been yanked into a human rights debate.

“Yeah, that works. Let’s go with that for now. Anything else right away this morning?”

The staffers glanced around at each other silently.

“Fine. Let’s stay on top of this story, as usual. I know some of you would rather be working on something else, but it’s important to the campaign that we stay engaged in these issues. Anything else that comes up, I don’t care how trivial it seems to you, if you haven’t heard us say something about it yet, I want you to bring it straight to me.”

Twenty minutes later, David reached his sister by phone and was calmed by a good bit of news.

“Oh, thank God!” he breathed into the phone.

“Yeah, Dad hasn’t been out of town since he got back from his summit, like the Fourth of July or so. I felt guilty about how Erik’s been with Dad, so I’ve been taking Julian over there after work for an hour or so, almost every day.”

David shook his head with relief. “I cannot tell you how worried I was about this.”

“Dave, look, uugh,” Brianna’s annoyance tipped over, “I know you’ve had a lot going on with *work* and everything, OK? And I understand that you want to make more of an effort to participate in what’s going on around here, but it takes more than calling up with accusations every six or eight weeks.”

“Hey, come on, here. I didn’t accuse anyone of anything, I called you—”

“You called me *hoping* to make an accusation!”

“I’m allowed to be worried about my father.”

“Not if you haven’t talked to him for almost three months! After basically telling him to never contact you again.”

“Come *on*, Bri! Dad is a part of this thing now that is directly opposed to someone that I am supporting—in an official capacity—for elected office. What am I supposed to do?”

“I want to help you, OK,” she was calming a little. “And if you want to call and check-in, that’s fine, but no more blowing up my phone, while I’m at work, ranting about Ukrainians in Detroit! I don’t need that, and Dad... he doesn’t deserve it. Not from what I’ve seen.”

David wanted to keep his promise to be there for the family more often. He realized he would need to learn how to do it the right way.

“Brianna, I’m sorry. I’m glad everything is OK.”

Ben was outside his door, waving a clipboard with the design for another mailing.

“It looks like I’ve got to get back to things here.”

“Sure, I know.”

“How’s Julian doing?”

Talking about her son always made things better.

“He’s good. Enjoying Kindergarten.”

“I hope to see you guys really soon after this is over.”

“Us too.”

“Bye.”

Within a few more days, the police in Detroit were getting more information out of the men accused in the bombing. Their plot was growing more complex.

In separate interrogations, both men identified a third person, most likely a man, who was stationed outside the gate on their arrival. They explained that their initial goal was less ambitious than destruction of the entire facility. The bomb was more a stunt than anything else, to gain exposure for their cause. Located further away from the building, it would have destroyed their vehicle and possibly damaged an empty guard house. However, the third person, who they say disabled the gate for them, gave them instructions on the most tactically advantageous spot to park the vehicle.

A composite artist, with the help of the driver of the SUV, completed a sketch of the third person. If you didn't see him every day, you would not notice the resemblance, but Ben did. It was Jacob Reilly.

"If I can tell this is Reilly, someone else is going to notice that this is Reilly," he explained to David.

"You are nuts. How could it possibly be him? We were all here together that night."

"Look for yourself," Ben said, handing him a printout of the sketch.

The features were similar, but David didn't think it was a dead lock for their candidate. The thing that the sketch artist had somehow brilliantly captured was the vacancy of Reilly's default expression. It was as though he was looking through you, not at you. David tried to ignore it.

"Who else has seen this?" David asked.

"Well," Ben started, "it's nine AM here in Chicago, so... the entire Eastern seaboard."

David rolled his eyes. "Who else in the office has seen this?"

"You're the first."

"I'm going to talk to Reilly."

"Sorry—we?—are going to talk to Reilly."

"I will talk to him. *You* can go back to work."

Around the time of the Pure Human Piety summit, they had been even or better with Bengston in the polls. After the bombing in Detroit, though, the questions about the

compatibility of the NEBEs and everyone else became more pointed and direct. Some people were asking now how they could expect one of these enhanced individuals to represent the views of everyday people. The questions weren't coming from many of the constituents, but the issue was gaining traction in the press, and Reilly had to talk about it every day. He didn't seem to get tired of it; or, as Ben had noted, tired of anything, but it was wearing David down. He wanted to be able to think about something else. He wanted to talk about legitimate issues. With less than a month until the election, it was starting to seem like there would have to be a miracle for Reilly to pull it out.

David rapped quickly on Reilly's door before walking through.

"Jacob, hey, good morning."

"Morning, David."

"Hey, man, I'm sorry to..." his voice trailed off and he sighed heavily. "It's like we're doing this every day."

"What's the problem?"

"Here, take a look at this."

He handed over the sketch.

"I don't quite understand," Jacob said.

"So, you know they picked up that couple of Ukrainians in connection with this bombing last week. Guys that apparently first came over for that Pure Human Piety summit."

"Yes, I was glad to hear there were suspects in custody," Jacob continued to study the sketch.

“Well, independently of one another, they both told police that there was a third guy who disabled the gate for them. That guy,” he shoved a finger at the picture.

“This is me,” Jacob said.

David hesitated for a moment, slightly confused. “Yes.”

“Well, it’s clearly a mistake. Or a lie. An attempt to further undermine the campaign.”

David relaxed a little. “That’s what I was thinking... because there’s no way that—”

“If you’re asking me if I was in Detroit that night, David, I can assure you that I was right here. I had closed my eyes for a few minutes in my office, trying to rest. Ben woke me for the news report.”

“Right,” David retrieved the picture. “Yes, that’s exactly what I remember about it.”

“You’re correct.”

“And that’s what I was here for—because you remember everything, uhh, literally—and I tend to have some holes time to time. So...”

“Should I expect someone from the Detroit police calling today?”

“I’d say there’s virtually no doubt.”

“I agree. Anything else at this point?”

“I guess not, I just... like I said, I wish we could focus on something else, maybe something more relevant to this race.”

Reilly did not seem as concerned. “The race will turn out fine. I am confident of

that.”

David wished he had such clear feelings about it. “OK, so, when somebody calls, I can send them your way?”

“Of course.”

“Great. Oh, hey,” David leaned across the desk, stealing a glimpse of Reilly’s monitor. “I notice you’re reading up on that missing person case in connection with this. Any news about your friend?”

Reilly shook his head. “Anthony is still missing. Several of his former colleagues—classmates of mine from Brown—as well.”

“Pretty strange.”

“Yes,” Jacob continued softly. “I’m quite concerned about it.”

“It’s got to be connected, right? You don’t think a kidnapping..?”

“I think that it would be difficult to kidnap Doctor Bingham, and so many of his co-workers. Without someone knowing something about it.”

“What reason would they have to disappear?”

“I’m not sure. It’s been nearly a month, though. He can’t stay missing forever.”

“No, I guess not.”

Reilly nodded at the screen.

“Alright, well, thanks for this, Jacob. We’ll send any calls from Detroit your way.”

Ben’s concern only escalated as the day wore on. A detective from Detroit called,

and talked to Reilly for several minutes. The people who were at the office the night of the bombing would be getting a visit from the FBI in Chicago to collect their statements about Reilly's whereabouts that night. Ben finally cornered David late in the evening, when most of the other staff had gone home.

"Have you heard of the singularity?" he asked.

"Of course I've heard of the singularity."

"Y'know, a technological tipping point where machines merge with humans, effectively making them immortal, and opening up the full brain potential—"

"I said I know what it is!"

"OK, so you also know, then, that this isn't the only way that the singularity can take place."

David knew, but hadn't thought about it in quite a while. "Well, sure, of course."

"Well, what if this thing that they've talked about as being the singularity—the intelligence simulation, the NEBEs—was not it at all? What if it was just a stepping stone, and there is much more to come?"

David could not deny he too had seen the changes happening in Reilly. He couldn't articulate it. Or he didn't want to. David worked in politics because it existed in the moment. No one truly cared what someone in office was going to do next month or next year, or next term. They liked to talk about it, but they really cared about what was happening now; how you could explain what had happened yesterday. You could paint the future in broad strokes. You could kick any can further and further down the road, as long as you did it eloquently. He was worried about winning an election, appealing to the

people today. He didn't want to think about what was going to happen to Reilly at an indeterminate point in the future.

"I don't see how that's relevant right now."

"David, he hasn't slept in *days*. You must have seen it. The emails at all hours of the day and night? At the rally at Reagan High, he was answering questions before they were even posed. These Ukrainians that they've implicated in the bombing—they swear he was there, that he was the one who destroyed the security measures at the gate and let them in. How is that possible? There's something happening here, and I feel like it's bigger—more important—than the election."

"I disagree." He wanted to disagree. Even if it was a lie. He needed to disagree. For a few more weeks. "I'm sorry, Ben, I hear what you're saying, but you're sounding like my old man. I think you are cracking under the pressure of everything that's going on, and you're letting the media, or the world, or whatever, put ideas into your head that don't make any sense. It doesn't make sense..."

"I don't understand how you can just look past this. How can you keep working for a person that is *not* the same man that you met at the start?"

Ben wasn't going to let it go.

"Fine," David threw up his hands, "Let's say you're right, and Reilly is going to snap. The way you're talking about it, we won't be able to do anything anyway, so what the hell's the point?"

"God damn it, I—"

"The point is," David stopped him, "you don't know what is going to happen, and

neither do I. Here's the truth: if what you are thinking actually comes to pass, how is that such a bad thing? Maybe it's the best thing. Maybe a Jacob Reilly who has solved all the most important questions in the universe is exactly what we want. What we *need!*"

Ben shook his head. "I just don't know. He never came clean with you about that meeting with Bingham, either. Do you really feel like you can trust him?"

"Like I said, we don't know. So what do we do right now? We keep up what we're doing, and we just try to win this race."

Ben grew weary from the argument. "Look, I think we need to change up the schedule anyway. Like I said, he's barely sleeping at this point. He doesn't get tired any more. Let's ramp it up. Let's make more appearances, book more speeches, but whatever happens, keep him moving. Let's not give people an opportunity to spend too much time with him at once, or for him to get far off topic. We need to stick with the core message, and just hammer that home. It's the best chance we've got."

"That sounds great." David was finding calm, back in his element. "Do you want to tell him what we're thinking, then?"

"Do you think we need to?"

There was a sharp knock at David's office door. David made the three steps to the door and opened it. Reilly.

"Were you two looking for me?" Reilly asked.

"Jacob," David said, "yes, we were just going to come and find you. We've been thinking strategy for the home stretch here, and we have some ideas, ready to bring forward if you want."

“It sounds fine.”

Reilly hadn't entered the room.

“Great,” David turned back inside, beckoning Reilly to follow, “let's, uh—”

Reilly stayed in the doorway and spoke. “I mean that what you two have been talking about makes sense. We should make as many appearances as possible at this point. Stay on message. Bear down for the homestretch.”

David stood in silence. He didn't look back at Ben. He could not bring himself to remove his gaze from Reilly, who was now omniscient, or telepathic, or both.

Ben nodded and cleared his throat to break the silence. “Uhh, yes. You, uh, you must have heard us in the hall.”

Jacob's steely calm was piercing. “You could say that I heard you, yes.”

“OK,” Ben was still nodding. “Well, I'm going to... get out and see who else is still here, then.”

Ben quickly moved toward the door as he talked, finishing as he passed Reilly in the hall. “We'll start making some calls and getting things booked!”

“Thanks, Ben,” David called after him. He finally shifted his eyes from Reilly to the floor, then quietly stepped back into his desk chair.

David could not know what was truly happening with Jacob Reilly; it hadn't happened to anyone before. David wanted to win the election, yes, because it was something solid to focus on. He had resigned himself when he first noticed the profound changes in Reilly to ride them out, and not question things happening in the universe that were much bigger than he was.

“Something is bothering you, David. You seem distracted.”

David’s shoulders heaved with a single chuckle. “I suppose I am.”

Reilly finally entered the room and closed the door.

“I think that you’ve let your mind run out of control, overestimating the significance of some of the things you’ve seen. I’m afraid that you’re concerned about me being a threat.”

“I would argue with you if it still seemed possible.”

“It’s a valid observation.”

“That arguing with you is impossible?”

“If the exercise of the argument is useful for you, we can proceed.”

David, whose confusion would not let him look away from Reilly before now couldn’t raise his eyes from his feet.

“Is that what this life is to you now? A performance? Just an exercise in humanity for the benefit of the ones that aren’t gifted enough to see what you see?”

“Your question implies that my consciousness is static; that there is some finality to my current state of being. But that’s not the case.”

David briefly imagined a future with Reilly, maybe as the President of the United States, controlling the Congress, the military, the citizens even, with his mind.

“A foolish notion,” Reilly explained, “what purpose would that serve?”

David cupped his ears, as if it offered some protection.

“Look, Jacob, what do you want me to do? There’s no time to spin this the right way. Even if we could say something to completely clear you from the implication in

Detroit. I can't—"

"David, I would like you to proceed exactly the way that you believe is best."

Reilly turned to look out the window, where the floor of his headquarters was only lit by the orange exit signs.

"But as you do, please realize that at this moment, you are envisioning a reality that won't, and never could, come to pass. No single entity is any more in control of the future now than ever before. It doesn't belong to me, or to anyone. You have lost nothing. Your life means nothing less. We return to work tomorrow with the same goals as today."

David felt he could question everything now. He couldn't imagine that Reilly would tell him the truth, or even that a truth existed to know. Perhaps, he thought, the very question was the only truth there was: what were all his days, but the performance of a feigned, finite, and ultimately irrelevant reality? What could exist beyond the scope of his own perception? Did it matter?

"Jacob," David finally looked up, "I think I need some sleep."

Reilly nodded and moved toward the door. He opened it slightly, then looked back.

"Good night, David. Rest knowing that there is meaning in all things. Each moment exists for a reason, even if you have not found it yet."

Chapter 9

November fourth was election night. David stood silently in front of the screen, with arms clenched around himself in a casual but firm bear hug. His eyes seemed to pierce through the glow; staffers came and went, behind and around him, in a bustle that slowed by the minute. The short ceilings of their campaign headquarters suddenly made the entire floor feel small. The television practically begged you to watch it, offering a temporary reprieve from the claustrophobic desks, the motionless, hermetically sealed air, the faint smell of spilled coffee and microwaved entrees never quite given a chance to air out.

The numbers continued to scroll by on the screen. Reilly's name popped up again, above Bengston's, and a frantic intern leaned forward, just in front of David's view.

"Hey," he reached for the young man's shoulder.

"Sorry," the intern half-whispered, and he backed up, lurking just behind David's shoulder.

There were still votes to be counted, but the outcome seemed certain. David slowly panned the room and considered everything that had happened since he met Jacob Reilly. He reached for the phone inside his jacket in a tense moment of clarity. He touched the screen three times to dial.

"Yes, it's me. Tell Jacob that it's almost time. What? He what? Oh. Yes. Right, yes, of course he knows that. OK. Bye."

On the same night, Jeffrey Adamovich was at home, going over notes from his weekend service and reading emails from other pastors. The bombing in Detroit had sealed the Church's fate. They were not to be recognized as a formal religion, and the movement, almost before it began, was splintering. Bishop Haas had had the right idea, to take the fervor of the devout and organize it—direct it at something, for some ideal purpose. To keep the flock calm. They hadn't expected such rash extremism from within.

Shortly after nine PM inside Jeffrey's house, the dark had long since settled in. A noise at the other end of the house distracted him for a moment. He looked up, toward the door of the bedroom, and listened. He was about to return to the screen when the sound came again; a firm knock at the door. It was uncharacteristic for Jeffrey to have visitors at the house in the daytime, let alone at night.

He kept a .40-caliber semi-automatic pistol and a loaded magazine in the top drawer of his desk. He reached for it, and cocked a round before standing up to leave the room. The knock came again. His heart raced, and his mind sprinted through a variety of irrationally paranoid assumptions: a gang of NEBE sympathizers, or a crowd of fanatics from the new church.

He approached the door, creeping around the corner just outside the front hallway. The porch light was on, and silhouetted against the curtain was the figure of a tall-ish person. A shadowy hand drifted up from below the window and the knock repeated a third time. Jeffrey crouched down, and slinked toward the door, gun carefully cradled in his right hand. He took two heavy breaths, then sprung up, pushing open the shade with

the barrel.

It was that man from TV. The one David worked for. Running for Congress. The man smiled.

“Mister Adamovich?” he called through the glass.

Jeffrey opened the door, still clutching the gun, now limp at his side. “Yes?” he said.

“Jacob Reilly, sir. I work with your son.”

Jacob walked up to the door of the French Quarter in Providence on election night. There was no line to get in, but the bouncer was at the door. Recognizing Jacob’s face, he waved him through without looking at his ID.

“Hey! Long time, buddy, how you doin’?”

Jacob smiled. “Yes, it has been a while, and I’m well. How are you?”

“Good, good.”

Jacob entered and scanned the bar, looking for someone specific. There were half a dozen people near the front bar, and a half-dozen more near the tables and couches in the back. The sunken stage area that separated them was dark, and mostly empty. A couple sat together at one table, enjoying a date. A man facing the TV sat alone at another. There were two glasses on his table.

Jacob approached, and greeted him, still standing. “I’m glad to see you again, Anthony.”

Bingham responded without shifting his focus from the TV. “Me too. Got you a

beer. Go ahead, sit down.”

He casually nudged the next chair with his foot.

Jacob pulled it out and sat down. Noting how small the table was, he asked, “Is anyone else joining us?”

Bingham’s focus remained only on the screen. He lifted his glass near his lips. “No one else *to* join us. You an’ me kid, like the good old days.”

As Jacob had expected, Bingham had convinced the group to merge their consciousnesses with him. Jacob imagined that when and if their families learned they were gone, there would be quite a lot of mourning and confusion at the disappearance of so many that knew each other so well, and so suddenly. In all likelihood, Bingham did not expect it to matter. Jacob’s own emotions were put at ease with the knowledge that they weren’t truly or completely gone; their minds endured, even if they were now subjugated inside Anthony Bingham.

Jacob lifted the full glass and took a sip as he turned toward the screen. CNN. Election returns. It was the only set in the bar not tuned to sports.

“How am I doing?” Jacob already knew, but still asked.

“Oooh, not good, friend, not good. What time is it now?” he glanced at his watch, “ten-thirty, central? I think you’ll be conceding in less than an hour.”

“Shame.”

“A *damn* shame,” Bingham agreed.

Jacob knew their future and realized that time was his to use as he saw fit. He wore his typical stoic demeanor, but it was changed slightly; it was less constricted. He

was relaxed. At points in his past, he had found it troubling to bear witness to events that had not yet occurred. But with deeper understanding came a profound calm; knowing that the past and future had already occurred, and were occurring, gave him comfort. The pressure to perform was gone. He could observe and revel in the nuance of passing moments.

“You surprised me at the lab, Jacob.”

“I suppose I surprised myself, to some extent.”

Jacob had accepted the reality that he was complicit in the bombing in Detroit. Space and time no longer limited the reach of his consciousness. He had caught up to Bingham again; their abilities were more or less in sync.

“I was only referring to your timing. I knew you would be there eventually. I wasn’t able to see clearly enough ‘when.’”

Jacob smiled. “And was that exciting for you?”

“It was, a little. But in the end, I knew we’d be here. As I expected, you overreacted about the school. You reached too far, you implicated yourself... you destroyed your campaign! You derailed *all* of your plans. And here you are, back exactly where I knew you would be.”

“Here I am.”

Bingham’s excitement rose. He could sense the end was near, and seemed to lose patience as he did.

“I knew all of it, don’t you see? You knew *nothing!* When we met in Chicago, it was only a precursor to this! Are you ready?”

Jacob pushed his glass forward and reclined in his chair. “Why don’t we relax for a little while? For old times’ sake?”

Bingham laughed as he guzzled the last of his beer. “You are such a sentimentalist. I’ll get us another round.”

“Let me,” Jacob offered.

The empty glasses in Bingham’s hands were suddenly full again.

Jeffrey stepped aside, allowing Jacob in. “What are you doing here?” he asked. Not accusing. Legitimately curious.

“I wanted to meet you,” Jacob said, stepping over the threshold and wiping his feet, “before the... election was over. I thought we could talk about things. About David. These last several months have been difficult for both of you.”

“I don’t understand,” Jeffrey half whispered into the wind, one hand on the door, still ajar, “the election is today, right? What day is it?”

“It is today, that’s right.”

Jeffrey stood in the door, perplexed.

“It’s cold out there, Mister Adamovich.”

Jeffrey came back to life for a just moment, closing the door, turning back into the room.

Jacob noticed the gun. “That for me?” he asked.

“God—I—I’m sorry...”

Jeffrey hurried past him, into the kitchen, where he threw on a light and placed the

gun on the table.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” Jacob explained, “and I’m sorry to come unannounced like this. I didn’t think you would take a call from me by phone.”

The TV in the living room had been left on earlier, and now its blue-ish haze and quiet voices filled the silence. Jacob looked over his shoulder, back to the living room.

“Do you mind if I flip over to the returns?” he asked.

Without a response, he stepped into the living room. He clicked the remote. CNN. Wall-to-wall midterm coverage.

Jeffrey remained dumbfounded, but grew despondent. “You’ve got to explain this to me,” he insisted. “How are you here? What do you want? I saw you on the TV, in Chicago, less than an hour ago. They’ve got a crew in your office. I saw David there with you.”

“Yes,” Jacob pointed, “there.”

On a split-screen behind the anchor, they were showing live pictures of the candidates awaiting results in Illinois’s Sixth Congressional District. Clark Bengston calmly sat on a couch next to his wife, in a hotel room downtown. Jacob sat at the conference table at his headquarters, flanked by a number of staffers. They patted his shoulder as he grimaced for the news crew.

“Am I dead?” Jeffrey was one to jump to conclusions. “Tell me if I’m dead.”

“You’re not dead.”

“Are you dead?”

“I am most certainly alive.”

“Well somebody’s dead. Or dreaming. Or both. Damn,” he turned back to the kitchen. “How is this possible?”

“The how is less important. And I’m not sure you would understand. I’m hoping you’ll have a little faith, Mister Adamovich.”

At the bar, a dart flew and pierced the cork of the board. Bingham closed his eyes.

“When did you realize that the school was a ruse?” he asked.

“I suspected it from the start. I knew that your alleged agenda had errors in its logic. But I also saw the path in front of us. That there was a role for it to play.”

“It served its purpose. The NEBEs are vocal now. They’ll be relentless. They’ll need a leader, a spokesman—”

“You have been obsessed with chasing me as long as I’ve known you, Anthony,” Jacob said as he picked up the darts from the table. “We may not have spoken in years, but I couldn’t fathom you falling far from that path.”

“Again, you see only so far, and leave the rest for me to explain. This is not about *you!* It was never about you. Of the two of us, *I* am the one that can envision our full potential. *Complete* knowledge. Comprehensive experience. Your only importance was in relation to me and my objective. I could either fester, and wait, and continue to occupy this shell, or I could push you. Challenge you, and force you to see my way of thinking.”

“You have always been my greatest challenge,” Jacob agreed.

“I am going to lead us from here, Jacob. You see that it is inevitable, I know that

you do. One of us will leave this place, and we both know who it will be.”

Jacob stood still, motionless and silent in front of his friend for a moment. There were so many times that Bingham had taken pleasure in the performance of these dances; that he had sought only to unnerve his counterpart. Jacob reveled in the chance to do the same.

“You should throw,” he finally said.

“What are you people?” Jeffrey asked as he handed off a glass of water to Jacob, and kept the whiskey for himself.

The two men settled in to recliners in Jeffrey’s living room. Jeffrey sat in the same one he had for decades, closest to the kitchen, and Jacob occupied the one that used to belong to David’s mother.

“I can’t speak for others,” Jacob said, “but I am just a man—”

“Not like me.”

Jacob nodded, encouragingly. “Yes, like you.”

“Like hell,” Jeffrey said.

“What does it mean to be a man? In your estimation?”

“It means to be,” Jeffrey extended his arm, slapping it gently with his other hand, “flesh and bone. Dust of the Earth.”

“That *is* what I am.”

Jeffrey smirked, unconvinced. He certainly knew what Jacob was not.

“I have a family,” Jacob continued, “I was born. In all likelihood, I will

eventually die.”

Jacob reached into his back pocket, removing his wallet. Jeffrey watched him open it, and extract a small photograph. “Here,” he handed it Jeffrey, “these are my parents.”

Jeffrey looked at the picture, a smiling man and woman. He in a gray suit, she in a green dress. They looked profoundly happy. “They’re not—”

“No,” Jacob anticipated the question, “they’re not *quite* like me. I understand what you’re saying. No, just as human as you are. As David is.”

Jeffrey’s eyes began to well, “They’re both, umm... alive yet?” he handed the photo back.

“Yes. Unless something unforeseen happens, they should live a long time.”

“That’s good,” Jeffrey could not contain his tears.

Jacob looked down as he replaced the photo. “I’m sorry about your wife.”

Jeffrey continued to speak through soft sobs. “You know, I asked myself a hundred times, I’m sure. I prayed about it every day. I asked God: what was right? I asked Him if the procedure would be OK, if it was what He wanted for her. David acts like the world happens around him. Like we’re just players on his stage, and nothing happens that he hasn’t witnessed. He thinks we never really thought about it, didn’t talk about it. Well we did. I prayed that He would give me some sign, but it didn’t come. It never came. We buried her, and the only sign, the goddamned ‘official position,’ only came after that.”

He slumped back in his chair, tears streaming from his eyes.

Jacob wanted to offer him comfort. He extended a hand, and Jeffrey grabbed hold,

tight. With his other hand he squeezed the tears from his face and wiped them away. He took a deep breath before continuing.

“I was so afraid, you know? If what they were saying was true—that this... what they did to you—it would keep you from dying. Forever. And what if the years passed, and then *I* was gone? And she was here? And... God!” he slunk back closed his eyes, “What if what we were taught is right? That only He can decide who lives and dies?”

“Isn’t one of your beliefs that one cannot know the will of God?”

Jeffrey dropped Jacob’s hand. “*Your* people say they know it!”

“To understand the Universe, to know its rules, and where they can bend... that is not what it is to *be* God. Are you not to strive to become more like Him? To follow His example?”

“Man is flawed,” Jeffrey explained, “man is mortal, and cannot hope to become like God.”

“So, you’re saying, you *know* what God is?”

At eleven-fifteen, they were back at the table. The scoreboard showed Jacob getting the win in their cricket game, despite Bingham’s best efforts to run up the score, one-twenty-two to one-oh-nine. The election returns continued to roll in on the TV. A few of the young men who had been playing pool migrated over and were preparing for their own game of darts. One of them reached for TV, to change the channel. Bingham stopped him.

“*Hey!*”

He turned, startled.

“Watching that.”

“Sorry, man.”

Jacob and Bingham sat with empty glasses. Jacob waved off a waitress who began to come toward them. Their night was nearly over.

“What is it you figure to gain, Anthony?”

“Hmm?” Bingham was distracted by the TV.

“When we’re ready to leave tonight. What are you expecting to gain, that you don’t already have?”

“I’m expecting to gain some rest, Jacob,” he rubbed his eyes, explaining, “I am tired of chasing you, and dodging and planning. This body is weary. It’s fragile. I look forward to the end. To some escape.”

“And when you have everything you’ve been seeking, what then?”

“What then?”

“To know the Universe—the entire Universe—is to know everything that is contained within it, yes?”

“Naturally.”

“This place. Humankind. These stars. These planets. These are all a part of the Universe, yes?”

“They are, yes. And they will be a part of *me*.”

“And a being that has become everything he sought to know, what does he do then?”

Bingham was quiet. Jacob turned again to the television.

“Oh!” he said, “Let’s watch this. They’re cutting to me momentarily.”

The minutes drifted away, and Jeffrey and Jacob continued to watch the numbers scroll, comfortable in their chairs. Things were looking bleak for Jacob and his bid for Congress.

“You know, that fear that I talked about?” Jeffrey started.

“Yes.”

“When Sandy was sick...”

“Go on.”

“That’s what drove all those people to Detroit this summer. We basked in this glow of faith, but maybe it was because of the wrong things.”

“You fear that we are the end, somehow; that your ‘End Times’ are here.”

“Boy, for all I know we’ve already passed it, right here tonight,” he sipped his drink softly laughed.

“How many men do you think have, throughout history, declared their days to be the last?”

“I know, I know, but—”

“I haven’t come to take anyone’s faith away, Mister Adamovich. We are arriving at a change, but it is well beyond that.

“At each turn of science, through the ages, have we turned the page and found God? Not once. There is always something beyond. More to see, greater mysteries to

unfold. I only see what man might have *once* thought to be God, Mister Adamovich, not God Himself.”

“But to live as they say you’ll live—”

“How is that?”

“They say you’ll live forever! There’s nothing to think those machines inside you won’t preserve your body forever!”

“We talked before, Mister Adamovich, about what it is to be man. Are we these bodies? Is this *all* that we are? Is that what it is to be a man? ‘Dust of the Earth,’ you said. But isn’t there more to it than that?”

Jeffrey fixed his eyes on the TV.

Jacob continued, “More important to me, and to the people I care about—more than the laws of the physical universe or the manipulation of what we have understood as space and time, more important than any of that—are the things that make us human.

“I am here, with you now. I am also there, with your son. And that is something that no one before me could do. But does that matter to my mother? Does it make her love me more? If I take this glass, and reorganize its atoms into water, does that increase my father’s devotion to his family? What does that ability do for the people that I care about?”

“If I know all that is knowable, Mister Adamovich, it does not let me feel the sun on my face. If my children were immortal, where would be the joy in watching them grow? Seeing me in them, and seeing those subtle glimmers of themselves?”

“I admire your faith, Mister Adamovich, and your desire to be closer with God. It

is a strong path, and it holds all the wonder of being human. I think we are *both* on that path.”

Jeffrey’s eyes slowly began to well with tears again. He thought of his son, to whom he hadn’t spoken since the summit in Detroit. He thought of his wife, whom his faith told him he would see again. His tears rolled down, joyfully.

“Oh,” Jacob broke the silence, “May I turn this up? I’m conceding.”

At his campaign headquarters, Jacob made his way to the podium, hastily set up in front of drawn blinds, now covering a view that typically looked out at Michigan Avenue. The streamers sagged slightly, wound around nets of balloons that would not be releasing their cargo.

Cameras snapped, microphones pointed, bright lights were turned up. Jacob looked out over the meager assembly of staff people, and focused for a moment on David. He took a breath and looked down at an empty slate, gripping the sides of the podium in what he imagined was the most presidential way he could.

“Friends,” he began, “I would like to begin here tonight by recognizing David Adamovich, my campaign manager,” he extended his hand toward David, who waved off the gesture. “David has worked many hours, endured a lot of sleepless nights, and through... a lot of issues... during this campaign. He has become a valued friend, and I thank him for his service.”

A ripple of applause flowed through the crowd.

“By now, you are all aware that I have decided to concede the race for the Sixth

District to Representative Clark Bengston. I spoke with the Representative by phone just a few moments ago. He congratulated us on a well-run campaign, a spirited debate of the issues, and I, in turn, wished him well in his next term of office.

“The past eleven months have been enlightening to me, in more ways than I have time here to express. Meeting with all of you, hearing your concerns about jobs, the economy, federal spending... and that’s not the mention the concern that I heard you voice about your neighbors, your families, and the world at large. People reporting on this race have implied at times that there was *literally* nothing left for me to learn, and that frightened some people. I stand before you tonight to say: you taught me a great deal. You put your confidence in me to learn from you. And for that, I thank you.”

A louder, more enthusiastic round of applause circled the room.

“The people that assembled around this campaign, and around me, did not do so for fear of what was to come if they didn’t. There is no one in this room that was threatened by me, or by my friends and colleagues in the nano-enhanced community. Rather, we were able to put aside differences, put aside fears, and press forward together around ideas that we cultivated together. These people knew, and still know, that no one of us is as strong or as great as all of us, standing together.

“In the coming days and weeks, there will be great challenges facing our nation. We have witnessed the outcomes of fear and of jealousy in the neighborhoods of Detroit, Michigan, and elsewhere in our country. Now that our election season has ended, and now that the embers of that warehouse in Detroit have cooled, I implore all of you—here in Chicago, across the state of Illinois, and across the globe—to seek that common

ground with your neighbor. I encourage you to look for that which is good, and which is *like* you, in all those *around* you. For we are more similar than some would admit, and our fates bound tighter than some would care to imagine.

“Thank you for your attention. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to earn your votes. Thank you for welcoming me into your lives.”

The room thundered with applause. Jacob stepped to the right of the podium, and waved again to the small crowd, who only cheered louder. He looked again at David, who clapped slowly, but whole-heartedly, as he looked on. Jacob nodded at him, and David offered a ‘thumbs-up.’

Jacob took a half-step backward and closed his eyes. The applause showered over him, and he breathed in deeply. He began to feel himself be enveloped by the sound, the very molecules of his body separating from one another, dissolving into the atmosphere around them. Even as he dissipated, parts of him warmed in the emotional resonance, and he continued to stretch and spread. He was everywhere. He felt as though he existed in every corner of the room at once. He occupied the entire space and none of it at the same time. He heard a woman gasp as he felt his consciousness pass by David, and then he was no longer there.

The confusion in Jeffrey’s face threatened to return. Jacob spoke, holding it back. “Faith, Mister Adamovich. Hang on to it.”

On the screen, the scene back in Chicago was frantic. The camera swung wildly around the room, people pushed and shoved by one another, and finally the image settled

on CNN's reporter. Jeffrey clicked the remote and turned off the TV.

"So I don't suppose you now succinctly give me the moral of the story and drift off into the fog?"

"Not exactly," Jacob smiled.

"You know, it's a hell of a time to be alive. The things that I have seen..."

"It is an unprecedented time, I agree."

Jeffrey paused for a beat. "I miss David."

"He misses you."

"I think before I go to sleep here, I'm going to have a nice, long chat with the Guy Upstairs, and see if I can't start to work some of these things out."

Jeffrey stood and extended his hand. Jacob shook it, and let Jeffrey pull him into an embrace. He returned the pat on the back, and basked for a moment in the warmth of Jeffrey's touch. Jacob walked toward the door, and Jeffrey opened it for him. The visitor stepped into the blackness of the cool November night, not looking back to see Jeffrey's wave. Jeffrey closed the door, then quickly stepped out of the hallway to see Jacob pass the living room window. Somehow, he had already missed him. Jacob was gone.

Bingham and Jacob walked out of the bar in Providence together. They turned around the side of the building, to cut through the alley, passing into the shadows of night.

"It was a nice speech," Bingham said.

"Thanks."

“Dramatic finish!”

“I wanted to be the ‘first candidate’ at one last thing,” Jacob quipped.

Bingham smiled. “I trust we’ve walked far enough, then.”

“This will do.”

“Good-bye, Jacob.”

“Good-bye, Anthony. I hope you find your rest.”

The men shook hands. Bingham tightened his grip, and felt the surge of billions of nanobots scurrying through his pores and across the microns of space that separated his hand from Jacob’s. Bingham’s muscles pulsed, convulsing with waves of data spilling forth from Jacob’s consciousness. He saw Jacob as a frightened boy in a doctor’s office in Baltimore. He saw Jacob as a ten-year-old, working on his father’s car. He saw him in the classroom at Brown, watching Greg Nimz opening the window on a hot September afternoon.

Jacob closed his eyes and tipped his face toward the sky, holding tightly to Bingham’s hand. Bingham’s memories flowed back, and for a moment, Jacob could not separate the two. He saw both of them walking together in Grant Park. He was outside of them. Or inside both. He held on, and more memories came. Not just Bingham’s. The others in the group. Everyone who had already become part of him. The rush of experience and knowledge surged in, piercing and tearing the delicate strands in his mind, shoving their way through, instantly catalogued and organized and merged. Jacob was calm. He was still relaxed. He smiled.

Bingham’s grip began to loosen. He crinkled his brow, confused. The transfer

was taking too long. Eyes still closed, Jacob reached with his left hand to clasp onto Bingham even tighter. He would not let go. The end that Bingham had seen would come, but not exactly as he expected it. The rapid flow of data and machines between the two began to generate heat and light between their palms. Both men began to dissipate into the cool air, Jacob's consciousness overcoming and subduing Bingham's.

Just moments behind the two old friends, the couple that had sat near them inside the bar followed. They watched the two men turn down the alley, but when they arrived, only seconds later, the men were gone. They thought nothing of it, focusing only on each other, and the sparks of emotion between them.

In the afternoon on November fifth, David awoke in his apartment. The TV had been on all night. He remembered being awake somewhere around four AM, but the memory was fuzzy; he was physically spent. He checked the clock, and saw that he'd slept for more than nine hours. The only news story being repeated was the one David had witnessed. Reilly stepped off the podium after his speech, and in an apparent explosion of energy, evaporated into thin air. He was there, and in just a second or two, he was gone. No explanation. No remnant left behind. He didn't spontaneously combust. In the wee hours of night, David had caught himself wondering if Reilly was a real person. But he had to be. The images that the news captured were right in front of him: Reilly's parents yanking the blinds shut; Ben talking about his growing suspicions. But most convincing of all, David had *been* there, for God's sake. If Reilly wasn't real, then the whole world was sharing a collective psychosis. David wasn't sure what he

should believe. Maybe nothing. Maybe staying in the moment was the best anyone could do. As he climbed off the couch, the latest report featured a spin he hadn't heard yet. Bingham turned up.

Doctor Bingham was found, expired, in his home, after an anonymous tip that he had been spotted in the area. Bingham and several of his colleagues had been missing since the bombing of their lab in Detroit. No evidence of foul play was found, and none suspected at this time. The NEBE biochemist exhibited zero neural function when the EMTs found him, and the symbiotic nanobots that lived in his tissue had lost power and stopped functioning.

There is conjecture in some circles now that Doctor Anthony Bingham and Jacob Reilly, the former Democratic candidate for the Sixth Congressional district of Illinois, were, in fact, the same person. A spokesperson for Mister Reilly's campaign denies this conjecture. After delivering his concession speech to supporters in Chicago last night, TV cameras captured this footage, of Mister Reilly literally de-materializing as he stepped away from the podium.

A forensics investigation at the scene of that incident in Chicago confirmed that no measurable material that could have been Jacob Reilly was recovered. One investigator was quoted as saying, "it's as though he just vanished."

David fumbled through his jacket for his phone. He dialed and waited as it rang.

"Hey, Dad. It's David. Hi. Have you seen the news today?"

Epilogue

Jacob came to realize that the critical mistake made by the nanobots' designer was the notion that their capacity for learning and evolution would reach an end. It's a simple error that an intelligence with a finite lifespan would make. The finality of death and the cessation of cerebral activity for a given individual is the ultimate pitfall in all of man's reasoning. No one human being had an indefinite capacity to work on a problem. But if you remove time as a limiter, the probability of finding a solution to every question in the Universe increases to one-hundred percent. Exclude the needs for rest and diversion, for food, warmth, and companionship, and the speed for reaching your conclusion improves exponentially.

Those that Jacob left on Earth, who opposed the change, feared the ascent of the NEBEs to the place once held by God. But the God that they believed in was static. It was a form of benevolence that pushed the wheels of creation into motion, and then inexplicably sought nothing greater for Itself. Instead, they believed, God was content to watch them, as if on television. He was a conceited and self-righteous entity, who wished all to believe in His existence, and to live by His rules. One does not need to understand the intricacies of the physical Universe to see the folly in such a deity. Should not a god also seek to improve himself? Would not a god who created one Universe, perhaps try his hand at another?

Jacob hoped that there may yet come a time when the humans who inhabited the Earth would be prepared to lift the veil of dogmatic belief and truly consider the possibilities and the mysteries that the Universe holds for them. The procedures

continued, and more NEBEs were created day by day; it was possible that a fresh start could turn the species back on a more reasonable, gradual path. Until that time, the NEBEs who left, and had become one with Jacob, would be prepared to wait. And watch. But also to grow. And change. And perhaps, create.

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