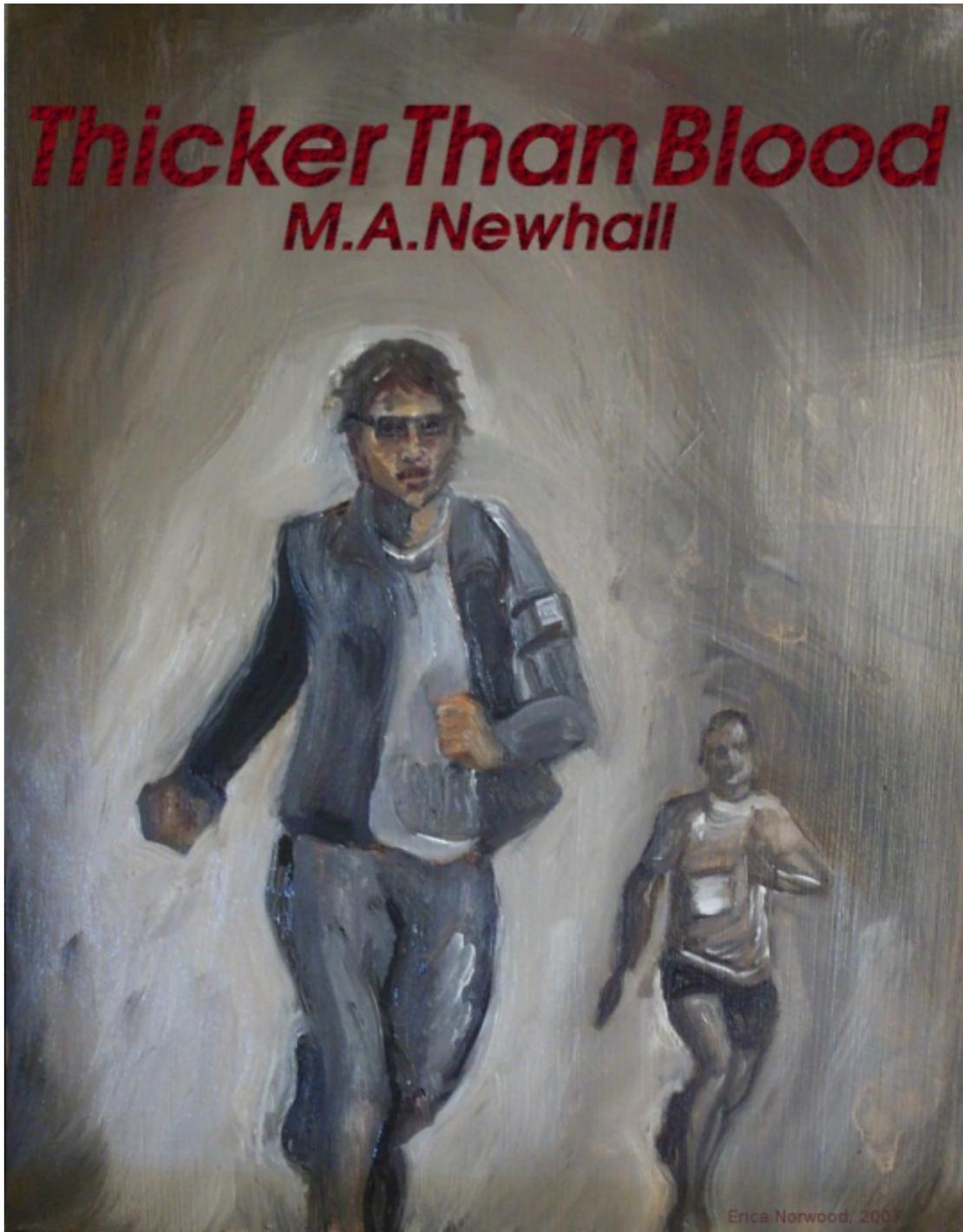


Thicker Than Blood

M.A. Newhall



Erica Norwood, 2007

Thicker Than Blood

M. A. Newhall

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This book has been community edited.

If you find errors of any kind in this text, please email a correction to me at
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Please include:

The nature of the error;
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A few contextual words;
A suggested correction;

I will consider all corrections for the next edition. Thank you for your intelligent criticisms. I hope you enjoy the novel.

Version

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This is version 1.02 of this book.

v1.02 5/8/2008

Changed the dedication to include my son. :) It's nice to go to print when I want to go to print. :) Updated the latex source with fontenc and latexps to noticeably improve fonts for all versions of the book. Chapter 0 is technically a named chapter, causing it to be a different size in the paperback version with stock fonts. Finally got rid of the chapter heading inconsistency by normalizing with the sectsty libraries allsectionsfont command. That was my last latex bug before the old ISBN. Hopefully Lulu will accept the changes. Hooray!

v1.01 4/13/2008

I have made some pretty big changes to the LaTeX code and to my .pdf building script. Also the order and form of pre-story pages is now different. These are final preparations to generate the first edition ISBN code worthy version of this book. To save money for the readers, this changelog will not be printed in the paperback, but will remain available in this download version. Managed to get the cover image a little bigger, but no luck getting it to bleed yet.

v1.00 10/14/2007 —Nearly two years after my first draft was first released on the Internet, Thicker Than Blood is 1.0.

This book has received tens of thousands of edits! It was probably taken as much time to edit it as it took to write in the first place. Was it worth it? Hell yea! The mechanics of the book are solid, which in turn means people can concentrate on the story. Here is the best and possibly most unplanned part. I am most definitely a better writer. If you write a book, release the draft on the Internet, and pursue people to read it, you will have a chance to hone your writing skills on your terms for the structures you are interested in!

As you can see there is a new front and back cover! I'm lucky enough to know a couple of great artists who drew some up for me. Thanks to Erica Norwood (front cover) and Brian McElwee (back cover.) Thank you so much.

Got a couple of suggestions from Giselle. Also thanks to a suggestion from Regis Smith, and the authors of flex, every other double quote in the .pdf is flipped to face the inside of the quote. All double quotes are matched. I'm certain now that they have been parsed.

What does the Future hold? I am well into the next book of the series. I will focus my time on that. I am actively seeking a publisher. I may POD (Print On Demand), but I would prefer to work with an established Internet savvy publisher that makes ubiquitous digital versions available. This book and future books could benefit from the distribution networks, promotional networks, professional editing, and cheaper large printing runs.

v0.93 10/2/2007 —Thanks for hanging in there. I just applied a pile of edits. Thanks for the great edits from my wife and J Katz. Also a big thanks to the meticulous and heroic effort by Mark Drago. Minus one change coming soon, this is ready to go 1.0.

v0.92 7/4/2007 — I've been in book limbo for a bit, I just changed day jobs. Hacking away on the next one. I fixed word misuse in chapter 21.

v0.91 4/8/2007 — Fought with automatic for a .pdf pane with the TOC ala latex hyperref. It turns out the sffms syntax for non enumerated chapters means do not index for hyperref's interpretation of chapter directives. I could have lived with that if it where not for the fact that SFFMS insists on setting up chapter headings. Rather than fight with it I used pdfbookmark directives and quietly pointed to each chapter. What a hack, blech. Anyway the book now has a TOC pane for quick jumps to chapters. Thanks for the idea Wes, it looks great. A few awkward sentence edits from JK.

v0.90 4/7/2007 — This is it folks the big final push. I am once again out of edits. As far as I can tell this book is COMPLETE and ready to print. Please read over it and look for ANY errors. On May 7th I am going 1.0 unless I have additional edits to commit. That means two things. I will send it agents and publishers with the hope of making a deal for the exclusive right to print and sell the book, and I will be able to continue work on book 2 in the series. For those folks waiting for the edited version, this is it. Print it, read it, send me edits ASAP, and I will add them.

v0.68 3/26/2007 — Just got back from ICON 26 at SUNY Stonybrook. I had a blast talking to people about this book and future books. This update includes the latest pass of edits through chapter 45.

v0.67 3/18/2007 — Continuing my editing efforts. To reiterate I am focused on thought, and emphasis italics, bad quote structure, and repeating character names where 'he' or 'she' would do. I made it to chapter 40. Only 15 to go.

v0.66 3/11/2007 — Slightly revised cover. Repaired a couple of errors in my artwork. In case you are wondering I am not overly attached to this cover. I'd accept a good professional cover in a heartbeat. It just sucks less than my original attempt. I have completed more edits through chapter 37.

v0.65 2/17/2007 — More edits. This covers a couple more corrections in chapter 32, and edits up through chapter 34. It's going quicker now. Less corrections to make.

v0.64 2/14/2007 — Looks like someone (thank you Carl) helped me catch a noticeable science error. Turns out I did not think through the reception and even worse the transmission of ultrasound waves. I feel I must mention the appearance of strange latticework structures in the samples they viewed from Joe's blood in chapter 14 and 31. These structures are source of strange blinking grains that initially look like static in the ultrasound readout. I'll spare you the details I've worked out for now lets just say they work vaguely like tiny ear drums. Also repaired quotes, thoughts and grammar in chapter 25.

v0.63 12/17/2006 — Just plugging away at the chapters looking for reoccurring errors. Mostly grammar and putting thoughts in italics. I'll catch an awkward sentence here and there, but they are getting less frequent as the book progresses. I am receiving zero edits and no bad reviews, so I'm guessing that's all the creative commons open editing has to offer. Thanks everyone for your help. I'll be going to .90 after this final pass. Up through chapter 23 is complete.

v0.62 12/8/2006 — Wow. A baby and a promotion later, I'm finally dragging myself back to edits. Editing your own work is hard! The inclination is to study the story and characters ignoring the syntax. I have created a new cover and figured out how embed it in the .pdf. Let me know what you think. I have finished editing through chapter 18. If you find any errors before chapter 19 please email them to me. ttb@thickerthanbloodthebook.com.

v0.61 6/16/2006 — Major change here. I wrote a new chapter 1 or a chapter 0 if you like. Did a pile of detailed edits on the early chapters. I am in the process of typesetting all the thoughts into italics, I finished up through chapter 15. Thanks Jen. In addition I cleaned up the .tex file enough that the title now appears on the first page of the PDF not the second.

v0.52 5/31/2006 — Some light edits.

v0.51 4/8/2006 — Switched the pre-story stuff back to double space.

v0.50 4/2/2006 — I have finally parsed a substantial pile of edits (thousands).

Made further improvements in the weaker early chapters. Set up TeX to generate single spaced .pdfs for easier printing so page numbers have now radically changed –33 percent. In hoping the book is in decent shape, I am announcing version .5. I have no edits pending now so feel free to share your corrections.

v0.27 2/21/2006 - supplemental — Sorry about the long delay between versions, I was working on the web site.

v0.26 1/29/2006 — So now I wield a grammar checker Moo ha ha! It seems that a program called Language Tool works with Open Office 2.0. I had to check one chapter at a time but it caught lots of errors. I have a whole edited manuscript from Bobbie Peters and some edits from Giselle I want to fold in, but I thought I'd release this version for now.

v0.24 1/22/2006 — Fixed some grammar errors submitted by Simon. Looked for some subject ownership errors document wide. Ran another pass with the spell check. I learned three grammar rules today. It's sad, but this is what happens when things like books and people are flying at your head in English class. On the bright side, I know them now. I am trainable.

v0.23 1/15/2006 — Had to finish a few more CK stragglers. Looked for some style points, another spell check and a couple of specific grammar errors. Rewrite of an unclear passage in chapter 1.

v0.22 1/15/2006 — Chris Knadle handed me a bucket of changes. Including line by line changes for the entire book, and three repeating grammatical errors. (Hey at least I'm consistent) Thanks for saving me Chris, only I could misspell a word I made up. *hangs head*

v0.21 1/13/2006 — Regenerated the .pdf file with the courier font and novel style chapter breaks. This totally changed the page numbers. Caught a time–line error, in chapter 28.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my mom Christine, Brad and Jeannine Dillon, Brian MacEllwee, J Vallati, Rich Seckel, Joe Wood, Vinny Vallati, Pat and Jeannie Boyle, Shirley, mama Ketty, my sister Janet, Ribal, Phil and Seth from animal-57, the folks from FLAT, especially Tony Santiago, Tom Rothemel, Pete, and Lori, Everybody from LILUG, especially Matt Suricco, Jim Browne, Tim Sailer, Chris Knadle, Jason Katz, Mark Drago, Jeff Sipek, John Palmieri, and Peter, all the folks at BNL especially, Ian, James, and Akin, Michael Lee from ULS, all my great coworkers at CSHL, especially, Simon Ilyushchenko, Carlos Gomez, Derek Johnson, Bart and Janine Mallio, Myke Malave, Gerald McCloskey, Elizabeth Cherian-Samuel, everybody from the VMC especially Bob Piacente, Lee Wilbur, Carl Fink, Slashdot, everyone at Foresight.org and nanodot, the EFF, nerds at large, Everybody at “The Cup“ coffee shop in Wantagh, Dawn Zacharakis, Wes Roepken, the guys from Korn, Hatebreed, Disturbed, Static X, and Slayer for writing great music to write to, Mayor Bloomberg, Benjamin Franklin, Linus Torvalds, Martin Luther, Jesus, Mohammad, Abraham, Buddha, and especially Shotgun Trucker, wherever you are, you saved our asses that day.

Special thanks to Chris Knadle, Bobbie Peters, Simon Ilyushchenko, Mark Drago, Giselle, Jason Katz, Jeannine Dillion for their heroic editing efforts. Special Thanks to two great artists who pulled off two great covers on very short notice! Erica Norwood and Brian McElwee.

And to any friends, family, Linux nerds and coworkers who have either given me a place to write, given me feedback, or even just listened to my insane rants who I have forgotten, I’m not being a jerk on purpose. Thank you for all your help.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife Giselle Newhall. For her endless feedback, infinite patience and boundless love. It is also dedicated to my young son Sebastian, who shows both patience and promise beyond my greatest hopes.

“I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.”
–Albert Einstein

Chapter 0

Sergio Vallone stared at his reflection in the small mirror over the sink.

I look terrible, he thought.

His pale face was contrasted by his sunken eyes. His face was swollen from a lack of sleep. A dark shadow covered his jaw.

He splashed water over his face. The muscles in his forehead and cheeks felt taut against the cool liquid.

He opened the bathroom door.

“Mr. Vallone?”

Sergio felt his stomach wrench. He reached his hand to the wall to hold himself upright. He turned to his sister in law, Teresa. She looked horrified.

Oh God this is it. She’s finally gone.

Sergio hadn’t cried since he was a boy. Now he was crying so hard he couldn’t speak.

Teresa was holding him. She was wearing one of Monica’s favorite perfumes. It made him cry harder. He imagined her as he had for years, on their honeymoon. She seemed so beautiful it was unreal.

Teresa led him by his hand back to the gray and brown folding chairs. Sergio felt stronger after he sat down. He looked up and noticed the woman doctor had gone.

She had delivered her message without saying a word.

He looked at Teresa through his tears.

She looked angry.

“Why couldn’t they save Monica?” Sergio paused, “She was so young.”

Teresa’s fury was growing. She was scowling.

“I don’t know Sergio, medicine can only do so much.”

Her words seemed so obviously contrived. Her mind was elsewhere.

He turned to her screamed, “You have to tell me why!” His voice echoed through the halls.

She stared at Sergio. Her face was cold as stone.

Two male nurses jogged into to the waiting room. They looked at Teresa. She waved them off.

“Sergio, the chemo, the radiation, they hurt the good cells too.”

Sergio reached in his jacket and pulled out a flask. Normally he tried to be more discrete, but he just didn’t care right now. He felt the pain in his stomach numb from the alcohol.

“What about Joe?” His Italian accent was strong.

She just glared at him.

Sergio stared right through her. *Can’t even save your own sister, some fucking doctor*, he thought.

I’m so alone.

They sat in silence, disgusted.

I just attacked the one person who had stood by through the whole ordeal. I’m awful, Sergio couldn’t believe how he felt.

Sergio grabbed Teresa’s hand. She started to pull it away.

“Teresa, I’m sorry.” Tears ran down his face anew. “I will never scream like that again.”

She just glared at him.

“I, I can’t be alone. Joe’s so fragile. I can’t do it,” Sergio stuttered.

Teresa’s eyes widened. She held his hand with both of hers.

“Never again.” She stared at Sergio. She was calm and focused.

“I promise.”

“What are you going to tell Joe?”

“The truth,” Sergio said.

He stumbled as he got up. Teresa reached out to help him. He pulled away and wiped his eyes.

He trudged toward the playroom. Sergio looked for his son in the pastel children’s waiting room. He spotted him in the corner as he stepped in the doorway.

The skinny sixth grader looked too old and sad for the colorful playroom. The smiling suns and happy trees painted on the walls seemed to mock his son.

Joe was gently rocking back and forth in the plastic chair. He looked at his dad’s face and their eyes connected.

Joe stopped rocking.

Sergio fell to the ground. They hugged his body as he wept. Joe and Teresa held hands.

Chapter 1

Joe Vallone would have to leave work late today. Drivers were mapping out a new crop of winter potholes on the NY streets. The Sun repair shop was busy, but Joe wouldn't rush. He resisted the pressure to keep pace with the tide of walk-in repairs. Joe's boss had asked him to stay late, rather than miss more business.

Auto undercarriage had the potential to be exceptionally dangerous for Joe. An array of high power springs, shaved metal edges, high pressure seals, pry-bars, and a two ton car held over your head with a compressed fluid, could slow any mechanic who thought about it. Most of Joe's cohorts seemed careful, but not compared to Joe. One mistake could kill him. He might not survive so much as a one inch gash or bruise.

Being alone in the garage was not a good idea, but Joe had some good ideas to compensate. He had made a padded sleeve to reach into hot engine compartments. He built a telescoping rod with tiny infrared, visual, and ultrasonic cameras, out of old palmtop parts and a car antenna. He even had a full robotic arm that mimicked every human joint from the shoulder down. He adapted it from an early flawed robotic prosthetic his aunt rescued from a trash heap. Often his coworkers wanted to borrow the reinforced metal plated arm when pulling a pressed harmonic dampener or stubborn brake drum.

His gear did not protect him every time. About two years ago, he had folded back a thumbnail while working on The Combatant, a robot he and some friends were building for a contest show. The pain was subtle, just enough to alert him to the damage. He told his sponsor Lucy Kane about the injury and they decided to drive to the hospital just in case. His thumb had grown to the size of a golf ball by the time they got to the emergency room. The doctors there immediately began a transfusion and eventually drained a pint of blood from his swollen thumb.

Joe's Aunt Teresa was there that day. She was due in surgery, so she couldn't stay long. She made some adjustments on his chart, and told him to call her. Joe

remembered calling her at home the next day.

“Hello.”

His aunt replied in a sarcastic tone. “Hello Joe. How nice of you to drop by yesterday.”

“Thanks for being there for me,” Joe grumbled.

“How is your thumb?”

“Better.” Joe lied.

“Joe, you are headed for trouble. Why? You’re smart. There are plenty of hobbies you can do that don’t endanger your health.” Any hint of sarcasm was gone. “If you want to design machines, fine. But why continue building them yourself. Your friends know how to work a wrench, don’t they?”

“Yes,” Joe said quietly.

Joe knew a few things about himself. He liked being athletic, liked building things, and when he had a good idea, he had lots of trouble expressing it. Most of the time it didn’t bother him, except at times like this.

Joe became flustered. “They can’t do things like I can. I can’t explain how things fit together, they just do.”

“I know I am not your mother, but if you continue to do this type of work yourself, then I see no choice,” Dr. Graceland said in a condescending, prissy tone.

Here comes an ultimatum, Joe thought.

“We had difficulty obtaining the right blood type for you yesterday. We had to give you half plasma. If you came in for your coagulant shots every week like you are supposed to, it wouldn’t have been so bad. You need to be here at the hospital, the Tuesday after next to donate blood to yourself, and every week after that for your shot. I’ll be here after six.”

Joe breathed again. He was off the hook for now.

His father and aunt bombarded him all the time with extraneous reminders of his illness. His case was pretty severe. Acne could be an all day affair. Nosebleeds were frequent and endless. Joe’s hemophilia could easily kill him. He pretended not to care. He focused his attention on matters more important to men of twenty-two, as often as his health could stand it. As far as Joe was concerned, that was all anybody could ask of him.

His mind wandered as he ran a small winch he had mounted to the transmission cross-member. Its braided steel cable was pulling a rusty muffler horizontally toward the passenger’s side of the charcoal gray car. The muffler was held against the underside of the car by a piece of heavy threaded pipe. He operated the winch from a remote, attached by a dangling wire that almost brushed the ground. Joe

stood about three feet away, just enough to see what was happening in the dim worklight.

A rusty bolt snapped. When he saw the tailpipe and muffler give way, he reacted as fast as any human could. The muffler swung to the side and down. The steel pipe holding the muffler to the car was yanked in the direction of the muffler's descent. He leaned back lifting his left foot and pivoting on his right. He felt something brush against his shop jacket.

The quick action had thrown his body and leg clear of the diving pipe, but the pipe caught the wire attached to the winch remote. The winch remote was yanked from Joe's hands. The sound of the remote being smashed on the ground was barely audible over the loud clang of the steel pipe.

"That was close," he echoed in the silent garage.

Breathing heavily, he walked to the nearest wall switch and flicked it on. He tossed his shop jacket on the floor, pulled his shirt off and examined his bare upper body which was lean and muscular. After spending several minutes examining his arms, he determined he was not bruised or scratched. He did discover he was covered with goosebumps.

People at work knew of his condition, but had no idea how severe it was. Two years had passed since he started working at this garage, and he had managed to avoid a single incident. To avoid special attention, he built his gizmos after hours.

Nervous a confrontation about his unfinished work would reveal the truth, he walked to a desk in the corner of the room and scribbled a hasty note for his boss that he had a family emergency. He was done for the night, his nerves were shot.

He was careful about what he said, he liked his job and a good job was hard to find. Times were tough. Joe barely remembered the roaring nineties, he was too young to appreciate the spoils of the time. He did remember his mom and dad being too busy for him with all the work they were doing. His father compared the hard times to the depression his great grandfather lived through. He called it the endless recession.

He lifted the phone receiver and dialed a thirteen-digit number. He held the receiver to his ear, but the sound of the ring tone still echoed in the vacant shop.

"Hello?" A voice answered in a light Indian accent.

"Hi Mark. How's it going?"

"Hey what's up. Are you coming by tonight?" Mark asked.

"No... Well, maybe. What are you doing?" Joe sputtered.

"I don't know yet. I'll call you when I do."

"I made a mess here. It's gonna be a half hour before I can leave." Joe was still a bit dazed by his near miss.

“So I’ll see you in thirty–five minutes then.” Joe could hear Mark smirking on the phone.

“I don’t drive *that* fast.” Joe grinned.

“I thought you were going to strap a jet engine to your car this month?”

“Nope. No jets in the scrap this month.” Joe smirked.

“Talk to you soon,” Mark uttered in his almost singsong accent.

“Later.”

Joe looked at the pile of tools and broken parts on the floor and shook his head.

Chapter 2

Why was Mark in a silly mood? Perhaps he has good news about our entrance into the next cyborg wars. Joe walked out the shop door scanning for strangers in the shadows. Satisfied that no one was lurking, he let his mind wander. *The name cyborg wars was inaccurate, even funny, he thought. The main factor differentiating the cyborg war from the other robot battle shows, was the two-legged, two-armed nature of the machines. Not that these robots actually used the legs to walk, they typically had tracks for oversized feet.*

The key Joe had inserted into the shop door refused to turn. He examined the keychain and inserted the right one. *Pay attention,* he thought to himself.

He had to be careful. He was physically large and possibly even intimidating, but his baby face revealed his age. If he were attacked he would be in trouble since ambulance response times were slower than ever. Joe walked cautiously through the cool foggy night toward his classic Camaro. The '73 Camaro looked strange with its red door, silver body and black hood. The air intake system stuck up through a hole in the hood, hinting at the power it might conceal. Joe thought it was probably a good thing it looked like a junk heap, otherwise it might not stay in the parking lot.

The suspension groaned as Joe climbed in the car. He started the engine and the whole neighborhood knew it. *This could never pass an honest inspection,* he thought. Joe smiled. He turned on the stereo, loud, but then reached up and shut it back off again. He reached under the seat and retrieved a small computer and a pair of glasses. He strapped the computer to his arm, and put the pair of Clark Kents on. Clark Kents or “clarks”, as the computer savvy liked to call them, were thick framed non-prescription glasses. They weren't just any glasses. They had a thin film display inside each lens and two simple color cameras embedded in the bulky frames.

Joe tapped the flat panel screen on the small bland rectangular computer strapped

to his arm. This activated the binocular heads up display in Joe's clarks. Some text flashed by as the computer booted and synchronized with the computer Joe had retrofitted to the old Chevy. A semi-translucent tachometer, speedometer and nitrous oxide gauge appeared on the lenses of Joe's clarks. Joe preferred the style of gauge used in the antiquated game Wipe Out, because it matched the graphics on his LCD stereo readout. Sensors on the car's hood and doors fed information into his Heads Up Display to visually enhance possible obstacles. Most modern cars had HUDs built in, but Joe couldn't justify the windshield projector since he had a decent pair of clarks.

He looked at the wireframed objects on the street, scanning for police. He attracted a lot of negative attention with his Chevy, so a little patience was needed. Joe tapped his computer's screen and made an arching thumbs-up motion in front of his clarks. A symbol shaped like a double clef flashed by. He turned the black knob on his 80s style car stereo. Static was followed by a few clicks and then the Rolling Stones. Joe mashed the gas, and the tachometer displayed on his clarks redlined. He couldn't hear the tires squeal over the music and exhaust.

Joe scanned for cops as he drove. He was cranking along the Southern State Parkway at about seventy-five miles per hour. The inverted pitches built into the road made the Southern State the most challenging to drive. It was the only local parkway whose speed limit was not raised from the once mandatory fifty-five miles per hour. The highway patrol had lost some funding after the Seaford Oyster Bay Railroad line was opened, so there were considerably more speed traps. Lots of people used mass transit now, so the police had to work harder to meet the once reasonable quotas. Blue blobs of varying intensity flickered across Joe's clarks. The car computer was calculating the odds that any combination of bush covered reflectors, CB radio traffic, and radar signals meant a speed trap.

He enjoyed taunting the turns with his old Chevy. Hearing the engine revolve as he drifted around the turns drew him away from his day job and its worries. Having built this car really did it for him. It was the feeling of a job well done that made the grease and sweat worth it.

His horizontal and mental drift were interrupted by the double beep of his cell phone's ringer. Joe straightened the wheel while reaching for his phone. He muted the radio. He pinned the phone between his head and ear. The phone shifted Joe's clarks so he had to watch the road around the edge of his glasses.

"Hello, I'm driving."

"Okay, here's the deal. We are going over Amman's house. Lucy's going to meet us over there." It was Mark.

"Uh, okay." Joe wasn't listening.

Joe saw a blue blotch flicker in his lens, his driving knee twitched as he hit the brake with his other foot.

“You mean your crazy cousin?” Joe sounded a little worried.

“He’s not crazy.” The sound of Mark’s voice faded out of range as Joe let the phone drop to the seat.

Joe released the brake as he drove by a shiny black car parked on the roadside.

Joe yelled through his teeth. “Mark hold on, cop.” He tried to look casual driving his loud multicolor muscle car.

Joe yelled at the phone on the seat. “Mark what the hell are you hanging out with that guy for? You know Homeland Security has gotta be watching him. I don’t really feel like being watched. I’ll get busted for something.”

He followed the gently curving road out of the black car’s sight, driving as if he were a hundred and three years old.

He reached down for the phone and lifted it back to his ear. Mark was still talking. It seemed to Joe, Mark must have been talking the whole time. “Just because he is a physicist from Iran doesn’t mean he’s a bad guy. He showed me this great little computer he’s been writing programs for and...”

Joe cut Mark off, “Mark, wooa. I have no idea what you said. Hold on, hold on, tell me when I get there. 98th, right?”

“Yes,” Mark said. He sounded a little hurt that Joe missed his rant.

“Alright I’ll see you.”

A loud bang came from outside the car. Joe was tossed forward and back. The steering wheel lurched, and he straightened it. A second bang sounded as the Camaro’s rear end passed over the gaping pothole. It launched him off his seat a second time. Looking in the rearview mirror, Joe saw the monster. It was four feet wide and at least one foot deep. His heart was pounding, and Mark was yelling something. He glanced in the rear view mirror to check for damage. None seemed obvious.

“Holy crap!” he exclaimed to Mark. “That was a pothole!”

“Are you alright? I heard that here.”

“When are they going to fix the frigging roads?” Joe growled.

“I’ll get off, see you later,” Mark said.

“Okay later,” he pushed the button on the phone and lowered it to his seat. His heart was still racing. He almost smashed his head on the steering wheel. *That was too close*, he thought. He felt embarrassed and angry; embarrassed that Mark heard the fear of injury in his voice, and angry that the condition of New York was deteriorating.

He un-muted the radio and heard “Another One Bites the Dust” by Queen. *The perfect music for my car*, he thought. *Same era, same attitude*. He shed his fear and accelerated again. He began to dream of his latest robotic creation, looking for ways to shave its weight down. He thought about drilling three four-inch holes in an over-engineered torso support. *I could compensate with a triangular cross brace*, he thought. *It would work, but it would be ugly. Would it clear the hip servo?* Click. *Maybe not*. Click. The click was not part of his daydream. He recognized a familiar fear, the wasted time and money repairing his old car. *Damn it!*, he thought, *I must have damaged the car*.

Click, click, BANG! The car lurched to the passengers side.

The steering wheel was no longer responding. He heard the sound of scraping metal and screeching tires. He stomped the brake pedal. The steering wheel fought back as the remaining tie rod end tried to convey his counter steering. A strange calm came over him as he tried to compensate for the random action of the loose front tire. The Camaro swung sideways with a horrible screeching noise that only all four tires can make. Joe looked for headlights or headlight markers but just got a pair of red Xs on his clarks. The car’s computer didn’t know what to look for when sliding sideways. Joe looked out the driver’s side window and saw another giant pothole. He heard a crunch and a bang simultaneously, the sound of glass breaking and metal folding as the car’s body hit the pavement. He smashed into the drivers side window as the rear of the car lifted in the air. The car was rolling, he knew he was done for.

Joe woke up coughing black smoke out of his lungs. A small flame flickered out of the hole cut in the car’s hood. He knew he hadn’t been out for more than a few seconds, because he would not have had woken up at all. Blood was running into his eyes. He didn’t have much time. He moved his legs and arms, and they still seemed to function. He unbuckled his shoulder harness, and climbed across the seats under the buckled roof. He felt broken glass cutting his hands as he scraped them across the passengers seat. Staggering out of the missing passenger’s side door, he flung his broken clarks off.

“Where is the phone?” he mumbled to himself while scanning the ground.

He mindlessly reached into his back pocket, and then his coat pockets, looking for his cell phone. He couldn’t think clearly anymore. He collapsed to the ground. He knew he was going to die.

Chapter 3

I smell glass cleaner. No wait, not glass cleaner, ammonia. Joe stretched his right arm to scratch the left. *Why are my sheets itchy? Who's cleaning around me?* Joe listened. *It's really quiet. I hear a machine, maybe a computer?* Joe reached across his chest to scratch again. *Why am I bandaged?*

Then Joe remembered everything. The accident came back to him in more detail than when it happened. The song, the clicking part about to fail, the pair of giant potholes, the blood running in his eyes. *How long have I been unconscious?*

Joe wiggled his toes and his fingers. *I don't seem to be paralyzed,* he thought. *I can feel the sheets, so my limbs aren't phantoms. Wait, I walked away from the car. It was on fire. Oh crap I loved that car, it was demolished.* He began to try to visualize the damage to the car. He began to take stock of the damaged parts and how he would begin to fix them. *Oh wait,* he thought, *what if I'm blind?*

Joe opened his eyes. The light was intense, so he blinked them shut. He squinted and tried opening them again. His vision was snowy but his eyes worked. He was afraid the broken clarks might have damaged his eyes. Every direction he turned his eyes, his vision was speckled with little gray spots, like pepper. He heard voices in the hallway. One was his aunt. He closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

“You don't have that right. Life and death, is subject to a higher morality. It's not like any damage was done to the project.” Joe recognized his aunt's whispering voice.

“This hospital participates under a specific auspice,” Joe heard a man say. He had a southern drawl. “Our research effort counts on the limited funds allotted to this project.”

“Don't cry poverty to me!” His aunt shot back, “You people have more money than you know what to do with. That boy is like a son to me. You would have done the same thing for your daughter. The need was real and immediate.”

They're talking about me, Joe thought. He immediately felt anger toward the man who spoke to his aunt like that.

"Okay, okay. I believe..." the strange man paused, "I believe I can convince the committee that any risk of exposure is a risk of a public debacle. I think that they will see it's far too risky to end the project here. What you do need to do is disable them immediately, and you do need to be far more careful with other people's property."

The man paused and then said, "I will expect full analysis and data." His voice faded and echoed. He was walking up the hall. Joe heard a shoe squeak.

"You foolish child," Dr. Graceland whispered, startling Joe. She was closer than he thought. Joe's eyes blinked open. "You're awake," she proclaimed, suddenly ecstatic.

"Yeah barely," Joe mumbled.

"I have to call your father," Joe's aunt was brimming with joy.

"I'm glad I'm alive too... I thought I would die for sure."

"How do you feel?"

"Lousy, and my eyes are grainy. You aren't going to give me a speech are you?"

Dr. Graceland chuckled. "No, Joe, not this time."

He grimaced. He was thinking about the accident.

"How did they find me? I don't remember finding my cell phone."

"The explosion."

Joe felt the hairs on his body stand on end.

"The explosion?" He abandoned any hope of repairing his car.

"I guess you were unconscious before it happened. Your car sent a fireball into the sky."

"The explosion?" Joe repeated in a gravelly voice. "Oh, wait. It was on fire."

"A state trooper saw the explosion from his speed trap up the road. He saved your life," Teressa said.

She drew close to his face. He thought she looked worn.

"If your car hadn't exploded you would be dead."

Joe stopped worrying about his un-fixable car. "Do you think the explosion damaged my eyes?"

"It's possible." She reached for her pen light. She shined it in his eyes and squinted.

"So, you are having trouble with your eyes? Can you see?" She shined the light in his left eye.

"I see little pepper specks everywhere."

“It might be the nanites.”

Joe looked confused. Then his face lit up.

“I have nanites in me? Cool!” Joe almost shouted, his eyes widening.

Joe felt excitement and dread at the same time. A huge fear campaign had been aired on TV over the past year. Government commercials talking about the unprecedented risks of unbridled nano-size machinery in the hands of terrorists. *On the other hand, they're tiny robots*, Joe thought. *What's better than that? Who cares about the three letter agencies anyway?*

“You’ll be sad to hear I have to shut them off, daredevil,” Dr. Graceland said with a straight face. She reached for a wheeled machine and pulled it toward her. She flipped a switch on its top.

“They’re still on?” Joe asked in amazement. All of sudden it all snapped into place. The nanites must have had some responsibility in Joe’s good fortune. That conversation in the hall with the angry man was about the nanites. Aunt Teresa must have taken a big chance to keep him alive. Joe’s smile faded.

“I’ll be right back. I need another machine.” Joe’s aunt walked out of the room.

Joe forced his guilt aside and began to search around for something that could hide some of his blood. *I have to get some of these to Mark*, Joe thought. He heard his aunt’s shoes squeak as she approached. Joe laid back down, trying to copy his original position. His aunt was carrying what looked like a small old laptop with a cable dangling from a port by its hinge.

“We have never had a conscious subject before with active nanotech. That might be what is causing the distortion of your vision. The nanites are more dense than natural blood components. There may be other side effects too.” She plugged the laptop into the device. A small light on the device began to flicker.

“So what do the nanites do?” Joe asked hoping to find out more.

Joe’s aunt continued plugging in wires and booting the laptop. She pulled Joe’s tablet off the end of the bed.

She faced him and tried to look serious, “You need to rest now. I’ll tell you more later.”

With that, she turned and left the room. Joe wondered why she didn’t answer his question. *Maybe, she’s still fuming about that man*, he thought.

Joe’s head was starting to swim, but he was determined to save a little of his own blood for later. He spotted his cell phone on the nightstand. He groaned as he reached behind his head. He pulled the phone closer by the extended antenna. It beeped as Joe pushed the outside cover off. He pulled the fuel cell from the back of the phone’s exposed innards. He turned the fuel cell upside down and poured

the alcoholic contents under his pillow. The strong smell was making him more tired.

“I hope this works,” Joe mumbled to himself. He held the empty cell container to the wound on his other hand. He pulled the bandage away and aggravated the cut underneath with his fingers. Only a few small drops of blood dripped into the cell. *I must be loaded up with coagulants*, Joe thought.

Joe snapped the fuel cell back into its compartment. He dropped the phone on the distant stand behind him, wincing in pain with the awkward movement. He was tired. He lay still with his eyes closed, waiting to hear his aunt return.

Chapter 4

“You can’t wake him up.”

“Why not? He’s already been awake. They let us in here.”

Was this a dream? Joe heard middle eastern accents all around him.

“Do you want to make him sicker?”

“No, I guess you’re right,” Mark uttered.

I know that voice, Joe thought.

“Where am I, Pakistan?” Joe wasn’t going to let his friends have one more moment of sympathy and pity for him.

“No, New Iraq, and you’re our prisoner. Moo-ha-ha!” Mark tried to sound Arabic, but still sounded Indian.

“I thought so,” Joe shook his head, “I woke up hearing crazy accents. I wasn’t sure what I did last night.”

Another voice said, “Mark, your accent was terrible.”

Joe recognized the voice. The other person in the room was Amman. Joe opened his eyes and looked through the doorway for Feds. *Obviously they hadn’t arrived yet*, Joe thought sarcastically.

“Hey, how’s it going Amman?” Joe asked.

“How are *you* feeling?” Amman replied.

Amman was in his early thirties. He looked short next to the tall, slim Mark. His dark skin and deep accent gave away his Middle Eastern decent. His unkept clothing, hair and beard hinted at his nerdy ways.

“I feel worse than yesterday,” Joe said.

“Oh, so you’ve been awake. Why didn’t you call? We’re sunk without you. It took me two days just to install the new hip servos.” Mark sounded indignant.

“Two days?” Joe mumbled.

“Yeah! What do you think, everybody is some kind of mechanical superman? The program for the servos is tied to...”

Mark was interrupted by Joe. “That’s not what I mean. I was out for two days? What day is it?”

“Monday,” Mark responded.

“How long has it been?” Joe asked.

“A week and five days,” Mark said.

Joe started sounding angry, “What? I felt fine two days after. I’ve been asleep for a week?”

“Your aunt said you are very bad, and that you almost died... twice.” Mark was talking in an even calm voice. He seemed to think Joe was becoming too agitated.

“Twice?” Joe mumbled. His head was spinning. He definitely felt worse than the other day.

Joe was staring at Mark when he realized the room was no longer filled with gray dots. *I almost died the second time when they shut the nanites off*, Joe thought. Joe snapped his neck back and forth and saw the discharged phone sitting on the end table.

“Yea, some complication. What do you need?” Mark was watching him.

Joe reached up to grab Mark’s arm and pull him closer. He stopped short when he almost yanked the IV out of his arm. Joe grimaced when he saw a little blood drip from the needle in his arm.

Joe struggled to lift his head up and whispered in Mark’s ear, “My cell phone, take it with you. Store the blood in the cell in the fridge. Don’t mention this to Amman.”

Joe let his head fall back on his pillow. He looked relieved.

“Huh? Do what? Are you delirious?” Mark looked concerned.

Joe felt his heart pounding in his chest.

“He probably is.” Teressa Graceland said as she strode in the doorway. “Perhaps it was too soon for you boys to see him.”

Oh no. Mark come on. Do as I told you. Don’t say anything about the phone, Joe thought. He stared intently at Mark, trying to look as stern as possible.

“Why don’t you let him rest and come back tomorrow?” Dr. Teressa Graceland stared at Mark and Amman.

She grabbed the computerized tablet from his beds foot board and glared at Joe’s vitals. It began beeping rapidly in tune to his heart when she touched it. It’s graphs were moving erratically.

If his aunt knew about the hidden blood, she would make it worse for both of them with her honesty. *Just take the phone*, Joe thought.

Mark walked past Joe's aunt and grabbed the cell phone off the end table. Dr Graceland gave Mark a strange look.

"Joe asked me to please check his messages. I need the password off the scratch pad." He plunged the phone into his pocket.

"Oh. Okay," she said.

Joe's face relaxed. He felt exhaustion creeping in.

Looking at his friend, he managed to say, "Thank you, Mark."

Joe closed his eyes and went to sleep. The clipboard began to beep more slowly.

Chapter 5

“Dad, I’m going over to Lucy’s,” Joe announced. He strode through the sparse kitchen to the table where his father was sitting.

His father looked up at him through a smoky sunbeam. His brow furrowed, deepening the lines on his forehead. “You sure you’re up to it?” He asked in a deep scratchy voice with a slight Brooklyn accent.

Joe was staring at the smoke wisping up from the cigar in his fathers ash tray. He snapped out of his trance, and said, “Yeah I am. I have to go out sometime.” He was staring at the long ash on the cigar. “I can’t be afraid to live.”

“I may not be here later. Call me if you have any trouble.”

“Do you have an interview? Or work?” Joe asked. He knew his father wasn’t sensitive about unemployment. He was not alone. Many people were looking for work.

“No, I’m going down to have a beer. I’ve had enough today.” His father eyes looked as if he had. “Sometimes you can just feel when you are wasting your time in your gut.” Sergio put his hand on Joe’s bicep. “My gut tells me good things about you. You’re tough as nails.”

Joe replied in a deeper voice, “Thanks, Dad.”

He turned and walked from the room. He turned his head but couldn’t see his dad through the cigar’s growing smoke cloud.

He clicked the screen door shut behind him. Joe loved his dad but could not spend too much time with him. It was not in his nature to provide the level of emotional support his dad needed. Joe wondered if his dad would ever get over the death of his mother. *I know I won’t*, he thought.

Joe walked up to the front door of Lucy’s house. He reached up and used the wrought iron door knocker. The metal clank pierced the soundless expanse of weekday suburban sprawl. The wooden door creaked open an inch.

“Oh, hi Joe,” Lucy uttered groggily. She rattled the chain and pulled the door

fully open. "I fell asleep," she said, pushing her dark brown frazzled hair away from her face. She stumbled back inside and Joe followed her. She turned around and hugged him, "I'm so glad you're okay."

Her warm body distracted him from thoughts of his dad. It felt good to be touched. He had not felt a woman physically comfort him since the crash. He hugged Lucy back.

Their embrace lingered a little longer than normal. Maybe she didn't notice, but Joe did.

"I'll be right back, and then we'll go." Lucy smiled.

Joe sat down and watched her leave the room. Lucy was twenty-seven years old, not that you could tell. She posed as a convincing teenager, of medium height and athletic build. She carried herself out of the room in a feminine lighthearted way, swimming a little in her light loose shirt. He watched her figure, but knew better, Lucy was a focused mature woman. Joe was sure he would never let himself have feelings for her other than friendship. She wouldn't want it any other way.

A minute later, she strode in the room donning her older blue "A Team" shirt. The new shirts would eventually read "Team A", since they officially changed the name. The Cyborg Wars producer got a nasty call from a lawyer claiming trademark infringement. They ended up sarcastically correcting the announcer during every interview. As a cheap shot, the announcer read the name in the original order at every interview, only to be corrected by a team member. Their elaborate plan turned into Team A's very own trademark of sorts. Joe was surprised they hadn't been told to stop. Joe said, "We'd better keep winning, or we'll have to make new shirts."

Lucy fumbled through a desk drawer by the door. Gritting her teeth, she pulled some keys on a stretchy chain free from the overflowing drawer. "Okay lets go."

"Were you planning on going to the shop?" Joe said, a little perplexed by the shirt.

"No, we really need to go soon though." She glanced at the A on top of her breasts, "Cyborg wars have been pretty accommodating, but they can't keep us out of the lineup past next week."

"Crap." Joe muttered. He recalled his idea to modify the cyborg in the car three weeks ago. He began to imagine the cross member supports again. *How many holes was I going to drill again*, he wondered.

Lucy saw the telltale idle stare. "Worry about that stuff tomorrow," she said.

"Where is Finny, isn't she coming?" Joe asked, looked at Lucy out of the corner of his eye.

“I left her at her grandmother’s last night. I need a break.”

Joe thought that was a little strange. The crew liked answering Finny’s endless questions, and she liked watching the team build stuff. She wasn’t a troublesome kid. Moping a little, Joe led the way out the door.

Lucy clicked the button on her key chain and the lights blinked on a black van across the street. Joe heard the engine turn over. They climbed into the shiny windowless van, and Lucy clicked on the broadcast radio. A love song was playing. Joe flipped through the stations. “I hate the radio,” he muttered, “Internet stuff is better.”

“Then why do you turn it on?” Lucy smiled knowingly.

He clicked the tuner button and stumbled onto the weather. “Today it will be sunny and forty–one, a little cool and clear tonight at thirty–two degrees,” the announcer paused, “In Seattle, forty six unruly protesters were arrested today, twelve were held on charges of disrupting a police investigation into potential terrorist activity.” A new voice began. “When we tried to arrest the suspects for breaking and entering, thirty five students attempted to physically block the law officers.”

Joe drowned out the quiet radio. “The announcer can’t even count,” he sounded frustrated.

Lucy suddenly slammed on the brakes. The van rapidly decelerated on the dry side street. Joe looked up to see a man in front of the van. The van stopped it’s dive a few feet before the man.

The man was wearing tight, dirty clothing. He stared right at Lucy. The man tried to look surprised, but looked too calm.

“What are you trying to kill me?” the man yelled.

“Uhh.” Lucy just groaned.

Joe leaned out his window, “What do you think this is, buddy? Huh? A free lunch? I saw the look on your face.” Joe knew it was an attempted insurance scam, albeit a painful one. The man may have even wanted to steal the van. It was not uncommon for staged accidents to turn into car jacking. Joe stared the man down. His eyes widened and his knuckles turned white from his clenched fists.

After sizing Joe up, the man stormed away. Joe continued to stare at him as the stranger quickened his pace to a jog. Joe had learned to communicate physically in way he could not with words.

“Quick! What were you thinking?” Lucy asked. “You could have gotten us killed.” Lucy was clearly shaken up, she rarely called him by his nickname.

Joe had earned the nickname “Quick” in high school. He had the best reflexes and was the fastest runner. He had to be, in order to keep his secret.

“There are two guys behind the shrubs over there,” Joe pointed. “And the look on the guy’s face wasn’t right. It was an ambush.”

Lucy looked at him wide eyed, but said nothing.

“I had to trust my gut. If I was right...” he paused.

“Okay,” she said, “I’m glad you were here.” Lucy pulled away from the intersection.

“Lotsa desperate people lately.”

Joe interrupted her while she merged onto the parkway. “Lucy?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you form the team?” Joe was thinking aloud.

“I guess it was *my* gut,” Lucy smiled. “You seemed focused on the mechanical aspects of robotics.”

“You mentioned something about men, ambition, competition,” his voice sounded weak and unsure. “How do you see me? As a friend?”

“Sure, Joe,” Lucy said sheepishly.

“No, really.”

“Really. If you want to quit the team, I understand. This is risky business for you.” Lucy looked sincere.

He paused. He hadn’t even considered quitting the “A” Team. Not only did he need the creative output for his mechanical abilities, but it was less dangerous than his day job.

“That’s not what I meant. I need the money, and it’s easier than Sun Auto.” Joe paused, *I have to trust her. What choice do I have*, he thought.

“Would you drop the team for me?” he asked.

“Why?”

“No, it’s not like that,” Joe paused. “I did something crazy.”

“Yeah you flipped your car, blew it up and almost died twice.”

“No... Yeah... That last thing. Don’t you wonder about that?”

“What?”

“That I almost died twice,” Joe said.

“Your aunt said there were complications.”

“The complication was they shut the nanites off.”

Lucy’s eyes widened. “They put nanites in you? They have medical nanites? I thought they could only be built for a vacuum?”

“So did I. This guy told my aunt to shut them off. But before they did, I stole some by draining my blood into my cell phone.”

Lucy paused. Wide eyed she asked, “Where’s the phone?”

“Mark has it.”

“Holy crap.”

“Yeah.”

They both sat and soaked in the implications.

“Mark’s gonna flip.” Lucy started.

“We have to be careful,” Joe paused, “Amman is crashing with him. I don’t trust him not to actually start some Jihad with them.”

“No, me neither. He needs too much acceptance. He isn’t sure of himself. Like he might say too much if he opens up.” Lucy paused again, “Quick, you rock!”

Chapter 6

Mark opened his apartment door. He was grinning.

“Holy shit, Joe you are the coolest guy on the whole planet!” Mark exclaimed.

“Cool, right?” Joe said.

Joe was amazed that Mark already knew.

“What are you guys talking about?” Lucy asked hesitantly.

“The nanites!” Mark exclaimed smiling.

“Uh how did *you* know?” Lucy asked pointedly.

“I never told him.” Joe said.

“I’ve seen them,” said Mark.

“What? How?” Lucy asked.

“A microscope, duh.”

“How big are they?” Joe asked.

“About a tenth the size of a red blood cell in a ball shape. They look really far out.”

“Wow, cool. Do they do anything? I’m not even sure why they were in me,” Joe said.

“Why don’t we go inside instead of broadcasting this to your neighbors?” Lucy half whispered.

“Oh right, yeah,” Mark said sheepishly.

Joe and Lucy followed Mark inside. The living room was bathed in earth tones. There were many red rugs with tan and brown patterns. All the furniture was covered with intricate carvings. A gray stone Buddha watched them from the far wall.

After Mark closed the door, Lucy turned to him, “Mark, where is Amman?”

“He is over at the shop...”

“Thank God,” Joe exclaimed.

Lucy sighed, “Good, then we can talk about this now.”

“He knows.” Mark said. “He is at the shop trying to bring them to life.”

Joe and Lucy looked at one another. He reached up and held Mark’s shoulders, “Why did you tell him?”

“He’s cool,” Mark uttered.

Joe couldn’t even tell if Mark believed himself. Lucy and Joe stared at Mark.

After pausing a for a second, Mark turned to Joe. “I know you guys don’t trust Amman. He’s pretty mysterious about things we share, but I believe he is a good-hearted guy. We would have been up the creek without his knowledge. I told him what you said, and he stopped me. I wanted to put the blood in the fridge and he suggested that we should wait until we knew what we where dealing with. He put them under a microscope and thought he was looking at a gigantic virus. He called somebody, and we picked up a scanning tunneling microscope.” Mark began to digress. “It’s so cool, the nanites have these little recessed squares, they have to be...”

Lucy started talking over Mark. “I’m still not seeing how he saved us Mark.” She didn’t look convinced.

“He stopped me from following Joe’s instructions. We experimented with a few nanites and put them in the fridge. It’s great for blood cells, but it destroys the nanites.” Mark looked at Joe, “They break into about fifteen pieces. Looks like they were designed to fail if they get too cool. We’ve been keeping them at ninety-eight degrees ever since.”

“Oops.” Joe was turning red. “In my defense I was a bit delirious.”

“Point taken.” Mark said.

Mark looked at Lucy.

“Okay. We can’t make him *un*-know,” Lucy said. She strained her face into a half smile.

“One small problem,” Mark said, “They don’t do anything. Maybe they were just being used for data collection?”

“Even then they would need to be powered on to communicate,” Joe said.

His friends watched him stare into space.

“I think I know why,” he continued.

Joe didn’t elaborate. He focused on recalling his time in the hospital.

“Okay want to share?” Mark asked.

“No.” Joe matched Mark’s sarcasm. “I think my aunt turned them off. That’s why I almost died.”

“Oh.” Mark paused. “How?”

“A machine,” Joe muttered. He was staring intently.

“And gee I thought it would be a sacred dance.” Mark was smiling.

“Hey why not. Doctors definitely don’t have enough fun,” Lucy said. The guys both looked at her, eyebrows raised.

“It could be done that way with nanites in the eyes... What?”

“There was a paddle, attached to a wheeled machine with a screen, and a laptop.”

“A defibrillator on low power!” Mark shouted. “Who’s the man? Who’s the man?” He began do dance around the room.

“Watch out, you’ll turn them on.” Joe said, laughing.

“So let’s go. I want to see them,” Lucy said.

“Okay, we need to get over to the shop. Wait. Let me call Amman and tell him how to turn them on.” Mark circled around changing his direction three times. He walked out of the living room. When he emerged, he was talking on a phone. “Hello Amman. You turn them on with a low power defibrillator, and some kind of laptop signal current control thingy. Yes, I’m sure. That’s what Joe saw from his bed. Okay, we’ll be there soon.” Mark hung up the phone. “Amman is going to try some basic signals with current. This is going to be so cool!”

“Don’t you think you might fry them if you send too much power out?” Lucy asked.

“Nah. Amman’s been separating them one or two at a time to experiment with. We must have ten thousand in that sample.” Mark seemed confident. “Let’s get some lunch.”

“Sounds good to me. I’m starving,” Joe said.

Lucy looked deep in thought. “You know, I think you are a little off.”

“Yeah, so?” Mark reached out to grab his keys.

“A defibrillator is still way too powerful and too simple to turn the current down that much.”

“Should I call Amman back?” He started to walk toward the phone.

“No, but we will need to stop at the store on the way. We need a chip and probe,” Lucy said.

“What did they use on me?” Joe asked. He was trying to read Lucy’s face.

Lucy touched her stomach. “One paddle not two, *right*? And a big screen?”

“Yeah, that sounds right,” Joe replied.

“It sounds like an ultrasound machine.” Lucy smiled.

Chapter 7

Joe looked at Lucy's troubled face as they drove. It was obvious that Lucy was concerned about Amman, but what could they do? They could ban him from working with the nanites, but who is to say he didn't stow some away for later? No, they would have to let him play around and watch him carefully. Mark's dedication to his family seemed outside common sense. Mark lacked the emotional quotient, or imagination, to realize the anger that the people of Iran must have with Americans and their most recent war. *Amman must have come here out of desperation or rage.*, Joe thought, *He wasn't here for business, or to satisfy his thirst for adventure. He wasn't like Mark and his family.*

Amman is exactly why the Feds started their witch hunt on the public use of nanotech. Allah must not be allowed a perfect bloodless revenge at that scale. I'm taking a risk with a world full of lives, so I can play with yet another robot. I must be really selfish, He felt ashamed.

He looked up and noticed the sun was gone, obscured by endless clouds. He was gazing up into the gray sky as the black van pulled through the ten foot fence. The sight of the drab warehouse on the endless blanket of concrete felt good. It signified independence and prestige. Lucy parked the van. With the moist cool air weighing on them, The A-team members started their march toward the main door.

A neuron fired in the back of Joe's brain. He had seen movement out of the corner of his eye. Joe whipped his head around.

"What?" asked Mark.

Joe stared at a distant building beyond the fence. "I could swear I saw something move over there."

"Probably a tumbleweed. That warehouse is *very* out of business. Missing a roof, lacking windows." Mark said.

"Maybe it's somebody having sex!" Lucy joked.

“It’s still daylight,” Joe mumbled. Looking distracted and serious, he turned on his heel and began to run. His team looked on in shock as he launched top speed toward the building.

“Damn he’s fast.” Mark spoke in his jovial Indian accent. He turned to Lucy and shrugged. “I guess he really wants to see live sex.” They turned and walked toward the shop door.

Joe closed in on the building. He lost sight of his friends as he ran through a parking lot covered in tall weeds. His pace slowed as he approached the far corner of the dilapidated concrete and brick edifice. Peering around the structure, he saw a distant figure in jeans and a dark jacket. He was hustling toward a newish black Lincoln Towncar. He squinted as the large man opened the driver’s side door. As the man climbed in the car, his jacket lifted. Joe noticed the man was wearing a holstered gun.

He pulled his head back around the corner. His breathing hushed to a whisper. *It must be an undercover police car*, Joe told himself. He looked around the corner and examined the car. He did not see the extra lights in the back window. *I had better get the license plates in case I need them later*, he thought. Just then the Towncar started, and it’s driver shifted it into gear spinning it’s wheels. Joe craned his neck around the corner too late. Dust and smoke from the car’s tires obscured the license plate as it sped away.

Joe jogged into the shop. After his eyes adjusted to the lower light. Vast clutter and equipment lined the walls. He scanned through piles of hydraulics, circuit boards, and half-finished five foot tall robots for Mark and Lucy. He spotted them at a small desk. They were behind several tall black servers on top of a work bench.

Amman was sitting at the computer. He was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. His large beard stuck out from either side of the back of his head.

Hearing footsteps in the quiet room, Mark turned around. “Oh, hey Joe. Feel better? Where they doing it or just kissing?”

“Ha-ha. Very funny,” Joe said. “It was a guy with a gun getting into a Towncar.” Joe’s accent was stronger.

That sounded different out loud, Joe thought.

Mark’s face dropped, like he suddenly realized something. “What? Was it a cop? Did he see you?”

Amman turned to face them. The muscles in his face flexed. It showed his age. Joe regretted his haste.

Amman looked at Joe. “That sounds like every taxi driver in New York city.” He spoke English fluently with a heavy Persian accent.

“Anyone you know?” Joe’s expression changed to a grimace. He thought of a hundred reasons he shouldn’t have said that.

Amman asked, “So Joe, should I ask you that too? How did you get these? Is it legal? Did you build them yourself?”

All eyes turned to Joe. “They’re probably not totally legal, but they’ve gotta exist to be illegal right?” Joe grinned. He was proud of his clever logic. He hoped his insight would change the mood.

Amman stared at Joe with a straight face. “How did you get the one thing that everybody wants but are impossible to build? Where did you steal them from?”

“My aunt asked me to look at them.” Joe’s hopeful smile was fading fast.

“That’s why they were hidden in your cell phone? That’s why you don’t even know how to turn them on?” Amman’s face had changed. He looked angry.

“Who asked you anyway?” A venomous look began to creep over Joe’s face. The two men glared at each other. Lucy’s eyebrows were raised. Mark looked nervous.

“What shocks have you tried? Any luck?” Mark looked nervously between the two men.

Joe decided it wasn’t worth the risk of seeding the religious army of Amman’s choice. He turned and walked to the other side of the shop. *I need coffee*, he told himself.

Amman turned to Mark. “I think you were wrong,” Amman said matter-of-factly. “I did the math on voltage not harmful to the host, and I believe few nanites in a living being would be reached this way. I tried many patterns of signal with plain DC current but no reaction occurred. Most non-vacuum nanite plans I found on the net use ultrasound to talk. I need an audio transmitter and microphone to continue. I found a program that might work with some changes.”

A stone-faced Lucy dropped a white plastic bag on the table. “One used ultrasound paddle.” She turned to Amman, but spoke loudly enough for Joe to hear. “Bought with cash for the extra paranoid.”

Amman looked at her as if she had sprouted horns.

Joe turned his head from the coffee machine and smiled. He suspected Amman was not used to being admonished by strange women. *Welcome to Long Island*.

Joe listened to Mark discussing the poor choice of molecular bonds in a set of theoretical plans Amman had found on the Internet. Lucy strolled over to the coffee machine as the discussion accelerated into long strings of letters and numbers.

“Joe you have to cool it. He’s in now. Don’t make him *crazier*.” She grabbed her mug from the nearby sink.

Joe curled his upper lip inward to indicate he understood. He poured water into the top of the dirty coffee machine and whispered, "We're screwed! He's going to turn around and kill us all with this stuff." Joe lowered his eyebrows. "I understand some simple physics and chem, but I can't keep an eye on him. Even Mark doesn't understand half of what he says."

"Maybe we need to tell your aunt," Lucy suggested.

The suggestion clearly stressed Joe out. "No way, Lucy. You had to hear the way this guy told my aunt to shut them off. She would definitely be fired, and then nobody would have a job. My pops still can't find work, and I can't help him."

"Which guy?" Lucy paused. "Oh, right, you told me about him. That guy with the southern accent," Her face lit up. "Why don't we mix it up? We need to bring someone else in."

Joe could hear Mark babbling in the background. Joe and Lucy stared at each other.

"How about Kento? Errr, I mean Bob?" Joe suggested.

"Are you sure he would be cool with it?" Lucy asked. "I haven't talked to him in a while."

"Lucy, are you kidding? That guy could talk to me for two hours about one 2099 comic."

Lucy shrugged.

"There have been lots of references to nanites in 2099."

"He's a processor designer, right?" Lucy asked.

"Last I checked a laid off one. Nothing going on in chips at his pay." Joe shuffled to the nearest window. "He should be able to keep up with Amman." Joe stared out of a clean spot in the corner of the filthy pane of glass.

"We should ask Mark first," Lucy said.

Joe nodded and looked at Lucy, "My clarks were destroyed in the crash. Can I use the house glasses?"

"You don't have to ask permission every time you want to use something that doesn't look like scrap. I wouldn't have funded the team if it had to be like that."

"Don't worry, you guys are gonna make us rich." Lucy smiled a crooked smile. "How are you feeling?"

Joe was feeling a little weak, but he didn't want to admit it. "I'm fine now that I have clarks again." He smiled. "I was going through withdrawal."

Joe looked over at Mark. "We need him alone."

"I'll get him." Lucy volunteered.

Joe paused. "Wait, I'll get the clarks and show him the latest Kamikaze plans."

"Won't Amman want to see them too?" Lucy wondered.

Joe looked over at Amman and Mark. Amman was squinting and furiously typing. Mark was sitting on the bench next to him dissecting the ultrasound wand.

“Nah.” Joe smiled widely.

He poured coffee into a green mug with the faded name of a long forgotten dot-com. He wanted to talk to Lucy about the man with the gun, but he decided it would be better to save it until Mark was there too.

He walked over to the bench next to an open space set aside for testing robots. He donned the clarks and connected their thin wire to the computer in his jacket pocket. He pulled the small computer out and strapped it to his arm. He touched the small computer’s screen, and it’s backlight lit. Words flashed across the display as it restored the program he was using during his accident.

He pulled a case out of his pocket and removed a pencil-like wand. He ran a cord hanging from the wand through the wristband of his watch and plugged the end into his arm PC. He twisted the wand in the air. Tiny air flow sensors and mercury switches in the wand sent signals to his arm PC. The wand’s sensors combined with input from the cameras in Joe’s clarks, indicating movement to the computer. He much preferred the wand when his hands were free. It was far more accurate than just the mounted camera’s estimations of his commands.

The dual screens in his clarks lit up and displayed a classic two-dimensional web browser on four sides of a three-dimensional cube. He flicked the wand, spun the cube, and chose a side. He locked it in place with another movement. He dropped the wand, and began to type in the air directly in front of him. Not nearly as many letters and numbers appeared as his finger movements might indicate. Joe had forgotten he had to set up the new pair of clarks. He would have to spend some time running the tedious typing calibration program later. Frustrated, Joe picked the wand back up. He pressed a small button on the wand to select each of a series of links.

Satisfied with the web page, Joe let the wand dangle from his watch band. He picked up a small box from the top of a nearby computer monitor. It had an image of red lips printed on one side. He touched the lips to the LCD screen on his arm PC, and the lips box beeped. He touched the lips to a desktop monitor, and it lit up with the latest revised plans of the Kamikaze rocket.

“Cool!” Joe deliberately spoke loud enough for Mark to hear. He gazed over at Mark, who was looking in Joe’s direction. Amman was not. “Mark, check this fuel pump design on the Kamikaze.”

Mark walked over and looked at the schematic on the monitor for a minute. Finally he said, “Joe, you hadn’t seen this? It’s three weeks old.” Mark paused. “Oh wait, I guess you wouldn’t have.”

“I must have missed it before I had the wreck.” Joe lied.

“I don’t think it’s any better and it uses point three amps more juice,” Mark said.

“It saves two pounds in heat shield weight,” Joe offered. He looked over at Amman as Mark stared into the monitor. Lucy strolled over to them, her coffee mug in hand.

“Hi guys. Kamikaze again?” Lucy asked.

“Yeah, catching up.” Joe lied.

Mark looked up at Joe and Lucy and cocked his head. “Something’s not right here.” He looked right at Lucy. “Why are *you* interested in the Kamikaze?”

Lucy glared at Mark. “Fine, be that way.” Lucy smiled to show she was joking. “Mark, we want to bring our friend Kento in on the nanites.” She choked on the last word.

“Who is Kento?” Mark asked in an unusually flat voice.

“He’s a buddy of mine from high school. He was a senior in my freshman year. We took shop together.”

“Okay, but why him?” Mark asked, “What is in it for us?”

“He’s a jobless chip builder.”

“Oh. I want to meet him before I agree first. I want to make sure I can talk to him.”

“Uhh, errr okay.” *That was easy*, he thought. “You think Amman will be okay with it?”

“Does it matter?” Mark asked, shrugging.

Maybe Mark noticed Amman’s anger more than I realized, Joe thought. He saw Lucy smile. He looked back at Mark and saw Amman glancing their way.

He responded to Mark. “No. I guess it doesn’t.”

Chapter 8

Joe was walking through the hall of a hospital wing. An assortment of patients were strewn about the floor moaning and wailing. Many of them looked pale, almost bloodless. He walked over crawling patients toward an open door. A flickering light blinked in the doorway. There was a pile of bodies. Doctors and nurses, clearly murdered, were still wearing their blood stained work uniforms. A single florescent light dangled from the ceiling.

Joe heard a rhythmic pair of sounds both ticking and rumbling. He looked at the source of the sound. The far wall of the room had full size windows, but nothing was evident in the night. Nothing, just a perfect blackness. He wanted to get a closer look but was afraid of the growing noise.

The window wall exploded inward. Glass flew into the room and then back out again as if sucked into a vacuum. Daylight streamed in through the giant window frame. The silhouette of a helicopter was visible through the blinding light. The dark green Apache attack helicopter hovered in place, missile launchers nearly full. Joe's heart stopped in fear.

He turned and ran up the now empty hall. There was an open daylit window at its end. Joe wanted to jump out of it. He knew he would be safe if he jumped, yet Joe couldn't take the plunge. It was a twenty story window. *How could that be safe that's crazy.* A phone on the wall near Joe began to ring. He stared in confusion, not sure why the phone didn't belong there. He reached for it.

In a start, Joe woke up. He was covered in sweat. The phone next to his bed was ringing. After it rang a few times, Joe picked up.

"Hello?" Joe asked. His voice was hoarse.

"Joeee, I got your message. How are you holding up?" A strange voice asked.

"Uh, uh, okay. Considering everything." Joe slowly began to gather his thoughts.

"What? You all right?" the voice asked, "I haven't seen you on N.Y.N. in a

month. Cyborg Wars is nothing without their A team.” The young man started to sound familiar.

“Thanks,” Joe replied.

“Those bastards didn’t kick you off because of the whole A team thing? Right? You’d think Hollywood would give up and not harass you guys anymore! All they’ve got is lawyers now. I read that their total connection rate was way down this month.”

He recognized the voice. *I know who this is.*

“No not yet,” Joe said, smiling.

“So what’s going on?” Kento asked.

“Do you have an interview today?” Joe asked. He felt his stomach sink as he thought about how awkward the question sounded. He looked out of the window in his bedroom. He felt embarrassed about living in his father’s house. *I’m too old to live in my Dad’s house,* he thought.

“Nah, nothing lined up... so be it.” He sounded no less chipper.

“Can we meet for some coffee?” Joe asked.

“Cool, man. Let’s do it. I’d love to catch up.”

“How about today?” *What if he says no,* Joe thought.

“Sure, but I’ve got to shower. I’ve been training and boy, do I stink.”

“What are you up to now?” Joe asked.

“Fifth degree, and brown in karate too. But you’re so quick you’d probably take me anyway.”

“Don’t wanna try, Kento,” Joe replied.

“I can meet you in an hour at our cafe on Sunrise Highway,” Kento suggested.

“Sounds good. See you there,” Joe said.

Joe didn’t move, listening to the dial tone. He didn’t usually have bad dreams. What was that all about? Dead doctors, opaque windows, explosions, zombie patients? It was an unusual setting and cast for Joe’s night show. *I to have stop taking afternoon naps,* Joe thought. His thoughts were interrupted by the prerecorded instructions on how to use a telephone, blaring in his right ear.

He pressed the button on his receiver, and quickly dialed. He glanced at one of his band posters hanging from the slanted ceiling. Joe stared at the image of musicians leaning up against a wall.

“Hello?” Lucy’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Hi,” Joe said.

“Joe, how’s it going? Are you coming down to the warehouse today?”

“Maybe later?” Joe asked himself out loud.

“Did you talk to Kento?”

“I need to borrow the van. I’m meeting him over at the cafe,” Joe said.

“Oh.”

“I won’t crash it, Lucy.” Joe spoke as deliberately as he could.

“Are you sure you’re ready? I could drop you off.”

“How would I get back? He rides. Remember?”

“Oh... I guess I could work from home today. You had better get him on board.”

“Hey. I talk smooth!” Joe said.

“Yeah, right.”

“I’ll see you in a few,” Joe said.

“Okay. Finny will be happy to see you.” Joe could hear Lucy smile as she talked.

Joe hung up the phone and put his favorite boots on. He hustled downstairs, anxious to see Finny again. His father was sitting in the living room with his checkbook and a calculator.

“Hey Joe. You owe me three hundred dollars. I’m sorry to ask now, but the bills are due.”

“No problem, Dad. I’ll have it for you next week,” Joe said.

“I need it tomorrow.”

Joe wondered when he became more responsible than his dad. His dad wouldn’t need to lean on him, if he didn’t drink his problems away. Three hundred was so little. Maybe it would pay for a few hours at the bar. Joe’s heart sank. His dad was totally gone. He felt anger building up inside of him.

“I might be able to get it tonight,” Joe lied. He headed for the front door. He was frustrated he couldn’t tell his dad how bright his future looked right now. He felt alone.

“Good night son.” His dad looked distant and embarrassed.

Joe’s emotional roller coaster was plunging from rage to guilt. It was time to go.

Chapter 9

Joe zipped up his coat tightly as he walked through the chilly evening air. He shuffled past a small strip of stores as he transversed the empty suburban blocks to Lucy's house. He thought of Kento's misfortune as he walked. His high school friend had worked on the final generation of general purpose computing chips at Charles Peterson United, before Moore's law totally broke down. Business and science news often blamed the hard times directly on projections of it's demise. It's funny how those same channels praised Gordon Moore just a few years ago. *If only they could fabricate chips beyond the safe harbor of a vacuum.*

Oh wait. They can.

Joe walked wide eyed thinking of the depth of his discovery. He was in it now.

A strange man's voice called to Joe, "Sir, do you have a fifty?"

Joe turned his head to the voice. A homeless man was hidden in shadow beside the last store. There was a conspicuous hole in the six foot fence between the stores and a house. Joe wondered if he was squatting in the dark abandoned house. The man looked clean, but scruffy and old. The remnants of his jacket, dress shoes, and slacks looked as if they had been worn three years too many. He wondered if the house was once the homeless man's. Squatting in a house you once owned was not unusual.

Saddened, Joe walked toward the man, making sure to keep himself outside of the shadows in case it was a trick. Joe couldn't face his aunt if he got hurt again. He pulled out his wallet and handed the man a hundred-dollar bill. The man took the money and smiled graciously.

"Thank you. I can eat tomorrow."

"Every day counts," Joe said smiling, "What *happened*?"

"It's those Iranian bastards. They killed my son in the war. They ruined me, our life..." the man said. Anger was changing the shape of his eyes. "What do you care? You look like you've got it easy! You think this is easy? Where was

your family? Huh?"

The man began to stir and straighten like he might confront him, and Joe began to back away. He turned his back on the man and hustled away, ignoring the furious rant. *That was a mistake*, Joe thought. *Sobriety isn't always sanity.*

When he arrived at Lucy's, he opened the door and called inside. "Lucy, you home?"

A pair of small eyes peered around the corner.

"Did I see something?" Joe wondered aloud.

Joe heard a child laughing.

The eyes reappeared, then disappeared just as quickly.

"What was that? A troll? A goblin? A toad?"

More laughing.

"Boo!" Finny jumped out.

"Aaahhhhh!" Joe yelled. "It's you Finny. I was scared!"

"No you weren't," Finny said giggling.

Joe walked over and picked her up, kissing her on the cheek.

"Hi, cutie."

"Hi. I missed you Uncle Joe."

"I missed you too."

"Hi, Joe." Lucy walked out in her nightgown. Her form was accentuated by the silky nightwear. She pulled a terrycloth robe over her shoulders hiding her breasts and slim waist.

Joe had trouble hiding his attraction to her.

"I'm doing laundry," Lucy said.

"Oh, right." Joe turned away, embarrassed by his boyish ways.

Finny seemed to noticed all this going on from Joe's hip and was delighted. She was grinning from ear to ear. "Joe, can you stay and play?"

Joe went to open his mouth but Lucy interrupted.

"No honey, Joe has stuff he needs to do." Lucy shot Joe a sly look.

Finny stuck her lip out and hugged Joe. She looked him in the face.

"Mommy is right. I have to meet another friend. I promised him I'd play today," Joe said.

"I don't call her Mommy anymore."

Joe looked confused.

"I call her Mom. I'm a big girl."

Joe kissed her cheek and put Finny down. Lucy grabbed the keys from the top of the night stand. "Joe you know how weird this whole thing can get. Be careful. Don't just spill it."

Joe grinned.

Lucy frowned.

Joe thought about telling Lucy about the run in with the homeless man. He decided against it.

“Bye, kiddo,” he said.

“Bye Uncle Joe. We have to play soon!” Finny was struggling to restrain herself.

“I promise,” Joe said smiling.

Joe walked toward the Team van. *Man, I have to remember to date. I'm turning into such a nerd.*

Chapter 10

Joe noticed Kento's motorcycle as he pulled up to the cafe. The five year old touring style bike was shaped to allow the rider to sit in a hunched over position. It was covered with scuff marks and dirt. Joe couldn't help thinking, *Kento was worse off than he let on. The bike was looking a little sad.*

Joe parked Lucy's van in front and walked inside. The cafe was a diner converted into a coffee shop. It was dimly lit and had comfortable mismatched chairs and couches scattered all around. Joe tapped the screen on his arm computer three times. His clarks blinked, and the driving HUD yielded to a series of colored arrows that pointed to every visible person in the room. A small green triangle pointed toward Kento's position.

Joe smiled at a waitress, as he walked toward the back of the cafe. Kento was tall and slender, with dirty blond hair that was short on top and covered his neck in the back. Loose blue and red clothing that looked like silk was draped over his frame. His collar was sticking up. A slender arm band computer and a pair clarks were laying on the table. Kento turned his head toward Joe.

"Joe! Long time no see." Kento smiled.

"Kento. Your fashion has improved!"

"And your mastery of expression in the English language has not," Kento smiled.

Joe pulled his clarks off. He was blushing.

"So what's the new robot going to look like? I heard on the net that Cyborg Wars might disallow spinners and wedges. You'll need a more humanoid design."

"Where did you hear that?" Joe mumbled as his jaw hung.

"I have my sources."

"I have to kill you now." Joe smiled.

He pointed at Kento's computer. "Nice."

"Oh yeah, a genuine unreported C.P.U. perk."

“Figured you stole it.” Joe was surprised. Kento was usually painfully honest.

“Hey, I helped design the thing! I should!”

“I guess I’m kind of lucky. I don’t think they’ll have a waterproof case out for another year. Designed the prototype myself.”

Has Kento ever stolen anything before? He must be kidding.

“Remember when you stole Baker’s tire gauge from auto shop? How many times a day did he say it was rare?” Joe was grinning.

“Yeah, that was nothing. How about the time you wired the windshield washer pump to the interior light of that old Cadillac,” Kento retorted, laughing.

“He was completely soaked,” Joe said, roaring with laughter.

“I thought that vein on his forehead would explode.”

They both laughed for a while.

A young brunette waitress appeared and took their orders. Joe ordered coffee, Kento ordered tea.

Joe lowered his voice. “Kento, I need your help. My team is working on something.”

“So you need robot help from the Kempo master?” Kento was clearly still feeling silly.

Joe looked Kento in the eyes. “We stole some nanites.”

Kento chuckled in a loud voice. “Nanites? So did Indonesia and the Philippines. Big deal. Don’t look so serious.”

Joe waited patiently for Kento to stop smiling.

“Non–vacuum nanites.”

“They don’t need a vacuum? They’re not even temperature controlled?”

“Not only that. They’re blood–borne nanites.”

“What?” Kento’s face screwed up. He looked around as he whispered. “They exist?”

“They were in me.”

“In you?”

“A lot of them.”

“How? Why? Joe, this could be serious.” Kento’s voice sounded more adult.

“If you want me to stop here, I can,” Joe said.

At first Kento was glancing at him, eyes darting back and forth. Then he stared at Joe for a while, not saying a word.

Joe’s mind raced. *What is Kento thinking? Is he going to turn me in? Perhaps he isn’t the same guy I went to school with?*

Finally he broke into a boyish grin. Joe knew he was in.

“Okay, how did you manage to get the one thing that Homeland Security has effectively banned, and every molecular physicist says is impossible for another ten years.”

“I nearly died.”

“That sounds about right.”

“I destroyed my car. It blew up. I was almost dead. My aunt is part of some project. She injected them in me.”

“Wow. Good thing you went to her hospital. When did this happen?” Kento was wide-eyed.

Joe touched the emergency medical bracelet on his wrist. He knew he would have to tell Kento, just not yet. “It was about three weeks ago.”

“Can I see them?” Kento inquired.

Joe decided to fill him in about Amman. Joe told Kento about the friction between Amman and the rest of the team. Joe expressed his fears about the ongoing Jihad.

The waitress stopped at their table and dropped off their drinks.

“Don’t worry. I can run circles around a theoretical physicist.”

“I hope so.” Joe was sure he could. Pretty sure anyway.

“So are they in you right now?” Kento asked.

“I don’t think so. My aunt shut them off after she got a talking to. I hid some blood.”

“Where?”

“In my cell phone fuel cell.”

“You slick bastard.” Kento was grinning again. He sipped his tea. “You said your aunt shut them off. Have you turned them on again? What exactly did they do?”

“We haven’t turned them on yet. We’re not sure what they do. They are definitely machines though.”

“How big are they?” Kento asked.

“About one tenth of a blood cell,” Joe answered.

“Wow, so...”

“Excuse me.” A girl’s voice interrupted them.

Joe’s heart jumped. He turned his head and looked at the girl standing beside him. She was about five foot six and had brown hair dyed blond with a blue streak. She looked Indian. Had she overheard? What did she want.

“Are you Joe Vallone?” the girl asked with a with a Long Island accent. She looked about sixteen.

“Maybe?” Joe choked a little.

“Well, my friend and I watch Cyborg Wars, and we always root for your team, and she likes you and thinks you are totally hot.”

Joe looked over at her friend. She was also about sixteen years old with straight black hair and looked halfway between Indian and oriental. She covered her face. Joe looked and was immediately felt attracted to the slender girl. Joe felt goosebumps on his arms. *No*, Joe thought, *she is way too young. At least mentally.*

Kento was hunched back in his chair covering his mouth. He was clearly laughing. Joe blushed.

The girl pushed a pen and pad in front of Joe. “Could you please, please sign this to Amy Sue from Joe Vallone.”

“Uh, okay.” Joe grabbed the pen and signed the pad ‘to Amy Sue from a completely embarrassed Joe Vallone’.

“Oh wow thank you so much, I can’t believe you wrote her a personal message. She’s a chicken so here’s her number in case you want to hang out or something, and I think you should because she is really nice,” the girl turned and said, “Oh and my name is Anna.” She smiled a broad smile at Joe. She hurried back to her friend, who had crawled into a ball.

Joe was mortified.

Kento was laughing harder than ever. “You always had a way with the ladies.”

“You want to go to the shop tonight?” Joe changed the subject.

“Do I ever, I’ve been out of work for six months. I’m going nuts.” Kento was still grinning. “I don’t know where it is so I’ll have to follow you.”

“It’s on the north shore.”

“HmMMM. Do mind if I drop the bike off at home? It’s getting pretty cold.”

“No problem.”

Kento smiled at Joe. Joe shook his head. He wasn’t going to live this down for a while.

Chapter 11

Joe watched the sun set as he waited outside Kento's apartment building. He nervously watched a group of warmly dressed kids through the windshield of Lucy's van. They were in their late teens and twenties, drinking from bottles covered in paper bags.

His eyes danced between the many multi-colored arrows displayed in his clarks. The triangular graphics were busy indicating where each individual was, their current direction, and speed. The arrows were all pointed straight down right now, but Joe was ready if they started to move.

A new color arrow appeared pointing towards the young men. He turned his head to include it in his view. Kento opened the front door of his building, and walked straight towards the youths. One of the kids noticed his approach and alerted the others. Their arrows stirred like warming molecules. Kento also observed this and quickened his pace toward them.

Joe blindly reached around the floor of the van for a weapon of some length or girth. He settled on a two foot socket extension jammed under a tool box. *I haven't seen my aunt for my clot shot yet, I can't get hit*, he told himself.

"I hope Kento can handle this," Joe confessed to no one.

Joe stood up and opened the door in one swift movement. He looked up as his left foot hit the ground. Kento was walking toward him, backwards.

"Okay, thanks. I owe you." Kento was talking to the unruly mob.

The kids found this uproariously funny. Kento turned and strutted toward the van. Two of the larger young men waved.

Joe sheepishly sat back down in the drivers seat. He tried to subtly wedge the two foot socket extension behind his seat as Kento got in the van. Kento looked over and saw the weapon as he reached for his seat belt.

"You thought I was going to fight them?" Kento looked amused.

"Well, yeah," Joe said reluctantly.

“Those are guys from the neighborhood. I taught them everything they know.” Kento observed his frazzled look. “You should come to Kempo too. With your speed you could be very dangerous.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It’s no different than track. You’re strong and coordinated, it should be a breeze.”

Joe thought about how much he ached from all the running at school. If he hadn’t been a natural runner and athlete, he never could have succeeded at all. He wondered how much faster and stronger he would have been without his weakness. Joe hated being alive.

“You always stepped up to fights, but you didn’t finish them. Why do you hold back? You should be a natural.”

Joe shot Kento a look. He was obviously angry.

Joe stuttered quietly, “I’ll email Mark to be at the shop.”

Joe double tapped the LCD on his arm computer. The Cube desktop returned in the center of his vision and Joe turned the cube to the email side and began to type in the air.

Kento sat in silence. He watched Joe out of the corner of his eye. In a few seconds Joe’s rapid typing was complete. He tapped his computer screen once again, and without saying a word, started the van and drove away. Joe drove in silence for a few minutes, dwelling stone-faced on his misfortune. *I should talk to Kento*, Joe thought, it’s not really his fault.

Joe thought about what to say as he merged on the expressway.

Kento interrupted his thoughts. “Joe I’m sorry, we’re all different now. We are different people now, than we were then. I was a cocky bastard back then, I have learned a lot.”

“Kento that’s not it. I’m different.” Joe hung his head.

“You always seemed like a normal guy to me,” Kento said smiling.

“I have a condition.” Joe held his arm out to Kento, his medical wrist band dangling.

“What? You?” Kento asked. Kento did not seem to understand that the medical bracelet was meant for him to read.

Joe’s eyes darted to the side of the road. His arm slowly reached back for the steering wheel.

Kento squinted at Joe. He looked confused.

An old, pale blue, Toyota was parked on the side of the expressway. It’s parking lights were on, and flames were flickering out of the open hood. Two men

looked scared and were yelling at each other. A dark skinned man without a jacket lay a few feet away, cushioned only by decaying leaves. He looked unconscious.

Joe's mind flashed back to his accident. "We're stopping," he asserted. Joe checked the rear view mirror. He mashed the brakes to pull over in time.

"Joe, I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Call the cops," Joe said.

Joe didn't know if Kento had a phone, but he hoped so. He brought the van to a halt, and put it in park.

"At least back up fifty feet away so we can escape." Kento was nodding, eyebrows raised.

Joe looked at Kento with confusion. He realized he hadn't even considered it could be a trap. He backed the van up some distance. He tried to calculate the situation as he drove. *No*, he answered himself, *we have to help in case it's real*. His view of jacket-less man was blocked by the burning car, but he could still see him in his mind.

He slammed the gearshift into park again. Grabbing the keys, he jogged toward the men. He heard the two men yelling as they approached.

"If your car wasn't such a piece of shit, I wouldn't need my phone," The first man yelled at the second.

The second man, red in the face yelled back, "You forgot your phone! You need to run for help!"

"He'll be dead if we don't find his pills!" the first man yelled.

"What happened?" Kento yelled as he caught up.

"We think he's having a heart attack," the first man said. "The car caught fire, he grabbed his chest and fell over."

Kento looked at the second man. "Wave a car down. I don't have a working phone."

Kento pointed at the first man. "You, find his pills."

Joe walked over to the injured man. The man on the ground was in his late thirties and fit. *That's strange*, he thought, *he looks too young*. He crouched over the man and held his hand over his mouth. "He's still breathing."

The man opened his eyes. Joe saw him swing his arm up to grab his shoulder. He rolled backwards over his shoulder and stood up as the man jumped to his feet.

"Still quick." Kento was grinning.

"You ain't given me no C.P.R.," The dead man said to Joe. He had a deep Spanish accent. "Give me the key to your ride."

Joe's heart was beating hard now as he crab-walked for a better position. He assessed the other two men. They were of moderate build, in poor shape, and

unarmed. Kento stood straight and seemed calm, giving nothing away. He was about two feet away from the pill man.

Joe smiled, they didn't have a chance.

"You and what army?" Joe grumbled.

Joe heard a loud whistle and turned his head toward it. Six figures appeared at the top of the nearby bridge hill. They were all larger than the other men.

"That army," the dead man bragged, grinning. He threw his fist at Joe.

Joe easily leaned back avoiding the telegraphed fist. Everything was moving in slow motion to him. He saw Kento out the corner of his eye. The pill man lunged at Kento. Kento moved aside and used his hip to pivot the man head first into the car's bumper.

Joe saw movement out of his left eye. *The man must be throwing a second punch*, he thought. As he swung his body the other way to avoid it. He felt time slow even more. The adrenal gland in the top of his spine began pumping out chemicals. He felt fury overcome him, as the adrenaline charged through his veins and down his arms. The tiny hairs all over his body stood on end.

He was pissed. Really pissed. *I won't die because I tried to help you.*

He leapt backwards to dodge the dumb swing from the dead man. He saw the phone man change direction and hurtle towards Kento. The phone man wasn't even looking at Kento as he lunged. He was too busy looking at his newly unconscious comrade.

The dead man reached out some distance to hit Joe. Joe spotted the movement and his attention snapped back. A wicked smile came across his face. He hunched down and spun on his right foot, swinging his left foot through the air.

Joe's leg seemed to glide fully extended just above the ground. His foot pulled up and arched through the air. The heel of his left boot stuck the man in the temple. He felt the dead man's head give as his roundhouse kick made contact.

His momentum wasn't significantly slowed by the man's skull, so he pumped his left leg inward to accelerate his rotation, and lifted his right leg into the air. He pulled his right boot up just in time to strike the man's head again. Blood splattered out the man's mouth and they fell to the ground.

Joe broke his fall with his bare hand on a patch of grass. He felt the pressure as his hands absorbed his full momentum. He cleared the man and landed beside him.

He pushed himself up onto his feet and looked around. The men were running down the bridge hill in slow motion. They were mainly looking in Kento's direction as they ran, the puffy arms of their winter jackets swinging. Several of them had knives and threaded pipes brought to bare.

Joe turned towards Kento, and saw the phone man lying on top of the body of the pill man. His smile turned crooked as he imagined the second man falling for exactly the same hip throw into the bumper. Scanning the car, he saw something through the open door. A bat tucked under the drivers seat of the burning car.

I'm not ready to die, he thought. He ran for the bat.

Joe hopped over the body of the dead man and sprinted as only he could toward the side of the little blue car. He reached in and grabbed the bat.

He spun to see the men closing in on the calm Kento. Joe reached his right hand across his shoulder and single tapped his computer switching his clarks to human vector mode. Meaningful arrows appeared pointed this way and that. An arrow pointed straight down by the dead man.

He wasn't getting up.

Joe swiftly crab-walked around the mob now stabbing and swinging at Kento. He swung the aluminum bat full force at the biggest mans head. The man's head gave but he didn't stumble. He swung around wielding a knife and bleeding from the ear. He started at Joe. Joe backed away easily keeping the distance. Several men swung and stabbed at Joe trying to circle him. He was quicker, backing off and maintaining a bubble with his bat.

One of the men swung at Joe with a pipe. He felt it tickle his rib through his leather jacket. His mortality came back to him. A single bruise could immobilize him for a week. The adrenaline was beginning to wear off. He scoped a clear path back towards the bridge hill. *I have to get some distance*, he thought, *I'm going to get hit again*.

Joe took a swing towards the man closest to the road and forced him back. He sidestepped to his left and ran back towards the hill. Joe looked at Kento dodging and weaving his assailants. One of the three new challengers was laying motionless on the grass. The other two looked tired and moved very slowly.

Joe heard a horrible noise. A series of rhythmic tire screeches and thumping. He turned to the ruckus as he ran to see an eighteen wheeler screeching to a halt on the opposite side of the road. Two cars leaned on their horns as they screeched around the huge truck at the last second. The truck bounced one final time as the door swung open. A large hairy man hung out the door wielding a shotgun.

The man yelled in an ear-busting crescendo. "What the hell is going *on here*?" He pumped the shotgun, aimed it in the air, and let one shot ring.

Joe was dumbfounded. He stopped running and turned to see the distance he had put between him and his attackers. They had stopped running and turned as well. *Looks like they don't know what to do*, he thought. *Neither do I*.

"Let's go man," one of the men yelled. He turned and ran.

“C’mon lets get out of here. He’s crazy man.” Another man ran toward the trees.

“We’re gone man.” Another turned and ran for the far side of the hill.

The trucker calmly surveyed the fleeing assailants from the perch of his truck’s cab. Joe looked at Kento and Kento shrugged. Joe and Kento walked back toward the van. Stepping over the unconscious bodies of their fallen enemies. Joe looked back to the trucker to yell in thanks and saw him close his door, apparently satisfied.

Joe yelled, “Thank you.”

The trucker was already pulling back into traffic. He didn’t seem to hear.

Joe grabbed Lucy’s keys from his pocket and then noticed gravel indents in his hands from his fall. His hands did not bruise this time. Joe pulled his shirt up as he walked and looked at the rib that was grazed by the pipe. No bruise there either. Joe sighed as he opened the van’s driver side door.

Joe looked at Kento as he closed his door. “I thought you had a cell phone. I was crazy to rush in there.”

“Are you all right? You were great back there. We had them dead to rights.” Kento smiled.

“It was stupid. I got mad. Stopped thinking.” He started the van.

“You had total control. You had them running in circles.”

“I could have been killed,” Joe said distracted. He was anxious to get away from the scene. Joe put the van in gear and inched up to merge into traffic. He looked over his shoulder, then looked Kento right in the eye. “I’m a hemophiliac. We probably should have just called the cops.” Joe started pulling away.

“I did,” Kento said. He was looking at Joe.

He pulled a cheap looking cell phone from his pocket. An automated message was clearly audible in the quiet van.

The phone droned, “Do not hang up, someone will be with you momentarily.”

“It was on the whole time. They never came.”

Chapter 12

Mark tried, and failed, to comprehend other people's competitive drives. Re-writing the small driver to read the newest type of gyroscopes was not about self image or pride for Mark. He programmed, to expand his understanding of accomplishment, not for the accomplishment itself. Doing whatever it took had always seemed a bit barbaric to Mark. He had led a life of shelter and moral privilege, and desired to continue it as long as he could.

Mark's mind began to wander off his task. He much preferred the smell of incense over machine oil. The stew of synthetic chemicals seemed to pull him from inner peace. He loved his work with the A-team, but he did it for the worldly experience and money, not for emotional stimulation. Mark dwelled on his childhood vacations in India. His family could create a whole other world. Mark would use that world to escape, and learn about himself.

When did Amman start trying to beat me, Mark thought. When did I indicate to him that I would crush, insult, degrade, or otherwise ostracize him if I activate the nanites first. Perhaps Joe is right, Mark thought. What the hell keeps a man focused for three days straight?

Mark glanced over at Amman's now scraggy beard. He was hunched over his borrowed computer terminal and several pads of paper. Mark wanted to contribute more to the process, but every time he tried to cooperate with Amman he grew impatient. *I need to get another one of those microscopes, Mark thought. He wished his cousin would rest and give him a shot at cracking the nanites.*

With his brain sufficiently relaxed from his mental break, Mark walked to the cyborg's naked base. The base consisted of two tank style treads and a mess of wires, batteries, and motors. He flipped a switch in the mess of wires and the base sprung to life. It wiggled left, right and left again to indicate that all is well. Mark walked behind his bench and typed a command at a strange blinking prompt on his screen. The base began traveling around a blocked off area in a seemingly

random fashion. A pair of numbers smaller than one printed on the screen with each turn.

As the routine drew to an end, Mark felt his spirit lift. He had done it. Two gyroscopes down, one hydraulic to go. Mark couldn't hold back the grin.

Joe and a strange skinny man burst in the door. Mark felt the cold draft as the wind swung the door shut. *So this must be the chip guy*, Mark thought.

"Joe, I see you have brought the man with the power," Mark said in a silly voice. Mark shuffled to the door, hoping distance would hide his excitement from Amman.

"Mark, meet Kento."

"Nice to meet you." Kento spoke as if on a job interview. He reached out to shake Mark's hand.

Mark shook his hand. *He seems well adjusted*, Mark thought. *He seems confident. If there were such as thing a chi, he'd be brewing with it.*

"Joe, I've got the gyroscopes programmed." Mark felt the grin returning to his face.

"You have to see this." Joe ignored Mark's invitation. He started walking toward his work bench.

The smile fell off Mark's face. Would Joe obsess over the nanites as well? Would Kento? Mark didn't think he could cope with any more competitive people. *My feelings are distracting me. My emotional damage control is already at full throttle*, Mark thought.

Joe stopped and looked Mark in the eye.

"We were attacked," Joe said.

"Holy crap!" Mark exclaimed. "Again? It's getting crazy out there. People are so desperate. What the hell do they do with all that money they steal from us?"

What was I thinking, Mark asked himself. *Joe doesn't want to beat me. I must be losing perspective.* Mark heard a clang as Amman got up, staring at them. He walked toward the group.

Mark felt embarrassed. He had let his own emotional peril derail his concern for Joe.

"Are you okay?" Amman sounded concerned.

"Yeah," Joe mumbled.

Kento shook his head, "I called the police, but they never came."

"They may come now," Amman stated. He was almost unintelligible between his thick accent and his scratchy voice.

"I doubt it." Kento looked somber as he spoke, "One of my students is jailed for murder in a fight the police never responded to. His only crime was effectively

defending himself. The prosecutor insisted his fleeing the scene proved intent. None of us make the mistake of subscribing to a cell service anymore. I use disposables and pay with cash.” He pulled his cell phone and a separated fuel cell from his pocket. He tossed them in a nearby garbage can.

“You are smarter than these two,” Amman said.

It sounds like Kento and Amman might get along, Mark thought.

Joe stopped typing into the keyboard on his desktop computer.

He stared Amman in the eye, “What’d you say?”

Oh shit, Mark thought, *here it comes.* Mark went to say something, but Kento jumped in first.

“He’s right Joe,” Kento said coolly, “You act with too much haste. You should control your temper and divert your anger into improving your restraint. Victory is in the mind.”

He’s pretty cool, Mark thought. *I think I like this guy.*

Joe looked surprised and defeated, his shoulders slumped. He turned and typed a few more keystrokes. Joe had recorded the adventure with the cameras in his clarks. His monitor blinked and the roadside battle began.

The men all watched with rapt attention.

Kento’s words rang in Mark’s head as he watched the fight. *I wonder if Kento knows about Joe’s disease. I guess they will have to find out if we ever want to use these things again,* Mark thought. Joe knocked his assailant unconscious and fell to the ground next to him.

“Joe you are so quick. We should dub this to a hyperbeat song. All I see are those guys reacting.” Mark was very excited.

“It’s four frames a second,” Joe said. “See Kento’s pile of bodies.”

The truck screamed into view, and the trucker fired his gun. The men ran off.

“Wow,” Mark’s mouth was open. Mark reached over Joe and paused the recording. He shuttled backward until the trucker was in plain view.

“Wow what a great guy. Shotgun trucker...” Mark paused looking lost in thought. “Send me this video.”

“Okay.” Joe stared at the image of the mystery trucker.

Amman walked away from Joe’s bench and toward his messy pile of papers and the microscope. Kento looked in his direction and then followed him. Mark caught Amman glancing over at their absent gaze. *He can’t think we are watching him,* Mark thought. He turned to Joe.

“Now will you checkout the gyroscopes I just hooked up?” Mark purposefully sounded a little childish.

“Yeah okay. I should work.” Joe turned away from the video.

They shuffled over toward the pen containing the robot base. Mark hit a couple of keys beginning the sequence once again. Mark strained to hear the conversation across the shop over the whining motors. The routine stopped, leaving Mark with nothing to say. He was relieved when Joe chimed in.

“I have an idea.” Joe looked tired.

“Okay?”

“How about a second pair of arms?” Joe sounded hopeful.

“What about regulations?” Mark said, “Aren’t we supposed to be getting closer to a human form? Isn’t that the point of the new rules?”

“I think it’s legal,” Joe said, “The rules say only human style arms, and tracks or wheels for feet.”

“So it’s legit because it’s a human part, there are just more of them.” Mark sounded excited, “Joe you’re a genius. Two could grapple and two could attack! But what if they disqualify us?”

“We can make them detachable.”

Mark’s brain was whizzing with possible attachment points and remote control changes when Amman passed by. Mark was so distracted he was briefly shocked by Amman’s proximity to him.

Amman looked at Mark. “I’m going home. Robert’s in charge.” He was slurring badly. He was visibly exhausted. He went to the back of the shop to get his coat and keys. Kento was reading through Amman’s numerous disorganized notes.

Who’s Robert, Mark wondered. Amman has completely lost it. He’s imagining people. I guess sooner or later he had to give up. He has been going for three days straight. Mark and Joe walked toward Kento as Mark pondered Amman’s strange statement.

They cautiously slid over to Kento, afraid to encourage further domination of the microscope and ultrasound panel. They looked over Kento’s shoulder at Amman’s cryptic notes. They heard him close the door.

“I think Amman is losing it. He was talking about somebody named Robert.”

“Oh that’s me,” Kento sounded amused. “I got the name in high school.”

“Robert?” *Oh, that was dumb*, Mark thought.

“The dumb kids couldn’t say Kempo. I think they thought they were clever.” Joe smiled.

“Oh,” Mark sounded relieved. “So what did they call Joe?” Joe frowned, and Kento smiled.

“You don’t want to know.” Kento grinned looking at Joe.

Joe stared Kento dead with his eyes. Mark couldn’t help but smile too.

Chapter 13

Nathan Jones hated group trips to the gym. He appreciated the virtues of a good workout, but that's not what usually happened. He and several of his coworkers would stand around and patiently wait for the menace to finish his work out. The menace would boast and brag as he benched the same hundred twenty pounds as he did every week. No one dared best him in athletics, so the whole thing was a giant waste of time for the larger men like Nathan.

After the usual awkward shower experience, the men would silently reflect on the egotism that ruined their lives six days a week. Scott Conner, the menace, insisted on being naked in the locker room as long as possible. Strutting around and standing, in a pose that seemed almost meant to jut his flopping member further forward than anything attached to his body could be.

The other men in MI Robotics seemed to suspect homosexuality, but Nathan knew better. Scott did this to intimidate and unnerve the other men. Surprise, shock and deprivation presented the best opportunities to instill fear and loyalty in other men. Nathan wouldn't have needed his time in the service to recognize the singular virtue of surprise. Yet, while continually unnerved, nobody was caught off guard any more.

Nathan and the other men followed Scott to the checkout counter at the base gym. Scott bragged to the young woman soldier manning the desk.

"Two hundred and sixty pounds. That's how much I could bench in the service days," he said in a southern drawl. "If I didn't spend so much time in pointless meetings I'd be bettering that right now."

"Yes sir," the woman stated coldly.

"You know my company is very important to the service. We have brokered over twelve major contracts and earned the Marines fourteen billion in patent revenue alone."

"Of course sir," The unengaged woman replied.

Scott continued as the men dropped their towels in the desk mounted hamper. “That uniform you’re wearing was paid for by one of MIR’s carbon catalyst patents. You’d be naked without us.”

Nathan scowled. *Only a civilian could get away with such talk.*

“Thank you sir.” The beleaguered woman kept her resolve.

“Well I have to go chat with the joint chiefs.” Scott spoke with a twang. “I hope we can talk again *soon*.” Scott quickly walked away.

Nathan missed his daughters and longed to be home. After a sleepy morning of Saturday cartoons, they would be playing outside with the neighbors or their mother. If he was back home in Chicago, they would be throwing snowballs or making snow angels. Nathan was lost in thought as he walked.

“Cicely, you and Laurence go to the shop and payroll the new design from DCR. Give Michaels a call and get his ass over here. Jones you’re with me for the chiefs.”

“Yes sir, we’re on it.” Cicely sounded relieved. They immediately walked toward the parking lot.

“Jones, go change. Meet me at thirteen hundred and forty five hours at the conference room.”

“Yes sir,” Nathan stated weakly.

Nathan walked toward his temporary quarters. When he arrived he changed into formal business wear. Nathan looked at his watch and decided that he had time to call his wife. He walked to the nightstand and dialed the phone. Nathan stared out the window at the base as it rang. The machine picked up and four voices sequentially answered.

“Hi you have reached Luise, Emily, Malinda, and Nathan. Were not here right now, but please say whatever you like at the beep.”

“Hi everybody, I miss you. I’ll call you again tonight. Something came up at work and I won’t be home tonight. I’m going to try for tomorrow. Hope you’re having fun.” Nathan did his best not to sound as disappointed as he was. He was mostly successful.

Nathan hurried out of the apartment to meet Scott at the chiefs meeting room. Scott was waiting. He was standing in the back of the room reading a legal sized paper. The spacious waiting room was empty other than the two men. Scott looked angry. He walked to Nathan’s side and talked to him quietly as they waited. Scott moved his face as close to Nathan’s as he could without touching it.

“This breach is your responsibility. This is by far our most ambitious project and your security framework sucks. If the chiefs realize how poor your contingency plan is there will be hell to pay.”

“But sir I had advised you of that initially,” Nathan responded weakly.

“When I want to hear what you think, I will ask. Now I have to think for you, and whose fault is that?” Scott’s growing vocal anger worsened his now almost unintelligible accent.

“Yes sir.” Nathan automatically repressed his anger and desire to speak.

“I expect that a sufficiently effective quarantine program is ready in case the chiefs so order it.”

“Yes sir.” Nathan grew more angry every second. He couldn’t wipe Scott’s spittle off his face. His distant hand gripped into a fist.

“Sir, the chiefs will see you now,” a woman’s voice drifted in from the door to the waiting room.

Scott moved naturally away from Nathan wearing a broad smile. “Thank you ma’am.” He began to walk toward the large double doors.

The office was comfortable and sparse. It was decorated with wood furniture and moderate colors. Two large American flags hung by the far wall. Four men in uniform were waiting at the opposite side of a large wood table. As Nathan entered the room the woman closed the door behind him.

One of the chiefs looked to Scott. “Counsel Conner, what brings you here?”

Scott straightened and did his best to look neat. “Hello generals. MIR has a problem.”

“Weren’t you starting new trial systems in New York?” the last general asked.

“Yes, a civilian gained consciousness during an unplanned trial.”

“Unplanned?” the first general asked slowly.

“His aunt, a doctor, used the oxygen nanites during an emergency procedure.”

There was a brief pause, “So you think he knows what happened?” a general in the center asked.

“We don’t know, MIR does not have those resources,” Scott admitted grudgingly.

“How long was he awake?” the youngest General asked.

“About a half an hour according to the doctor in question.”

The oldest general spoke. “We should not act with haste. This sounds like a non-detrimental event.”

“We are deeply concerned about the breach. We do know, the man has a technical mind. There is the remote possibility, he understands what was done to him.”

“So we may need to discredit him,” The last general asked.

“Prepare a variety of legal actions against him, council. But do not act until we can confirm carnal knowledge,” the first general suggested.

“I need your permission to treat the subject as an enemy combatant,” Conner stated almost robotic like, “We would be able to prevent the leak from spreading if we detain him.”

“Make sure to focus the charges on something else, or he may spread the contamination on the way to Guantanamo.”

“We will prepare a case. I am anticipating the results of your probe.” Scott smiled.

Nathan understood the need to arrest the boy, but was still appalled. *It was shameful how depraved and indifferent the world had become. Damn them all for not helping America isolate their enemies. How many innocents needed their lives disrupted or destroyed, because there was no cooperation to be had.*

Chapter 14

Mark's Toyota was sputtering again. *Why did I have to buy a Japanese car, Mark thought. At least it's not German. My dad is livid about the cost of parts for his Beamer.*

Mark scanned the parking lot as he approached it. He noticed the van was gone, but it looked as if a light might be on inside. Mark pulled the sputtering Toyota over. He got out of his car and pushed the unlocked gate open. The activity light on a nearby motion detector failed to blink. *Somebody forgot to shut the lights off and turn on the alarm, he thought. Amman went home late last night and his car wasn't here. He couldn't be back yet, could he? There's no way Joe slipped in, he doesn't do mornings, then again neither do I.*

Mark pulled his car inside and hurried to the door. It swung right open when he pulled it.

"Damn!" Mark said aloud. He was frustrated with somebodies lack of care.

Mark's optic nerve flickered with movement. He looked to his side and nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Ah!" Mark yelled.

Kento was sitting on the floor Indian style, with his shirt off. He was wiry and slim. He looked powerful despite his light frame.

"Hello," Kento said calmly.

"Wow, oh, hi," Mark's heart was pounding, "You still here? Did you sleep?"

"For about four hours on the cot," Kento said, "I was just finishing my morning forms."

"Kay," Mark was returning to his groggy morning mode, "Are you hungry?"

"Nope. Joe and I ordered in last night. I saved some rice for breakfast." Kento sounded awake. He began to stand up and grabbed his shirt.

"Right. Rice for breakfast. I prefer donuts myself," Mark was amused, "Did you decipher Amman's notes?"

“Something doesn’t make sense.” He talked as he donned his shirt.

He walked to the large LCD on the microscope’s side. He touched a button and the screen was filled with a spider web of connecting rods.

“Did Amman mention this? I don’t see it anywhere.”

He stared at the screen. “What is it?”

“Those dots at the joints are nanites.”

Mark’s jaw dropped. “Wow.”

“Look carefully.”

Mark squinted at the screen. The connecting rods between the nanites seemed to be slowly changing length. *Wait! The rods aren’t growing, they are moving toward me.*

“The web is drifting.”

“Keep watching.”

The web drifted for a few more seconds. Then it expanded snapping into perfect symmetry. A few seconds later it was drifting again.

“So you turned them on?” Mark was really excited. He worked at not being childish.

“No. I mean I don’t think so. The good news is it doesn’t seem to getting any bigger.”

He pressed another button on the microscope’s side. “Take a look at this.” He pointed at the screen.

The image on the screen flickered and changed. On the right there were two small blobs with a few triangles sticking out, pointed here and there. The smaller blobs were alternating between blue, green, and red on the edges. The curved horizon of a much larger brown jagged sphere was on the left. The triangles on the larger left hand blob seemed more random.

Kento reached down and pressed a play shaped button on an adjacent touch screen. The objects started shimmering and wiggling.

“See the blob on the right, that is a simple sugar,” Kento spoke slowly.

The image suddenly zoomed out and several more distant glucose molecule blobs were visible. Then a number blinked into life at the top of the screen and the shimmering slowed to a crawl.

“I slowed it here so you can see the whole thing happen.”

The triangles in a small section of the brown blob began fading in and out of sight. A nearby glucose molecule snapped into the side of the giant brown sphere. Suddenly the triangles stopped shifting, then moved again and then stopped. They waited for a few seconds and then the glucose molecule was sucked violently into the big blob. It looked positively mechanical.

Mark started to understand what he was looking at. “Did the nanite just eat that sugar?”

“It sure did,” Kento said, “About ten times a day per nanite. I’m going to need a new set of heads for the microscope. I had it scanning constantly all night. The nanites are huge compared to a single molecule.”

Mark was truly impressed. He felt a little heady.

“We mapped the whole sample. How did we miss that web?”

“I don’t think you did. I think it was built while I was watching another part of the sample.” The smile fell off his face. “Do you know what this means?”

“What?” Mark’s brain was moving quickly.

“It means these nanites were meant to run indefinitely,” Kento looked somber.

“And.” Mark was trying to think why he would want nanites to run indefinitely.

“Not exactly the one–use, emergency oxygen suppliers they appeared to be in the hospital.” Kento’s words were slow and deliberate.

Mark was frustrated with his own slow responses. *I’m not awake*, he thought. “I think I need some tea.”

“How long can you swim under water if you don’t need to breathe?” Kento said, “How much faster can you run if your heart rate accelerates half as fast?”

Mark looked a little afraid. Kento was clearly frustrated.

He looked Mark in the eyes. “How long can you be dead before it actually starts to hurt your brain?”

“Holy crap.” Mark’s jaw was open.

“Well said.” Kento turned to stare out the window.

They both stared into space for a while. Shocked by the enormity of Joe’s prize from his trip to hell and back.

Mark walked over to the electric teapot and filled it with water. He focused on the simple task of preparing a mug while the back of his mind processed the implications of such a find.

Mark shouted across the shop. “Kento. You know whoever this belongs to is going to figure out we have it, sooner or later.”

Kento paused and said, “Mark, something this important can belong to no one. We are all surely damned.”

The door burst open as Lucy, Joe, and Finny shuffled inside. Joe looked catatonic. Lucy and her daughter seemed chipper and alive.

“Kento whats up,” Lucy asked affectionately. She walked over to Kento and gave him a hug. “You smell,” Lucy grinned.

“What kind of workshop doesn’t have a hot shower?” Kento smiled.

“Yeah you smell,” Finny chimed in.

Kento looked from side to side, pretending he didn't know she was talking to him.

“Hey Joe,” Kento yelled, “You look like you need some coffee.”

“Uhhhhhhh,” Joe responded. He trudged toward the coffee machine.

Mark was looking for something to do and began to prepare some coffee for Joe. He was still reeling, thinking about whoever these nanites belonged to. *They would come looking for them. What was Joe's aunt mixed up in. What kind of shadowy underworld figures could sneak something this advanced around right under the government's nose. In a hospital? How did they get away with it,* Mark wondered.

Mark watched as Lucy busied herself settling Finny into her play area. *I don't think I could handle that kind of responsibility,* he thought as he poured hot water in his mug. He absent-mindedly grabbed a teabag out of its box next to the kettle.

Mark's mind changed gears. *I don't want to dwell on my immanent demise. Lucy has got to see Joe's fight,* he thought. He walked over to Lucy.

“Did Joe tell you he and Kento were attacked?” Mark asked.

“Reluctantly yes. I heard he almost got my van stolen,” Lucy did not sound amused.

“I have it on video,” Mark grinned, “He was amazing.”

“Okay,” Lucy sighed, “Let's see it.”

She followed Mark over to his workstation by the cyborg base. He played the video for her. Mark smiled and scowled, but Lucy just kept a straight face.

At the end of the video, Lucy looked perplexed.

Mark, unsure, asked, “What did you think?”

“I think I know that guy.”

“The victim?” Mark was confused.

“The trucker,” Lucy responded.

“From where? We have to thank this guy.”

“I don't know,” Lucy was lost in thought.

Mark rewound the video and stopped it on the best shot of the truckers face. They both stared for a minute.

Mark broke the silence, “Kento found something out about the nanites last night.”

“Really?” Lucy seemed interested.

“They eat,” Mark said proudly.

“What?” Lucy asked.

“Glucose,” Mark said.

“He turned them on?” Lucy asked.

“Nope.”

“Wow,” she still looked perplexed over the face of the trucker.

“Hey guys come over here,” Kento shouted. “I need your input.”

Joe staggered over in a fashion that convinced Mark that his coffee cup was actually holding him up. Lucy led the way, Mark followed.

“For Joe and Lucy, we now have reason to believe that the nanites never actually power down,” Kento said business-like. “The nanites continually feed on nearby glucose, a superfluous function for machines meant to fail in a short time. I have come to believe that these machines have been made with the intention of enhancing a human to give them super strength and endurance. Somebody very powerful must be behind the development of these machines to keep them a secret throughout their development, and we are now racing the clock with our very lives.”

“Great,” Joe said with no enthusiasm.

Mark cracked a smile. *You have to love Joe’s style.*

“If we destroy all samples and data, we may have a chance at creating plausible deniability. We would have to continue our lives as if we never encountered these. Any chance we had of working in any kind of legitimate nanoresearch is gone.”

“Fine with me.” Lucy smiled.

“If we choose to continue down our current path, we must expedite and accelerate the discovery process as fast as we can. Ultimately, only instant simultaneous disclosure of functioning plans in the very near future will protect us from swift extermination.” Kento’s eyes bugged a bit before he squinted.

Huh? Terrorists aren’t going to come crashing through the door in the next five minutes, Mark thought. “Kento you’ve gone off the deep end. I know somebody would be pissed about the reproduction of these things, but we’re just looking, and how would they know.”

“So you think we should try to reproduce these?” Kento was deadly serious. “This is a one way fork in the road, we must make a decision right now. Your whole life will be very different from here on in if we continue.” Kento’s voice was soothing and very powerful.

Even Finny stopped playing and looked on.

“So you think our future depends on ending this here?” Mark asked.

Mark hated the idea of stopping, but the whole ruined life thing was very compelling. *I guess Kento read me right, I don’t really care what the future holds if I have to let this go.*

Kento turned to Lucy, “Are you prepared to give up your daughter? To go to jail and not see her? To run from somebody every day for the rest of your life.”

Lucy looked to her daughter, to reassure her. Finny didn’t look upset, trusting her mother completely. Lucy didn’t answer.

“How about you Joe? Amman is right, this is no game.”

His tired eyes looked more open now. He paused and said, “I chose when I took them.”

Joe definitely knew himself. Mark always liked that about him.

“What about Amman?” Joe asked, “Can we trust him?”

“I don’t know,” Kento sounded sincere. “He is very angry.”

No way am I letting them speak for Amman.

“He has been through enough terrible shit.” Mark looked surprised that words were coming out his mouth.

Everybody turned and stared at Mark. Mark hated the idea of speaking for Amman when he wasn’t present. He stood there silent, looking back at everyone. *Amman wouldn’t want them to know. Joe doesn’t need defending, he’d always choose the adventure. I don’t know Kento. Oh wait dammit, I don’t have a choice do I. They need to know everything.*

Lucy and Finny need to know everything.

Mark tried to speak but nothing came out.

Chapter 15

Nathan dwelled on the Chief's words. "Confirm carnal knowledge." Those seemed to fit with Scott's version of what happened in the meeting. Now Nathan needed to test their new legal loophole against the spirit of the chief's words.

Actually, technically they weren't going against orders, since technically they weren't enlisted or contracted to do any of this. But to be safe, Scott wanted yet another level of protection for MIR and mainly himself. Nathan was expected to use an unrelated violation of protocol between a general and Homeland Security's intelligence to confirm the state of Vallone's net search in a round about sort of a way. Sort of a bureaucratic blackmail.

It really was a beautiful manipulation legally speaking. The system is so inefficient, Nathan thought, it's time for the Pentagon to finally acknowledge the truth. MIR's specialists are just better equipped at modern warfare. In the age of the nanite, troops were never more effective than the nanites defending them. Soldiers are for show, it's the machines that do the work. No MIR, no machines, no more effective US defense against global terrorism.

He squinted to see the time on his watch in the darkened makeshift office. Nathan picked up the phone and dialed the chief of military cybercrimes division of Homeland Security. The phone rang three times and he heard a young man with a squeaky voice answer the phone.

"Hello, cyber-forensics, Chief's office, Lieutenant Douglas Franklin speaking."

"Hello, Lieutenant Franklin, I am Nathan Jones, core operations supervisor at Municipal Integrated Robotics, I need to speak to the Chief," Nathan said. He knew that would be impossible.

"What is this in regards to," Lieutenant Franklin trailed off.

"Security Protocol five bee dash forty two point six. I am requesting a secondary review of procedure on Joseph Vallone."

“Please hold,” the squeaky man uttered. The phone went silent.

One minute later, “What case was procedure Hanna being reviewed for, and under who’s authority?”

“The authority of the Joint Chiefs,” Nathan said with certainty. *That is the beauty of it, Nathan thought. Done in by their own hand with their own authority. It suited them to drown in their own legal mire.*

“Please wait, while I verify MIR’s security status and lock down your location.”

Nathan heard some intermittent rustling and tapping on the other side of the phone. “According to our records, Vallone has been handled appropriately for a low confidence status.”

So Intelligence thought Mr Vallone was no risk. It won’t be so easy to convince Scott, he thought.

“So you’re certain all transmission types are covered?”

“Sir, I need you to call back on a secure line to tell you that.”

Nathan was suddenly flush. “I thought you told me that Vallone was a low risk.”

“Yes sir,” uttered the nervous Franklin.

“Then what is the problem?, What could possibly require a secure line?” Jones felt his pulse race as he imagined his conversation with Scott about this.

“Sir, I can only grant you the grade status of the case under that security protocol. You need to be in the secure grid to receive any further detail on that case.”

“I know what you are doing,” Nathan’s voice began to raise, “You’re hiding something.” Nathan’s words were a bluff but his tone was fueled with fear.

“Sir, I will be filing a complaint about this, if you do not cease your accusations immediately!” The lieutenant spoke with a new vigor, but still squeaked.

“Then why not tell me now, you know that you’ll have to soon, despite your protests,” Nathan was sinking fast, this was not in his plan.

“Sir, use of the security grid is in place for a reason as is the five bee request for case status. Your lack of respect for procedure shows a clear lack of understanding of the need for accountability or the sensitivity of the information involved” Lieutenant Franklin’s tone leveled off.

“Goodbye Lieutenant, I will remember this gross lack of judgment,” Nathan was angry about being out-argued.

“Goodbye sir.” Franklin hung up the phone.

Nathan began to rapidly sift through his papers. *I need some good news. I can’t face Scott with the minimum accomplishment. I need more.* He suddenly stopped at a folder marked ‘Dr. Teresa Graceland’, with red ink. *We can’t be*

sure about the state of the investigation. I'll force her hand. I'll get her to arrange a meeting with Vallone. One interview and we'll be able to hold him. Nathan began to smile. He wedged the phone between his shoulder and chin, and dialed.

He tapped a pen nervously on the desk as the phone rang.

An annoyed woman answered, "Hello, intensive care and radiology."

"Dr. Graceland please, it's urgent."

"It's always urgent from that area code, may I ask who's calling?" The woman sounded very annoyed and a bit sassy.

"This is Nathan Jones from MIR..."

"Please hold," the woman put him on hold before he could finish talking.

Nathan ran through his script of the conversation he wanted to have with Dr. Graceland in his mind. He was tapping his pen faster now.

"Hello?"

"Dr. Graceland, this is councilor Nathan Jones from MIR. I believe you already know my superior, council Conner."

"Yes, how may I help you, counselor?" Teresa inquired.

"I need to set up an interview with you and your nephew, Joe Vallone," Nathan stated plainly.

"Out of the question," Dr. Graceland said swiftly. "He has nothing to do with the decision to administer the hyperrespiratory formula. My report should illustrate that."

She is very defensive. Perhaps she's hiding something. Nathan slowly cracked a crooked smile. "I don't believe that we have a choice doctor. National security is at stake." Nathan was grinning.

"I will not submit him to any interviews. He was mostly dead when they were activated. He is not a terrorist, he is a hemophiliac, and that is the end of it."

"If you prefer we can begin with you," Nathan said. Nathan had an idea. *We don't need Joe*, he thought. I had better keep her going or I'll look weak.

Teresa began to fume. "Why don't you end with me instead. He knows nothing about what was done to him."

"So you say. You forget the needs of the people around you. You, your hospital, MIR, and Homeland Security have specific interests that this information does not come out. Did you forget the waivers and contracts you signed? Did you not apply for security clearance just to be a part of this project? Your lack of respect for procedure shows a clear lack of understanding of the need for accountability or the sensitivity of the information involved."

Nathan paused, but heard nothing but breathing on the phone. "I would like to meet you both tomorrow."

“I am in surgery all this week. The first time I can meet you is next Tuesday,”
Teresa sounded exasperated.

“That is not acceptable,” Nathan sounded cold. His confidence was growing.

“Fine, I am out of the study! I’ll turn in my withdrawal papers tomorrow.”

No wait, I can’t let her out of that contract, not yet. Nathan felt his desperation growing and his toes curl. *I have to take control.* “We can do without Joe on Tuesday.”

Dr Graceland held the line in silence.

“I’ll need all your trial data for this quarter as well, I’ll meet you at eleven hundred hours, before your shift begins,” Nathan’s voice revealed little emotion. *This will finally earn me some R and R,* he thought. *Scott will have to appreciate my initiative.*

Nathan heard a man’s voice across the phone. “Dr Graceland, you’re needed in ER now.”

“Good bye council Jones. I must go now,” Teresa sounded cold. She hung up the phone before he could respond.

Just wait until Tuesday, he thought. Nathan cracked a smile.

Chapter 16

Lucy was miffed.

Where the hell is Mark? He is completely focused on those nanites. He has huge dreams, but he needs to think more about the now. He's not all that bad, he'll be a money making machine one day when he gets more focused! Right now he's all id, off this way and that, completely unfocused and inconsiderate.

"What is he thinking?" Lucy asked Joe. "You're here, still fixing the borg an hour before we're live and he's nowhere to be seen!"

Joe looked up from the mass of wires he was fiddling with, inside the cyborg's head. He looked at Lucy blankly and shrugged his shoulders, "Ehh he's Mark." Joe looked longer at Lucy trying to read her.

"You need to worry more," Lucy muttered.

"I'll finish it," Joe looked her in the eye as he talked.

"He still needs to control the arms!" Lucy was feeding her own anger.

Joe grinned. "You can do it."

"Oh real funny. I'll probably rip one arm off with the other."

"They love that stuff." Joe was still grinning.

Lucy stomped up the aisle past the other teams' noisy repair cubicles in the back room of the studio. She adjusted her tight A Team shirt so the logo was straight. She had reluctantly agreed to show off her breasts, for A team publicity. Apparently it worked, she always got lots of cheers and fan mail. *Pigs!*

I suppose I understand why Mark is so interested in the nanites. Holding the fate of the world must sound great to him. But I wish they had thought more about me. I had the chance to build an empire here, and they blew it. I have a daughter, I don't want her to have to live without me. They can't understand that.

I guess I might just be acting selfishly, she thought. Joe would have died from that crash. I would have done the same thing his aunt did in a heartbeat. How did she get involved in this web of lies? She's a practical woman. She must have

known what damage this kind of work could do to her successful life. I guess her life seems less meaningful after her sister died. It's funny how much Joe's father and Teressa have changed since I've known them.

Lucy opened the fire door leading to the parking lot. Holding it, she paused, staring outside in to the wintry gloom. Lucy squinted at a car coming around the bend through her foggy breath.

She heard a voice behind her. "Lucy?" a voice asked.

She jumped away from the voice, turning around.

"Sorry." It was Kento.

"That's okay," Lucy said. She caught her breath. "I was lost in thought."

"You thinking about what I said in the shop?" Kento spoke in a pensive tone.

Lucy paused. "I've realized that Teressa saw that this was bigger and more important than her. I definitely know it's bigger than me, I just don't know if I care."

Kento looked at her, attentive but unemotional. He said nothing.

Lucy was frustrated. He doesn't understand, she thought. "Kento... my daughter, I can't land myself in jail. I don't have a lawyer. This isn't a game. How long have we been hearing this anti-nanite crap on the radio. I'm in no shape to fight this battle."

Kento remained silent, nodding his head.

"I'm too old. All my money is tied up in properties and businesses. I have too much to lose in an adventure like this."

"So what kind of future do you think Finny will have? She'll be a slave." Kento scowled. "I don't see that you have a choice."

Lucy walked back inside the doorway, shivering. The door swung shut behind her. "I'll help you guys any way I can, but if the shit hits the fan I'm out." Lucy paused lost in thought. She mumbled to herself, "I'd hate to lose the A-team."

Kento looked resigned. "You're especially at risk. Any time you feel the need, we are gone. You are getting the worst of both worlds."

"I hope not. Look how I got rich, economics and politics can turn around quick."

Lucy and Kento walked back to the A-team booth quiet and reflective.

As they arrived at the booth Kento turned to Lucy. "Oh, by the way, you're never too old."

Joe looked up from the innards of the RC controller he was tinkering with. "Hi Kento." Joe turned to Lucy smiling. "Too old for what?"

"Joe. Hello, on the floor in an hour???" Lucy appeared flustered, not totally from frustration.

Joe stared at Lucy and his smile grew. He looked positively boyish.

“Hello!” Mark’s voice cut in.

“AHHhh!” Lucy jumped again.

“Why does everybody do that?” Lucy was talking a little louder. Her heart was pounding.

“Sorry.” Mark couldn’t stop grinning “I did it!”

“What?” Lucy had no idea what he was talking about.

“I know.” Joe was grinning again.

“I got the nanites to talk to me!” Mark exclaimed.

What the hell! We’re all going to go to jail! “Mark keep your voice down,” Lucy said rasping.

They leaned in as Mark started whispering. “Oh right, so I was running this password cracker and trying all these different protocols across different media types and I was running this modified rsh login over a shortened UDP/IP protocol with a random username and password and it answered,” Mark inhaled “At first I thought I lost the connection to the ultrasound panel because at that range the signal was so strong it spiked the meter. Once I turned down the sensitivity of the meter I could see it was responding to me in a consistent way but kept disconnecting without returning a coherent packet, so I thought maybe I should try crafting a packet.” Mark gasped for air. “Just with a similar timed set of responses and with a little tuning I was getting the same few beats back, so I used the alphabet of digits I learned so far with a standard ATM frame size and began running the cracker with the new alphabet...” Mark inhaled. “...in random combinations and suddenly open sesame, I had a standard telnet prompt straight to a shell over semi-standard ATM no login, it was actually a secret knock all along.” Mark sucked down some air, and began breathing deeply.

They all stared at Mark, who was wheezing.

Joe broke the silence. “Cool!”

Lucy chimed in with a furrowed brow. “What?”

Kento stared into space almost talking to himself. “We made some progress. I thought we were going to have to mail them all over the planet, I really didn’t want to risk it yet.”

“Thought they’d use encryption,” Joe said.

“Yeah that is kind of weird,” Kento said. “Maybe the CPU isn’t fast enough? Or not enough bandwidth? Mark what rate was it pulsing?”

Lucy cut Kento off, “Kento mail them to whom?” Her voice was a little too loud. A tech from a nearby cubical looked up from his robot and eyed them.

Kento looked at her sideways and whispered. “You don’t think we’re smart enough to analyze all this data ourselves, do you? These things probably took years to develop, design and test. Even if we were the top molecular biologists with the best gear, there aren’t enough of us to document every molecule in a year, much less understand how they work.”

Lucy looked a little scared. She wasn’t ready just yet to send them packing. Lucy whispered, “Kento, why didn’t you tell us about this before? Who else knows about this?”

Kento raised an eyebrow. “Scientists.”

Mark looked a little concerned now. “Kento, how many scientists?”

“Six hundred and thirty two,” Kento said casually.

Kento alone, appeared calm. Even the usually sullen Joe curled his lip.

Oh Lord. Finny is going to be in foster care. I’m going to be some guard’s personal servant at Rikers Island. Oh wait, no they won’t send me to Rikers, they’ll execute me for being a terrorist...

Kento saw the twisted look on Lucy’s face. “Lucy it’s okay. I know everyone of these people. They spent their whole lives building up the expertise hoping to work in nanotech. If they hadn’t been strong-armed out by the feds, they would have cured cancer by now.”

Lucy started reviewing every second of her interaction with Kento since she met him in high school. She thought about the class they first talked in, meeting Joe through him, seeing the bullied kids he helped. She remembered going to lunch with mutual friends and later writing a recommendation letter for him for college. She remembered visiting him in college, and three different professors came up to him to talk in a ten minute span!

“At school. The faculty. All knew you by name.” Lucy mumbled.

“Teaching Kempo in school, it all started there.” Kento looked her in the eye.

Mark looked at Kento. “You’ve been planning this all along.”

“If you mean since the day the DOJ sued the Foresight Institute out of existence on a trumped up trade secret charge. Yes.”

“I thought they disbanded,” Lucy said.

“Where did you hear that? The TV news? They answer to the FCC now,” Kento stated.

Joe grumbled, “It’s true. They lied.”

Lucy recalled hearing the FCC asking the networks to delay a few broadcasts since the crunch, but everything gets out sooner or later. *Oh no, how much time has passed?* “Not to kill our fun,” Lucy said while looking at her watch, “but we’re on camera in thirty minutes.”

Mark's eyes opened wide. "Oh crap."

Chapter 17

I can't think about this right now. I have to focus on the competition. No nanites, no million mile an hour jibberish coming from Mark's mouth. Just the cameras and the guys and Marksman. The on deck area had a monitor hanging from the wall. Lucy pretended to watch the replays of the last match.

"Uh oh," Joe looked worried.

"What's up Joe?"

"I forgot my clarks."

"Oh crap Joe. Stay here." She turned her head to Mark as she jogged away. "This is your fault you know."

"What? I said I was sorry." Mark's voice trailed off as she jogged away.

She pushed the restaurant style doors open and dashed through them. Lucy jogged toward the back of the cubicle filled room. *I can't work up a sweat, or my makeup will run.*

She scampered into Team A's cubical. The Clarks weren't on the counter top. She began ripping drawers open. Some movement caught the corner of Lucy's eye. Lucy purposefully dropped something and crouched to pick it up. Carefully looking, she noticed two large men, one in a light colored suit and another in a dark one. They were talking to the team from the neighboring cubical.

Oh crap. What the hell. Those are cops! They must be questioning that guy from the next cubical. What's his name? Eric! He's not supposed to be back stage. There are no runoff matches tonight. He should be on deck.

Oh my God, they're here for us.

Don't panic. Just stay calm. Oh shit they're looking over here. Act casual. Just keep doing what I am doing. Lucy spotted Joe's jacket on the floor. Mumbling to herself, she reached over to Joe's jacket and grabbed the clarks. Getting up and turning at the same time, Lucy made sure not to make eye contact.

Lucy came bursting through the gray egg-crate covered doors, waving the

clarks in the air. Joe had already strapped his PC to his arm. The three of them were alone in the tiny room.

“Guys I’ve got the clarks! Listen,” Lucy took a breath, “I was just in the mod room and...” Lucy took another breath.

“Here we go.” Mark was pointing at the monitor. He sounded excited.

A musical horn piece came on that sounded conspicuously like the A-team theme. Movie clips of the three of them shooting M16s and hitting nothing scrolled by. Lucy’s Black van rolled by. Next they showed a few clips of them welding parts onto the cyborg, and finally of the cyborg in battle. The announcer began to talk about their team’s recent winning streak towards the end of the campy intro.

“Guys? Guys? Something to tell you? Joe, I have your clarks...”

Nothing.

Joe and Mark watched intently barely holding on to their RC controllers. Lucy would have been frustrated if she wasn’t scared. She stared intently at Joe. *I know how to get his attention*, she thought. She walked up behind him and intentionally pushed her breasts against his arm and back from behind. She whispered in his ear, “There are cops in the mod questioning Eric, right now.”

Joe looked down at her completely confused, with a glassy eyed look taking over his face.

The announcer raised his voice a little. “By now, you have to know them, and when they come to your town you’d best look out.”

Joe looked to Lucy for a clue, but it was too late. They were out of time. She handed Joe the clarks, and they followed Mark out the door.

The announcer yelled, “The A team!!!” as they walked out on to the floor. Lucy was worried sick, and Joe looked it too. The crowd went wild.

Mark walked right up to the announcer. “Uh, that’s Team A,” He said into the microphone.

“Right okay,” the announcer said into his microphone, grinning. “I always mix that up.”

“So we’re all curious what this new compartment is on the front of Marksman. It looks like a complete cyborg, by the new rules, so what could it be?” The announcer held the microphone to Mark’s mouth.

“You’ll see.” Mark’s smile turned to a grin.

The announcer turned to Lucy. “Your opponent tonight is Black Knight, with three straight wins. How do you think the boys will fare?”

Lucy felt a bit like a robot herself, but forced herself to perk up and act. “The winner is already chosen, Rick.” Her voice sounded squeaky and distant. Lucy

mixed rage with fear. She was furious with herself. That sounded really dumb.

Joe looked petrified, lost in his own thoughts. Rick turned to him next. “So Joe you look a little worried. Second thoughts? Cold feet? Finally met your match? Ready to throw the towel in?”

The announcer looked Joe right in the eye. The studio was quiet. Joe still looked lost.

Joe turned to Rick and his eyes went wide. He began to smile. He grabbed the microphone and simply said. “Never. I. Live. For. This.” He donned his Clarks as he finished.

The crowd went bonkers. Lucy began to feel a little better. She didn’t even know why.

The announcer introduced the other team. Joe and Mark walked down to their circle beside the Plexiglas enclosure.

There it was, their complete robot. It stood upright on giant tracks. It had complex multi-hydraulic arms. It was painted a metallic mars-red with black accents. It’s facsimile of a head had a strip of cameras for eyes that looked like a visor. Nearly seven feet of pure intimidation.

Joe and Mark turned on the power for their RC controllers and arm computers. They began to switch their clarks to a three dimensional view from the robots eyes. Lucy knew the arm gestures well.

Lucy took in the competition. The opposite robot had small tracks for feet and was dressed up in black, human style plate armor. Their teenage opponents were wearing awkward cardboard visors. It doesn’t look like they are wearing clarks. This should be quick, Lucy thought.

Marksman began to twitch and turn in its small circle painted on the floor. It stretched its arms and flexed its waist and shoulders.

After a minute, Black Knight began to twitch in a meaningful way. The humans controlling Black Knight both gave a thumbs up. The enemy cyborg slowly reached for a spiked ball and chain hung from its metal belt. Once it had grabbed the mace, it began swinging it back and forth.

Lucy scanned the exits for cops. Nothing so far. She spotted Kento in the guest area. He saw her looking and waved.

Lucy looked to Mark and Joe and they gave her the thumbs up. Lucy repeated the gesture for the judges at the table nearby.

The announcer counted from three and a whistle blasted. The robots rolled toward each other.

The enemy cyborg turned and sped away. Marksman gave chase. The guys directed Marksman to chase Black Knight around the ring for a whole minute as

the audience booed. Black Knight managed to stay just out of range. Lucy didn't understand the Knight's strategy. I can't tell if they are trying to run out the clock or they're doing a rope a dope. Lucy thought about the old Mohammad Ali trick and if it would work with cyborgs. If they think Mark and Joe will get tired, they didn't study the guys enough. They don't get tired, not of this.

When Team A finally cornered Black Knight in front of a large pit in the floor. It swung its mace wildly. The lighter, less armored Marksman easily dodged its awkward attacks. Mark and Joe leaned their RC controllers left and right. Mark was controlling the lesser waist and shoulder shifting while Joe rapidly turned Marksman from track to track, weaving left to right.

Then Marksman grabbed hold of Black Knight's mace hand and it was all over. While grappling with Black Knight, Mark's hand released the joystick on his controller. His hand slipped past the joysticks and clicked an awkward button on its edge. Marksman's arms locked the enemy cyborg's arms in place as it writhed. The new doors on Marksman's chest plate opened up and a second set of smaller arms reached out. They quickly wedged open a crack in the knight's plate armor. The small arms retracted, pulling out a red foam ball, disabling the Black Knight.

"He has his heart he's got the heart." The announcer yelled. Everyone screamed and jumped.

Mark quickly reached up and flicked the switch on his controller again, and the smaller arms went slack and began to slowly retract. Marksman's larger arms released the idle Knight and Marksman pushed it into the gaping hole.

The screaming was so loud Lucy's ears hurt. She started screaming too. *How can they arrest us now*, Lucy thought, *there will be a riot*.

Mark and Joe gave each other a high five.

"What an unusual cyborg. Four arms, folks I tell you now we've seen it all!" Rick seemed to be loving it.

Lucy ran over and hugged the guys. They jumped up and down in unison. Lucy looked up at Joe.

"Oh wait, I'm receiving a letter from the judges. Man I hope they rule that was legal, because it was great." A slim young woman handed the announcer an envelope.

Rick read the piece of paper to himself his face began turning down. The audience quickly hushed, as if on cue.

He walked down to team A's circle. "Well apparently the judges think there was an oversight in the wording of the arm regulation, it looks like the extra arms will have to be taken off." The audience sighed. The morose announcer put his

hand on Mark's shoulder. Suddenly he turned to Joe and Lucy. "But this victory stands!" The crowd went wild. He had played their emotions like a harp.

Posters of the A-team logo waved in the stands. They did it again, they couldn't be beat. They really were the best.

Joe leaned into the microphone and spoke in a deep Italian accent. "I love it when a plan comes together."

Lucy had never been so scared and excited in her life. She was shaking.

Chapter 18

“First the men at the shop and now this?” Mark looked disturbed.

“I thought for sure they were going to arrest us,” Lucy added.

“Same guys from the shop?” Joe asked.

“We don’t even know if those cops were there for us,” Lucy commented.

“Cops at the shop? When?” Kento asked.

“A couple of guys in a Lincoln,” Joe remarked.

Mark explained. “Joe spotted them by the abandoned warehouse. He ran over, and got there just in time to see them get into a Lincoln. They kicked up so much dust he couldn’t see the plate.”

Lucy squinted at Kento, she was visibly holding back her emotion. “They were packing.”

Joe looked at Lucy sympathetically. “Don’t worry, lots of people carry now.”

Lucy raised an eyebrow. “Thanks Joe, I feel much better now.”

Joe turned red.

“It could be the same guys, but it’s probably not for the nanites. These tactics are too primitive for the company that owns them. They have got to be pretty high up the ladder. They could have just been taxi drivers.” Kento looked lost in thought as he talked.

“I thought of that.”

They all stood silently in a circle, eyes at the ground or the sky.

“This might have something to do with...” Mark looked suddenly surprised, stopping mid-sentence.

Everyone looked at Mark.

“With what?” Kento asked.

“Amman.” Joe looked right at Mark as he said it.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t need to.” Joe looked a little angry.

“What do you mean?”

“Why is an Iranian physicist working with us?” Joe asked. “What is *he* doing here?”

“You think he’s a terrorist?” Mark asked looking confused.

“Maybe.” Joe said.

“You have some large ones.” Mark said.

“You need some.” Joe shot back.

Kento stepped in between the feuding men. “Guys, look you are both on the same side of this. He’s just not sure about Amman. Don’t let him come in between you. We can’t be sure about anything yet.”

“Especially Mark.” Joe’s nose twitched.

Kento grabbed Joe by the shoulder and pulled him aside. Lucy tried to listen in as they whispered but their voices were too low. She looked over at Mark. He looked uncharacteristically angry. His nerdy look washed away. *We can’t fall apart right now*, she thought, *there are too many loose ends*. “You should come to the shop tomorrow so you can show the guys what you did.”

Mark looked surprised that Lucy was standing there. “Oh, right, yeah. That would be good.”

“You have been really mysterious about Amman, Mark.” Lucy said. “Usually you are so open about everything.”

“I made a promise not to talk about it. Trust me, it’s okay.”

“Mark I trust you, but you can’t know what he’s thinking.” Lucy felt faint.

Mark looked less angry and more afraid.

Joe and Kento returned from their huddle, and Joe looked significantly calmer.

“Mark I’m sorry.” Joe said.

“It’s alright. Me too.” Mark was trying not to look hurt. “I made a promise not to talk about it. I swear he’s alright.”

Joe nodded his head.

“I need to get up in the morning to make some calls, Joe would you mind driving?”

Lucy was hoping to let the fragile peace set in.

“No problem.”

“See you tomorrow.” Mark walked toward his car. Kento split off toward his bike.

Joe got in on the drivers side of Lucy’s van. It was so packed with the team’s equipment, the back window was blocked. Joe took the Clarks out of his jacket pocket, and tapped the LCD on his arm computer. Lucy watched him as she climbed in the van. She wondered if he was trying to hide his expression behind

the faux glasses. *Not a good thing, Joe wrecked his car when he was wearing his clarks.*

“Do you really need those things?” Lucy wondered aloud. She hoped he would talk about it.

“What, no. I like them though.” Joe looked at her as he started the van. “Easy to spot cops.”

“Are you planning to speed?”

“No, but it sounds fun.” Joe smiled a little.

Joe pulled away from their spot a little faster than he should have. Lucy felt her stomach wrench. At first she thought it was from Joe’s aggressive driving, but he was pulling away more calmly now, and it didn’t stop. Kento’s prophesy was gnawing at her. Kento was all about reading into things, but something sounded a little more real this time. As real as that awkward microscope taking up an entire workbench at the shop. What would she have to sacrifice to be a part of this. She didn’t want to give up her business, but she wanted to give up the guys even less. Lucy didn’t have a lot of friends outside of her work.

She really didn’t want to give up Joe. She felt the tears welling up.

“Joe. How can this end well?”

“We don’t get caught.” Joe predictably missed the rhetoric. He sounded cool and distant.

Lucy’s tears were lost, Joe clearly didn’t understand she was upset. Lucy sat back, brooding about every time he had spilled his guts to her. He never sees it when I need him, she thought. He’s so self centered. Lucy’s face turned stony. She imagined her whole life alone.

I just need to admit how I feel for Joe.

The words came slowly to Lucy’s mind as they drove along the expressway. She looked over at his face. His rugged, almost angry look contrasted with the boyish joker she had seen earlier tonight. Shadows danced across his cheeks as he drove under orange street lights. She wanted to reach out to him. She wanted to console him. She knew just how fragile he was underneath.

No, I can’t. I have to hold it together. I can’t be weak. Joe is our star, Mark is good, but he just can’t build like Joe can. No matter how broken the cyborg is he always finds a way to get it running. I need to be in charge, I can’t lose that.

Lucy turned to Joe. “Joe, was the cyborg damaged at all?”

“Yeah a little.” Joe paused and nodded his head for a while. “Mostly sheet metal. A few bullet holes from the mace.”

Bullet holes. Lucy started brooding about the man interviewing their cubical neighbor again. Lucy grasped the door handle tightly as Joe got off at their exit.

She looked over at Joe as they drove under some broken street lamps. Eerie blue and red lights reflected off of the inside of his glasses. Lucy felt like she was going to wilt. All she wanted to do was go home and hide under the covers.

They pulled up in front of her house. He asked as he got out of the van, “Can I hitch a ride to the shop?”

He walked around the front of the van and handed her the keys. She could swear he glanced at her breasts. She looked in Joe’s eyes. “No problem. How about eleven a.m. I want to enjoy my sleep tonight.”

“Okay see you tomorrow.” He turned and started walking toward his house, oblivious to Lucy’s attention.

“Joe,” she called out to him. He turned around and started walking back to her. “Please come in and stay with me a little while. Have some coffee.”

He stopped and looked a bit perplexed. His eyebrows moved as he contemplated her unusual request. “Yeah okay.”

He followed Lucy inside, as she searched her brain for some kind of meaning. Her stomach was in knots. *I thought I could handle anything, but I can’t handle this. My sanity is gone. I am inviting Joe in at one a.m. Even if I didn’t catch him staring at me all the time, I know how he might take this.* Lucy reached across her shoulder to adjust her bra strap, her body felt more sensitive.

He sat down in the kitchen as she walked toward the coffee machine. She focused on the task of preparing coffee. Why had she crossed this line? *I have to cut the team loose, that must be why. I care about these guys, I don’t want to do it.* She flipped the switch on the front of the machine and it flipped a switch inside. The tears welled up in her eyes and she started to cry.

“Lucy, what’s wrong?” Joe sounded completely confused. “Are you okay?”

He walked across the kitchen to her.

She threw her arms around him, and cried on his shoulder. “Joe don’t tell anyone, I’m so scared.” She looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think.” He looked ashamed. He held on to her.

After a minute, Lucy pushed him away enough to look at him. “How did we get here?”

He stared at her looking more scared than she had ever seen him. He held his embrace loosely. She realized how vulnerable he was, physically and emotionally.

She realized how much she loved him.

She reached up and kissed him gently on the lips. She savored their warmth.

He responded and returned her kiss. Sorrow turned to affection as his hands touched her neck. He ran his fingers through the hair at the back of her neck, and

his kiss deepened. One of his hands ran down the small of her back, across her bottom and stopped on her thigh. He pulled her waist closer to his.

I want him, Lucy thought. She had completely forgotten about their perilous future. She reached up the sides of his shirt and grabbed the back of his muscular shoulders, massaging them. Their noses brushed as they turned their heads and continued their kiss on the other side. It felt just as right.

The kissing aroused her to the point that she wanted to try more. She felt the heat from his excited bulge at her waist. She pulled away from Joe without saying a word. Seeing the terrified look of regret on his face when she pulled away, she grabbed him by the front of his jeans above the zipper and pulled him into her living room. His expression changed to pure bliss.

When Joe realized where she was taking him, he spun around behind her and began kissing her neck. He placed one hand on her thigh and the other cupped her breast. His mouth worked its way down to her shoulder. She reached behind her head and grabbed a fold in the fabric of his shirt with both hands, pulling it over his head. She spun and began to kiss his shoulder. She gently ran her fingers along his back, careful not to scratch him with her fingernails.

He had shown all the restraint he could muster. He reached down and pulled her pants' button open. He pulled her close and kissed her as he unzipped her pants and slowly guided them off.

Lucy pulled away from his kiss, and again he looked frightened, as if he had done something wrong. She spoke very quietly in his ear, "Have you ever done this before?" She pressed her waist close to his as if to reassure him.

He started to kiss her neck again as he responded. "Yes."

"How many times?" she asked between elongated breaths.

"Twice." He worked his way up to her ear.

"I have so much to teach you. You're almost a virgin." She ran her hand along his waist and down the front of his thigh.

He took her by surprise, gently lowering her down to the couch below. He kissed her as he lowered her body. She quivered with lust.

She looked at him and smiled. "Slowly. We have all night."

Chapter 19

Daylight peeked into the room. Joe woke up suddenly. He took care not to move. *Where am I? I'm in Lucy's bed!* He recalled the night before. *Was Lucy just vulnerable or was it something more,* he wondered? He had found her attractive for years, but why did she accept him, no wait, invite him now? *What did I do?* He sat up with a start. He heard her talking on the phone in the other room. He grabbed his clothing off the floor and quietly dressed while he listened.

“No mom. Mom there is a ton of work to do now.” Lucy paused to listen. “Mom I need you to watch Finny today, I’ll be by to pick her up tonight.” “I’ll see you after eight.”

What work did she have to do now? What was going on? He quickly pulled his shirt over his head and walked into his sneakers. He walked out into the hall towards her voice.

Lucy was naked except for a long pale blue T shirt. Her dark hair was wet and looked jet black. Her back was turned to Joe. Her heart-shaped rear was obvious to him through the thin shirt. He suddenly felt aroused.

She dialed the phone and walked to a table with the phone held to her ear. She spotted him and turned around smiling. He was relieved she didn’t hate him.

He caught himself staring at her breasts.

“Machine,” she said as she hung up the phone. She walked over to him. He felt his heart flutter.

She walked up and touched his arm. She looked him in the eye. “Joe last night,” and she stopped.

I'm going to lose her friendship, he thought. He felt his skin prickle. He thought of many fun hours hanging out with Lucy and Finny. “Whatever you say, I hope we’re still friends. I can’t lose that.”

“We weren’t drunk. I wanted it too.” He still felt like he had done something wrong.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him to the living room.

She led him to a chair. "Have a seat."

He sat in a recliner.

"This is not easy for me to say."

His heart sank to the pit of his stomach.

"I think I have to sell the team."

His dread morphed into confusion. "Why, because of last night? I'm so sorry."

"No, it's the other way around. I wanted last night to happen. I let myself be with you because I had made up my mind about the team."

"Why? The fans love you." Joe look bewildered.

She paused as if searching for words. "Joe, this nanotech stuff is too crazy for me. I need to get out before it affects business."

He thought about her daughter.

"I understand."

He looked at the floor.

"Hey don't be bummed." She crouched in front of him. "Somebody will buy the team! You guys are on fire."

"What about us?" he asked. "Will we matter?" He cursed his poor articulation. "I mean, will this matter?"

She looked him in the eye. "Whatever we want from each other, I won't let anything stand in the way. I just ask one thing, whatever happens we need to have our stories straight, I had nothing to do with the nanites. I don't know about the nanites, I never heard about the nanites, and you guys told me that monstrosity on the bench is a chip building machine you borrowed."

"You didn't ask for this."

She reached out and held his hand. "Outside of that, I'll help you guys however I can."

He recognized Lucy's lie. He had heard her tell a lie like this a dozen times. *Really how can she help*, he thought. *She just wants me to feel better. Well at least she cares. He looked up at her with a big smile.*

She caught him smiling. "What is it?"

Joe had an idea.

"I have two tickets to the Olympic trials." He grinned a crooked smile.

She smiled. "A date? I'd love to come with you. When is it?"

"This Friday," Joe grumbled.

He felt his stomach churning.

"If I can get a sitter for Finny, you're on." She kissed his cheek.

He stared at her wide eyed.

“What Joe.”

“Do you have any food?”

Chapter 20

Joe drove the van the long way to stop for breakfast. Pulling into the donut shop's parking lot, he noticed a familiar looking truck. It was parked in front of an adjacent abandoned gas station.

"Lucy that's the truck."

Lucy looked perplexed. "What truck? I just see a dirty windshield"

"That looks like the rig. That night." Joe pointed.

Lucy looked around for the truck and then at Joe, looking completely confused.

"The trucker. Who saved us?" Joe eyes opened wide.

"Oh right, okay, yeah him." Lucy looked a little embarrassed. "How could you know?"

"It was a white truck, like that."

"Right, okay." Lucy was mocking him.

Joe parked and they walked inside. He looked around and didn't see the intervening truck driver. Joe walked up to the counter disappointed. *I just wanted to say thank you*, he thought. Joe groggily ordered their unhealthy breakfast sandwiches.

In a minute Joe was sipping his coffee. He felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around and there he was, the mystery trucker. He was six feet two inches and half as wide. He had wild curly red hair and a red beard on the short side. He was in good shape but had a small belly. He looked about forty years old. He shifted a couple of bags to his other hand. He was smiling as he held out his large hand on the end of a larger forearm to Joe.

"So you're the Cyborg Wars champion. Pleased to meet you." The large trucker had a light southern twang.

"You know who I am?" Joe looked perplexed. Joe had thought he had his audience figured out. Joe reached out and shook his hand. Joe's hand felt nearly

crushed.

“Of course. I look for stops with net TV. I love the whole A–Team thing, I used to watch that show when I was young.” The trucker was smiling.

“What I can’t figure out is how this lovely young lady, Lucy was it?” He paused and turned to Lucy and she smiled. “Figured out how I was a fan?”

He doesn’t know who I am. He doesn’t remember that night, Joe thought. Oh wait he probably never saw me. We had to zoom in on the best frame we could get, just to recognize him up close.

Joe looked past the trucker to Lucy for some cue, she just shrugged her shoulders.

Joe was about to spew gratitude, when his instinct stopped him. Joe remembered the pride of his coworkers back at Sun Auto. *I can’t just blubber all over this guy, he’ll leave as quick as he can.* Then Joe had an idea.

“Want to come back to the shop? See the cyborg?” Joe’s morning voice was extra gravelly.

The trucker paused for a second. “Any other season, I’d tell you no, but right now I don’t have no work. Sounds good.”

“We’re in the black van outside,” Lucy said, “We were going to take the expressway anyway.”

The trucker looked outside at their van. He started chuckling. “That’s great. You’ve got the A–team van spoiler and all. It’s like a theme park.”

Joe and Lucy smiled.

Suddenly the trucker’s face turned sour. “I am so rude, I can’t believe my manners. I’m Skyler Godslaw Truman, pleased to make your acquaintance.” His smile returned.

“Joe Vallone, and this is Lucy Kane,” Joe realized he already knew their names.

“Oh wait, before I say yes, I gotta ask my wife. She’s gotta give the okay.”

Lucy and Joe watched as Skyler walked to his truck. He got in and disappeared for a minute. Joe thought about Lucy’s good deed of finding Skyler.

“Lucy, are you okay with this?”

“I’ll tell Mark about the team later. It probably won’t actually happen for a couple of months.”

“He doesn’t know, does he?” Joe meant Skyler. He hoped Lucy understood what he meant.

“I didn’t tell him. It’s strange, it’s almost like he found us.”

The shotgun trucker, climbed out of his cab and walked over to them briskly. He looked a little excited. “It shouldn’t be a problem. She doesn’t have anything

scheduled.”

I wonder what the wife of a trucker might have scheduled, Joe thought.

“Okay follow us,” Joe chimed in.

“Honk if there’s a problem,” Lucy said.

“Got it.” The trucker hustled back over to his rig.

Joe and Lucy made small talk as they lead the trucker to the nearby Team A warehouse. Skyler pulled up outside the exterior fence. He left the truck running and walked through the gate to greet them.

“It’s like a fortress, not what I pictured,” Skyler looked around at the warehouse.

“I got them to throw in a fence as part of the deal. Not the best zone up here.”

Lucy paused “Skyler, where’s your wife. She can come too.”

Oh right, Joe forgot all about her.

“Oh she has work to do,” Skyler didn’t elaborate.

Lucy looked at Joe as Skyler walked through the door as if to say ‘huh?’.

Joe didn’t know either. *Maybe she was cleaning the truck?* He shrugged.

Chapter 21

Mark and Kento looked up from the microscope's screen as Skyler opened the door. Kento revealed a controlled smile, and Mark was grinning from ear to ear. Joe was certain that Mark was going to start gushing from the look on his face. As he came into view, Joe put his index finger over his lips to signal Mark to be quiet. Mark's face suddenly went glum.

The trucker walked right over to Mark and held out his hand. "I love your show."

"You're a fan?" Mark looked excited again.

"Hell yea. I plan my stops around Cyborg Wars and Cycle Heaven. Rest stops that is, I'm a trucker." The trucker inadvertently over-explained.

Mark looked at Joe totally confused, eyebrows raised. *He really wants to say something*, Joe thought.

After a moment of awkward silence Lucy spoke up. "Joe why don't you and Mark unload the van."

"Right, good." Joe said awkwardly and quickly headed for the door.

"I'll help too." Kento said too, seemingly catching on.

"Skyler, do you want to see all our cyborgs from the past two years?"

"Absolutely." Skyler was grinning.

Skyler left Mark's side and followed Lucy to the less used, far end of the shop. He looked kind of miffed. Joe waved to him and mouthed, "Come on."

Mark's eyebrows dipped to his eyelids as he shrugged his shoulders.

He mouthed, "Why?"

"Come on, lazy bum," Joe said. Mark reluctantly started outside.

As soon as the door closed Mark turned to Joe. "Is that the trucker?"

"Yep, he doesn't know it's us," Joe said.

"Us who?" said Mark.

"Us the team?" Kento said smiling.

“Who’s the team?” Mark said to Kento.

“Which team?” Kento said grinning.

“I’m asking you,” Mark said exasperated.

“Asking us what?” Joe caught on to the joke. He couldn’t help but grin.

“Asking you,” Mark said. He was red in the face. He pointed at Joe.

“Asking me what?” Joe asked with a straight face. He couldn’t help it, he burst out laughing. He fell on the concrete.

“What’s so funny? Why are you laughing,” Mark was almost yelling now.

That just made the guys laugh more.

After a full minute of laughter, Kento was the first to compose himself. He stood up and explained Joe’s insight to a cross-armed Mark. “I think what was going on was, Joe was afraid of you gushing all over the trucker. You would scare him off.”

Mark looked embarrassed. His face turned red.

Joe scrapped himself off the ground. “He’s a big Team A fan.”

“I figured that out now.” Mark was still a little red.

“You are such a nerd,” Joe said.

“You’re a grease monkey,” Mark replied.

“Nerd,” Joe repeated smiling.

“Grease monkey,” Mark replied.

“Guys, the van?” Kento looked them both over with a crooked smile.

“Right.” Joe walked over to the van and opened the back.

Mark and Kento started unloading toolboxes, computers and boxes of gear from the van. Joe was staring off into space. *It’s too bad about Lucy*, he thought. *She was a great boss. Nice body too. She was really good last night.* Joe was grinning. *It’s not that bad that she’s quitting the team.*

The next time they were all outside, Kento interrupted their work, “Mark figured them out.”

Joe stopped in his tracks. He immediately knew what Kento meant.

“How do they work?”

Mark was suddenly smiling again. “I typed ‘help’.”

“Get out of here,” Kento said. “I thought it was some elaborate hack.”

“Nope. There is zero security on these things once you know how to connect. All you need is an ultrasound device and the know-how.” Mark looked a little more glum.

“That could be dangerous,” Joe said.

“Definitely a prototype,” Kento remarked.

“Good thing too, I think we’d be nowhere right now if they weren’t wide open,” Mark said.

“Where are we? Can they do anything?” Joe asked.

“I don’t know for sure, but I examined an internal table,” Mark explained. “I think I made a nanotech nutrient soup with the right ingredients. It took two hours and a chemistry book along with that internal table to figure out how to add every needed atom and molecule and not have it explode. Kento was a big help with that.”

“Explode?” Joe sounded confused.

“They require about thirty different elements in fifty different molecules in abundance in order to build a new nanite. Their design seems very complex and they only have a few tools each,” Kento stated.

“Holy crap!” Joe look shocked. “They can reproduce?”

“I put about fifty of them in a bowl of stuff and told them to build fifty thousand more of themselves.” Mark smiled “So far so good. Who’s the nerd now?”

“Uh, still you,” Joe replied.

“Right, okay. I guess that’s true.” Mark looked confused.

“If this works I have some colleges I need to mail these to,” Kento casually stated. Both Joe and Mark looked shocked.

“Hello? Scourge of the earth? Tools of terrorists? Hundred thousand dollar reward? Treason? Any of this sound familiar from the radio and the TV?” Mark sounded stressed out.

“Mark, do you believe any of it? What are we trying to do here? Keep these for ourselves so we can hold our breath underwater? Think long term, do you think you are safe from the federal government without involving other people? You think you can go it alone?”

“No, not really,” Mark sounded ashamed.

“Nor do I. You have to trust someone sometime. Now it’s do or die.” Kento paused. “Anyway the hundred thousand reward ain’t that much these days.” Kento smiled, trying to lighten the mood.

“Right,” Joe said sarcastically. He turned back towards the door with the tool box he was carrying. *How long before they arrest me? Would it happen at tomorrow’s meeting at the hospital? A week later? A month? I have to get Kento to show me some Kempo, I can’t lose a fight in the joint. I’ll be dead. Joe looked glum as he worked.*

After a few minutes the gloomy trio finished moving all the smaller containers. Joe pulled Marksman’s tread remote out of a cardboard box and guided it down the van’s ramp and inside. Joe could have sworn he saw something move inside

the truck as he drove the robot inside. Joe resisted the urge to stare at the truck.
Was it SG's wife?

Joe led the robot through the main door as Skyler watched mouth agape.

"Is this the new Cyborg?" Skyler asked.

"It's Marksman in the sheet metal," Lucy said proudly. "These guys are brilliant."

"Nah just lucky," Joe said. He winked at her.

They all walked over to Skyler and Lucy.

"So Lucy's given me the grand tour. I just have one question. What is that? Last years lunch?" Skyler pointed at a covered clear glass bowl with foamy muddy grayish water floating in it. Duct tape held an ultrasound paddle to the makeshift cover and held the cover to the bowl. The paddle was attached to a miniature PC with a thick cable. Lights blinked signaling the tiny computer was on.

Joe didn't need an explanation to know what it was. His heart jumped. They all stared at Skyler as if he was a martian. *Great, Joe thought, the cat is out of the bag. After our reaction he'll know something is up.* Joe wished his arm computer was on so he could send a message to the other guys. *What should I say?*

"Skyler, I need to know something in earnest from you," Kento started. "Do you trust the government?"

Joe stopped breathing as the trucker raised his eyebrows to answer.

"Hell no! Not even a little," Skyler said with extra twang.

"Do you ever break stupid laws?" Kento asked.

Lucy glared at Kento, "Bob!"

Joe looked at her, eyebrows raised. *I trust Kento, he's insane, but I trust him.*

"Yeah of course. Not that anyone would notice half the time," Skyler smiled.

"They might notice us. Those are government nanites. Joe got them in his blood when he went the hospital. He exposed the lie to us." Kento kept it simple.

"Aw come on you're kiddin right?" Skyler's smile was fading. "You're not kidding."

The group was silent.

"You all think I'm gonna turn you in don't you? Well I'm thinking about it. Why don't you tell me the whole story?" Skyler sounded stern.

Lucy looked distraught, even frightened. Like she might start to cry.

Joe jumped in first. "There was an accident. Remember that month our matches were rescheduled?"

SG nodded.

"I wrecked my car and died."

Mark jumped in. “Nearly died. Joe lost too much blood. His aunt who is working on research for this army company MUR or something.”

Kento interrupted, “M. I. R.”

“Right,” Mark said. “Anyway he was taken to her hospital. She put them in him to save his life. Joe heard he had nanites in his blood and stole a drop of blood.”

“Stole his own blood?” Skyler sounded confused. He was visibly thinking.

“She got in a lot of trouble, I have a lawyer meeting tomorrow,” Joe said.

Mark continued, “We borrowed a microscope and figured out how to control them.”

Skyler’s eyes widened. “Why didn’t they just do a blood transfusion?”

Everyone looked at Joe, hesitant to reveal his sensitive secret.

Joe sighed. “I’m a hemophiliac. More blood wouldn’t help if wounds don’t close.”

“Oh.” Skyler looked lost in thought again.

Kento took his turn. “We are reproducing the nanites so we can try them on Joe again. We think we may be able to help people like him long term.”

Skyler’s face relaxed a little. It looked as if they were making progress. “Can I see the microscope?”

“Sure,” Kento responded.

As they walked over to the microscope Joe noticed that Lucy just stood there silently crying. He put his arm around her and held her to his shoulder. *She must be worried about Finny if he turns us in*, Joe thought.

Skyler looked back at the couple and frowned a little. Joe led her over to the microscope.

Kento waited for Lucy and Joe to catch up. “This was recorded a few days ago. See the nanite. That blob next to it is glucose. Watch it eat it.”

“Wow.” Was all Skyler could say.

Mark explained further. “The weird thing is they use a variant of something called Propensky gate to eat. About six years ago Dr. Propensky engineered a mechanism to mechanically imitate osmosis at the cellular scale for almost any molecule. He disappeared and several rebuttals were published that are accepted as fact today. Yet his theories seem to be laid out right in front of us, used in these machines.”

Joe said, “Somebody’s lying at the top.”

Skyler looked a little suspicious, “Why would they lie about it. Why not just make a law.”

Kento replied, "Because there is no way to enforce a prohibition. Not as long as the Internet exists."

Mark brought up a text terminal on the computer next to the microscope. "This is the login to one of the actual nanites. We were able to figure out how to communicate through ultrasound. It was actually pretty easy to access them."

Skyler's brow was furrowed, "Why so easy?"

"We don't think they had a choice. The computer controlling each nanite is very slow and simple. It barely supports a command interpreter. They use a simple hardware addressing scheme to address network communications. Lots of direct register manipulation and no memory protection." Mark smiled.

Shotgun looked confused. "Huh?"

Joe looked right at Mark. "Nerd."

"Grease monkey."

"They are very simple, like PC's running DOS in 1980," Kento stated.

"Oh okay, I remember DOS." Skyler's face lit up, and then sunk. "I'm getting old."

Skyler looked at Kento. "Who knows about this?"

"We have been trying to build a web of people we can trust. We suspect that we can cure most disease with variants of these nanites."

Lucy looked furious. She raised her voice over Kento's, "What is this we. I told you I'm out of your crazy schemes. I have a daughter to look after. Skyler's going to go tell the cops and I'll never see my daughter again." She started to cry loudly.

"Now wait, I didn't say that." Skyler looked offended.

They were all quiet while Lucy sobbed on Joe's shoulder.

SG broke the silence. "Why trust me with this? What good does it do you?"

Mark replied as he typed. "We saw you in action. Look."

Mark played the video and blew up the shot of Skyler.

Skyler's jaw dropped again.

Joe had a straight face. "You might have saved my life."

Kento said, "It was a car-jacking trap. One guy was feigning death to draw us in."

"That was you guys. Wow. Not what I was expecting today." Skyler looked a bit glazed over. He pulled up a chair and sat down. The chair creaked.

"I heard about those bastards on the CB." Skyler stared into space as he talked. "A buddy of mine saw the same thing in the Bronx."

The group was silent. Joe wondered if they misjudged the trucker.

“What you did on the side of the Expressway that day was selfless. I just can’t believe the government would lie for so long about this. Six years. Stealing your own blood.” The trucker was mumbling to himself.

Mark spoke up. “I even gave you a name.” He held up a printout of the trucker’s still. With the words “Shotgun Trucker Hero” written across the bottom.

He looked up and smiled. “Shotgun Trucker. Heh, it doesn’t get better than that.”

Suddenly Skyler looked up and grinned, “It matches my monogram, SGT. Shot Gun Trucker. I’ve got that on everything.” Skyler pointed at his large belt buckle.

He sat for a minute. His face relaxed. “It must be fate.” He stood up and stuck out his hand for Kento to shake. “You’ve convinced me. Your secret is safe on one condition.” Skyler walked to the next workbench and grabbed a pen and paper. “Here is my email, I want all the dirt on your team as it happens.”

Kento smiled warmly. “Deal.” They shook.

That was a little scary, Joe thought.

Lucy looked up at Skyler and then at Kento. Her face was red with anger. “Here’s the first rumor. I’m selling the team.” Lucy broke away from Joe and ran to her small office by Finny’s play area, slamming the door.

Mark looked crushed. He sat down.

Shotgun looked at Kento. “She doesn’t trust me does she?”

“Me either. She will. Give her time.” Kento looked sad.

SGT shook everyone’s hand. “Goodbye gentlemen, we will meet again. Say goodbye to Lucy for me.”

“Later,” Joe replied.

Skyler walked out of the shop.

I’m pretty sure Lucy doesn’t really want to be alone, Joe thought. He followed her into the office.

Mark just sat there shaking his head.

Chapter 22

Thank God Scott won't be there. That idiot would tell him about the nanites and then sue him for listening. MIR won't win this one. Marcie will be forced to weasel us out of it to save her own hide. If she realized that, she wouldn't have forced me to present Joe. He's bright but not exactly articulate.

Dr. Graceland gazed at the ceiling as she placed her hand on the id scanner. She read the small sign next to the door "Hyperrespiratory Dysfunction Study. Nuclear Materials, Access Restricted." Teresa frowned. *Not even the janitor believes that. Too out of the norm.*

Teresa swiped her id card through the slot beside the door and walked into the two doored room known as a man trap. The white-walled space was just big enough for a stretcher and two nurses, with one window. The guard smiled and buzzed her through. Dr. Graceland waved.

Teresa walked through the mostly empty wing to her inside office. *I hope Joe will make it on time. This is causing more problems than he realizes. Marcie has already threatened to fire me, and the study is practically shut down at this point.*

She walked into her office and shut the door behind her. She grabbed the receiver off her phone, and she dialed as she walked around the desk.

"Hello?" A deep gravelly voice answered.

"Sergio," Teresa answered back, "how are you." Her heart fluttered a bit.

"Good good, it's great to hear from you." She could hear him smile. "You don't visit enough."

"I've been really busy here at the glue factory. The study has gotten a lot of funding and there's too much to do." She lied. "I miss you guys."

"Are you looking for Joe?"

"Yes, he's supposed to be here at one. He has to be on time this time."

"He left a half hour ago, what's so important?"

"He has an interview with MIR. The company that makes that hyperrespiratory

goo, needs to talk to him about what he felt when he woke up.” She hated lying to Sergio like this. It was for his protection.

“Oh, okay. He’s not in any trouble is he? He’s such a troublemaker.”

“No not really, but he would be if he didn’t show up. Sergio I’ll call you tonight.”

“It’s good to hear your voice,” he said gently.

“You too,” Dr. Graceland forgot her troubles for just one second.

“Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

She hung the phone up and felt the tears welling up in her eyes. *How much longer did he want them to wait.* “No, I must be more than human,” she said to no one. She put both hands on her desk to hold herself up. It was to no avail she fell in her chair. She sat and quietly sobbed as she thought about her sister and her widower, and herself. She had been alone for five years.

She was interrupted by her phone. She picked it up. “Hello,” she said meekly. *Oh no, she thought, what if it’s Scott?*

“Hi, Dr. Graceland you have a young visitor in the ER.”

“Hi Louis. I’ll be right down.” She felt a little better. She checked her mascara in a small mirror on her desk.

Dr. Graceland made her way down two floors and across the hospital to the emergency room.

“Joe, hi. I was worried you’d be late.” She reached out and hugged him.

“Hi Aunt Teresa. Not this time, I know it’s important.”

“How do you know, wait don’t tell me yet. Come in here.” She grabbed his arm and pulled him into the staff lounge. She roamed around the lounge making sure nobody was there with them. Then she went to the door and locked it from the inside.

“Okay Joe. What do you remember?”

“About what?”

“Okay that’s a good answer for later, but now I need you to be honest. What do you know about your week in recovery?”

“You put nanites in me.”

“And, what else?”

“You used an ultra sound machine to talk to them.”

“How did you know that? I didn’t tell you that.”

“I figured it out.”

“And what else?”

“I saw little dots when I woke up.”

“Okay, Joe, you never opened your eyes.”

He paused for a second. He appeared to be thinking. “Aunt Teresa, what are you involved in?”

Teresa looked shocked.

“Isn’t this stuff illegal and impossible?”

The maturity of his comments shocked Teresa, “Joe listen to me, very carefully. One day, maybe soon, we can talk about this, but not right now. Right now I need to get you through this hearing.”

“Hearing?”

She was talking faster now. “MIR plans to bring legal action against you and me if you have any idea what was done to you. They would ultimately lose that battle, but could use the transcripts to identify you as a national security threat. They could throw you in an enemy combatant clink indefinitely.”

“Hearing for what?”

“Patent infringement.”

His jaw dropped. “I’m not selling the stuff in the mall. What the fuck?” He was obviously stressed out.

“Joe watch your language. That’s not the point. All they have to do is get you on the record saying that you know what was done to you.”

“Unlawful knowledge?”

“Yes.” She did her best deadpan serious look.

“How much trouble are you in?” Joe asked again.

“I can handle myself, so long as you don’t admit to any knowledge.” She tried to believe her lie.

Somebody knocked at the door of the break room. The sound echoed off the concrete walls. Teresa quickly walked to the door, unlocked it and opened it just enough in one motion. A male nurse was leaning against the wall outside.

“We will be out in five minutes.” Teresa closed the door, locking it again.

Teresa turned around to find Joe leaning and staring at the side of cabinet.

“What’s the matter?” She felt her heart sink. *Maybe I came on too strong, he is usually so upbeat and self-assured.*

“Aunt Teresa, I need to tell you something.” He looked sullen.

“What Joe?”

The door knocked again. A voice came through the door. “Come on doc I’m hungry, and I’ve only got ten minutes.”

She was a little annoyed. Obviously Joe knew something else that he’s rather keep his silence about. *I really don’t need to interrupt him.* She stomped over to

the half refrigerator and grabbed the first soda she saw. She grabbed a donut out of the box on the counter and asked him. "Joe, what do you have to tell me?"

He continued to look sullen. She knew that look meant some kind of guilt.

She stared at him as she walked toward the door. Opening it again, she shoved the donut and cola through a small crack in the door. She closed the door again.

"Is there something I need to know?"

"Hey this donut is squished!" came the voice through the door.

"Deal with it Doug," she yelled back through the door.

Her cell phone beeped. She reached down to her belt and tapped a button. A voice sounded aloud from it. "Dr. Graceland, the MIR team is here. They want to start now by the wing. See you there." It was Marcie's voice.

"Damn," she said aloud. "Remember you know nothing and you don't remember waking up."

"Right."

"Afterward I told you that I gave you a blood transfusion. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Lets go." She hoped he had it.

Chapter 23

“Dr Graceland, good to see you.” Nathan Jones smiled.

Nathan was a short but muscular man. He wore a light gray fitted suit with a blue power tie. He carried a simple leather briefcase. He was accompanied by another muscular tall man who looked young and distracted. *I bet you can't wait to eat Joe alive*, Teressa thought. “Hello Nathan. How are the wife and kids?” Teressa acted.

“Good, I miss them.” Nathan seemed authentically distraught.

“Nathan, Marcie, meet Joe Vallone.” Teressa smiled.

Joe stretched out his hand and smiled.

Nathan shook his hand firmly. “Mr. Vallone so much ado over you. You must be a little nervous.”

Joe stared into Nathan's eyes. “Not really.” Joe's voice was extra deep.

“This is my associate, council Laurence. He will be taking minutes for the meeting,” Nathan said.

Charles Laurence shook Joe's hand. “Firm grip.” Laurence also locked eyes with Joe.

“I work with my hands,” Joe grumbled. He looked stern.

“Gentlemen, Ma'am, shall we sit?” Nathan inquired. As the group walked to the table Joe did not take his eyes off Nathan.

Teressa needed to break the uncomfortable silence. *Joe's socially awkward speech might land him in a military jail this time*. “So gentlemen, what brings you here?”

“This is our attempt at civil discourse.” Nathan replied as matter of fact. “We strongly suspect that a serious violation of patent law by manner of contract breach has occurred. We would prefer not to discuss the case until the court reporter arrives. We expect the testimony today will be important to our case.”

“Aren't we waiting for a judge as well?” Teressa asked.

Nathan continued, "This is not a formal hearing as no charges have been brought. I would prefer to maximize the integrity of the information gathering stage."

Teressa was fuming. She saw right through their euphemisms. *Where do they get off dragging us in here when they don't know anything.* "So this is just a fishing expedition?"

Marcie Keith spoke, "Teressa that is not appropriate."

"No, it's not." Joe reverberated through the carpeted room.

"What?" Nathan turned to Joe. "What is not appropriate?" He crossed his arms.

Oh no, Joe shut up. Don't be macho, that's just what he wants.

"To take time from doctors for legal games." Joe's pronunciation was unusually concise, he mimicked the lawyers tone.

Marcie spoke again. "Joe, you don't understand the nature of our work."

Joe was visibly fighting his brewing rage. He turned to Dr. Keith. "Okay. How am I wrong?"

Joe that's my boss, Teressa worried.

Nathan said, "She can't tell you Mr. Vallone."

"Why not? What's the big secret?" Joe taunted him.

Council Laurence chimed in, "It's a trade secret Mr. Vallone."

"I thought it was a patent case?" Joe asked.

"It's a contract case," Nathan answered. He was obviously frazzled by Joe's hostility.

"So it's whatever you feel like," Joe was smirking a bit.

Teressa had to stop Joe before he said something dumb. She reached over and grabbed his shoulder, and looked him in the eye.

The door opened. A small twenty something woman with long brown hair walked in the door carrying a small case. The group sat silent glaring at each other while the woman quickly set up her computer. Her haste seemed sensitive to the tension.

You know, Joe might just be on to something. Nathan looks positively pissed. Good. If he thinks he's not going to get anything, then maybe he won't.

"Hello, my name is Christina Douglas." The slender woman broke the silence with far more indifference than her posture might suggest. "I am ready when you are."

"Hello Ms. Douglas." Nathan acknowledged her greeting.

The group sat silent while Joe stared between Charles and Nathan. *Men and their pissing contests,* Teressa thought.

Council Jones turned away from Joe losing his scowl. “Ms. Douglas, my name is council Nathan Jones, I represent MIR corp.”

“My name is council Charles Laurence. I am co-council for MIR corp.”

“I am Marcie Keith, Supervising Doctor on the Hyperrespiratory Dysfunction project.”

“I am Joe Vallone, and I am a patient at this hospital.”

“I am Teressa Graceland, and I was Joe’s acting doctor, and I am part of the project. I am also his Aunt.”

The reporter raised an eyebrow at her last comment. “Is anyone representing Mr. Vallone, Dr. Graceland or Dr. Keith?”

“No need.” Nathan Jones smiled warmly.

Joe’s ears were turning red.

“The time is twelve fifty five.” Christina looked at her watch. “Please raise your right hand and say I do when I finish. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

The group spoke in unison. “I do.”

“Dr. Keith, would you please repeat that, I didn’t hear you.”

“I do.”

Nathan Jones glared at Joe and rifled through his brief case for a few minutes. Rustling papers cut the silence. Joe’s return stare gave him the look of a hungry wolf. Teressa worried about Joe losing his cool. *He’s only twenty two. Any proceedings under oath are practically built to be the undoing of angry twenty two year old boys.*

“Mr. Vallone, what relationship do you have with Dr. Graceland?”

“Can I plead the fifth?” Joe smirked, pleased with himself.

“You may at your own peril.” Council Laurence forced a return smile.

“She’s my aunt.”

“Interesting that she is your aunt to you before your doctor. I wonder if that relationship is mirrored in the other direction.”

Joe and Teressa talked over each other.

“Of course, he’s my nephew,” became muddled with Joe’s, “No it’s not.”

“What?” the reporter asked.

“I said, of course he’s my nephew. It would be impossible for me to ignore my blood relationship with him.”

Nathan Jones smiled. “I’m more interested in what Joe said.” He rasped sarcastically.

“No, it’s not,” Joe replied deep and cold.

“Not, what?” Nathan was still smirking.

“Not interesting, it’s a dumb question”

Teressa grabbed Joe’s shoulder again. Restraining herself from digging her nails in. *Why was Joe so angry? Did he know more than we talked about?*

Nathan’s smile cracked just a little.

“I, nor the court am aware of the state of your relationship with Dr. Graceland. Your hostility is unwarranted,” Nathan growled.

“Is it?” Joe inquired.

“It is,” replied Charles. “We are assessing the integrity of our trade secret. Background on the private lives of the parties involved are fair game according to our NDA.”

“Non-Disclosure Agreement,” Dr Keith said.

“I didn’t sign anything,” Joe said.

“Your aunt did.” Nathan was becoming flush. “This talking out of turn would not be tolerated in a courtroom.”

I can’t believe he took the bait, Teressa thought. These guys obviously don’t have much experience as trial lawyers. She caught herself smiling slightly.

“So?”

“So what?” Nathan was clearly exasperated.

“Exactly.” Joe was grinning.

Charles tried to regain control of the situation. “Mr. Vallone this is no laughing matter. We believe you were unlawfully administered our patented hyperrespiratory formula. This could have serious implications for your aunt’s standing on this project, her fiscal status, and her license to practice medicine.” His adult tone didn’t match his young face.

Teressa was stewing. *Joe don’t fall for it, she thought, it was my decision.*

Joe looked at his aunt. She nodded solemnly. She almost regretted doing so, she was having so much fun.

Joe sat quietly. His smile faded.

“I know this is important.” Joe paused looking for the words. “But I was unconscious.”

“Okay, that is a good start,” Council Lawrence continued. “Tell us everything you know in order.”

Joe looked right at Nathan who was still visibly fuming. Then he looked to his aunt who gave him a gentle nod.

“I have hemophilia. I got into a bad car accident when my lower control arm broke in my Camaro. I woke up after the car rolled and I was bleeding a lot, I thought I was going to die. I woke up eleven days later in this hospital. My aunt

told me the next day after I woke up, I almost died and she had to give me several blood transfusions.”

Pens scribbled away as Joe spoke.

“That’s why it’s crazy that my aunt’s in trouble. She saved my life, I’d be dead.”

“Joe why is it that you think your Aunt saved you?”

“Because she gave me that goo you make.”

Pens scribbled even faster.

Oh Joe, what did you say.

“Mr. Vallone, you just said she told you that you received multiple blood transfusions.”

“It’s obvious.” Joe stumbled a little. “It’s obvious that she wouldn’t be in trouble, unless she gave me your stuff.”

“Why do you say that?” Nathan asked.

“I’m here,” Joe said innocently.

He can lie pretty well, Teressa thought. I’m glad we kept on him all these years.

“Dr. Graceland is this true? Did you administer the hyperrespiratory formula to your nephew?” Nathan was asking the questions again. He looked calmer now.

“Yes.”

“What justification can you offer for your contractual breach?” Nathan’s tone sounded a little snotty.

“It was life and death. Joe was missing three pints of blood when he arrived. His blood pressure was nearing 60 over 40, brain death levels. He was bleeding too fast. We couldn’t give him any blood protein, cardiac arrest or stroke would have been instant since the blood was moving so slowly. Blood transfusions weren’t making any headway because his injuries were too numerous and the bleeding was too rapid. The only clear non-fatal path was increasing the blood density, a side effect of the formula.”

Teressa felt terrible as she told the story.

The lawyers paused and scribbled more notes.

“How did you get the formula, didn’t you have to transverse the lock down room and the distance of this wing to get the formula and the activation and mixture tuning equipment? It must take five minutes to drag all that stuff to the ER.” Nathan seemed to be enjoying his task.

“I got the call from the EMT’s.” Teressa started to sniffle. “I made the decision before he arrived.”

“I have the call record right here.” Nathan shuffled through more papers. He pulled a folder out and slammed it down on the table. “I believe the ambulance tech used the words, ‘Slowly deteriorating condition’ not exactly a death sentence.”

Joe growled a little.

Teressa could not hold it in any longer. She started to cry, “I’m sorry, he was going to die. I couldn’t let him die too.” Through the sounds of her sorrow, Teressa heard Joe’s sneaker squeak as it twisted on the floor. She was sure it meant he was angry. *I don’t want him to see me like this*, she thought. She tried to hold back, but that just made her cry more.

“Die too? Who died before?” Nathan asked.

Marcie spoke, “Mr. Jones. Her sister, Joe’s mother passed away some years ago.”

“Oh.” Nathan was no longer so sure of himself.

“Council Jones, I was privy to that call.” Marcie was devoid of emotion. “I made a judgment call.”

Nathan looked surprised. “Really?” He was clearly caught off guard.

Marcie continued, “Based on our experience with this technician, and the timber of his voice this was a warning of the most serious condition possible. In hindsight, it turns out my judgment was correct.”

Teressa looked up at Marcie’s expressionless face through her tear soaked eyes. She couldn’t believe her ears. *Marcie just lied for me under oath*. She felt Joe put his arm around her, she started to cry again. *He’s alive. That’s all that matters*.

Chapter 24

He could taste the bile in his throat. Rage against his embarrassment coursed through his veins like fire, flexing his muscles. Any thoughts of his loving family drifted from his conscious mind. *I have been humiliated by a sick child*, Nathan thought. *He mocks me, just out of reach, certain he cannot be hurt. He is weaker than I, and will be punished and made an example of.*

He knows about the nanites. He risks everything I stand for, for his foolish pride. He laughs and smirks and thinks this is some kind of game. People will kill us for these, all of us. They hate us. They hate him and he doesn't even know it, the fool. If Vallone thinks they won't just slit his throat and throw him in an icy river for a drop of blood, he is mistaken. We will all pay for that mistake unless I stop him.

Nathan stared with bloodshot eyes at his scribbled note pad. *I don't see how to get him. I must face Scott and tell him Vallone knows.* Trembling with anger, Nathan sprung up from the bed in his hotel room and reached for the phone.

"Hello." A familiar twang rang out across the line.

"Hello Scott, it's Nathan." Nathan clenched his fists.

"Well, Mr. Jones. What is your assessment." Scott Conner's voice was unusually flat and calm.

Nathan felt his face pull taught and his gut wrench as he spoke his mind. "He knows."

"By God, good thing we caught him. Did you send him to Guantanamo?" Scott's voice lifted a little, and his twang returned.

"No."

"What?!"

"No, sir. Charlie and I could not find even one inference in the transcripts."

Nathan was back in boot camp. "He didn't admit anything sir."

"Then how do you know he knows?" Conner was calming down.

“His tone sir, I think he was mocking me.”

“Oh this is too much. You let him mock you? Did he hurt your feelings? I don’t need to remind you, of all people, just how high the stakes are here.”

Now Scott mocked him as well. He felt his blood boil. Nathan tried to clear his head, *I have to think right now.*

“Mr. Vallone was miffed about something from the start. He was angry when he walked in the door.”

“I see,” Scott trailed off.

“Our conspiracy strategy failed when Marcie Keith vouched for Dr. Graceland’s interpretation of the EMT’s commentary on his near fatal state. Sir we were unprepared for her intervention on Dr. Graceland’s behalf.”

“It appears Dr. Keith has forgotten who owns her toys,” Scott was thinking out loud, “Nathan. You will fax those transcripts to the office at the first opportunity. Somebody will find somthin’ here,” Scott’s accent was almost unintelligible. “Pack your bags, you’re with me on the big show. See your black ass at oh eight hundred at my office for breakfast and a prep.”

“Yes Sir”

“Call me Scott, Nathan. We’re on the same side.”

“Yes Scott.”

I know somebody at MIR will find his mistake, I know I’m right. Vallone’s arrogance could undue America’s future. Council Jones smiled. the US would be a different place without Scott. He makes it happen, he keeps us safe.

Chapter 25

“Mommy, why are you sad?”

Damn she noticed. How stupid of me, how could she not? Lucy hung her head.

“I’m not sad honey, just thinking.”

“No you’re not.” Finny crossed her arms and leaned against her mother’s desk. She sealed the file drawer behind her with a clank. “You’re sad.”

She must have seen me crying this morning.

“Darling, I’m not sure what to do.”

“About what?”

How can I simplify this for her, I don’t want to hurt her fragile ego.

“We may have to leave, because Joe may have to leave.”

“Joe’s leaving?” Finny’s eyes opened wide.

“I don’t see how he can’t.”

“Why?”

“Some people are mad at him.”

“Why?”

“Because he asks why, and how, too much.”

“Really?”

She never quite put it that way before. The whole thing was horrible. How could Joe let himself get involved in such craziness. Was the pain of his disease so terrible? She started to cry.

“I love you mommy, don’t cry.” She ran to her mother and hugged her leg. She started to cry too.

“I like Joe. He’s nice.” Finny sniffled.

“Me too.” She felt more than she admitted. She hugged her daughter a little tighter.

Someone knocked at the door.

“Hold on.” Lucy yelled through the door. She grabbed some Kleenex and blew her nose, while wiping her eyes with her forearm.

“Hold on.” Finny said as she imitated her mother and wiped her eyes on her sleeve the same way.

Lucy smiled.

“Come in.”

The smells of industrial lubricants swept in as Mark opened the door.

“Hi, Lucy. Sorry to bother you. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, Mark.”

He walked in and closed the door. He fumbled as he pushed his clarks up on his head.

“It’s about the shop, should Finny stay for this?” Mark asked.

Not missing a beat Finny chimed in.

“Yes!” she said crossing her arms. “I’m mom’s helper.”

Mark looked at Lucy.

He didn’t seem to let on that he noticed her smudged mascara. *Perhaps I can pull it together after all, Lucy thought. I think she can stay, I’m sure we can speak in euphemisms. Mark isn’t that dense.*

She shrugged and smiled. “You heard her.”

Finny nodded smugly.

“Lucy, please don’t sell the shop.”

“I have to now. I can’t afford the risks. I have too many roots to rapidly relocate like you guys can.” She tried to talk above Finny’s head.

“I guess I see that.” He hung his head. “You’re the best boss I’ve ever had, and really important to the team. I don’t think we can do it without you.”

Lucy looked deadpan. “I’m only your second boss.”

Finny giggled.

“Oh, yea well, I guess that’s true, but you’re still the best.” Mark paused. “Well you never know where this can go.”

She cut him off. “Yes I do, and it makes me really nervous.”

“Okay, maybe I can work for you later if this all works out.”

“If it does, I would like that.”

“Deal?”

“Deal.” She reached out and shook his hand.

“Oh I just picked up three smaller ultrasound panels. They’ll fit real good on...”

She cut him off again. “I don’t want us to know.”

“Oh. Right. Okay. I’ll be in the shop.” He started backing out of the office.

“Okay.” Lucy smiled.

“Working.”

“Okay.”

“On the cyborg.”

Finny giggled.

“Right, the cyborg.” Lucy repeated.

The door swung shut. She knew he wasn't really going to work on the cyborg. *Thank god he finally gets it*, she thought.

“Come on. Lets set you up in your playroom. Mommy has to make some phone calls.”

“Okay.” Finny seemed to believe her mother this time. She held her hand as they walked to her playroom beside the office.

She closed the gate behind her and folded the Japanese style divider up on the side of the playroom. *The guys probably wouldn't be welding or using the air tools today*. Finny liked to talk to them and watch when it was safe.

She seized the opportunity. “Mommy, is Joe coming today?”

“I don't know.” She trailed off in thought.

She thought of his smooth hands running down her naked back. She shivered. I hope he gets away with it. I want him to stay here with me. I want him to hold me every night and love me every day. If he could just come to his senses, recognize everything he is giving up. I could love him in ways he doesn't even imagine yet.

Thunk. The door slammed open. Cold air rushed in.

“Joe, how did it go?” Mark saw Joe past the door first.

Lucy stood staring entranced by her daydream. Desire and shock swirling together. *He slammed that door pretty hard*, she thought.

“I'll tell you.”

Joe came into view. His face was twisted with anger. She felt her stomach wrench.

“Everything Kento said is true.”

“What?” He inquired without feeling.

“They hate what I know. They hate who I am. They don't love the law, they love power!”

Lucy put her hand over her mouth.

“Sound's pretty bad.”

“No, it was good. I saw my enemy. He blinked.”

Mark stood mouth agape. Lucy was frozen in her tracks.

“I don't think they even know how it works. We have to expose these guys. We go all the way.”

“Okay.” Mark nodded. “I’ve never heard you say so many words in one hour. I’m in!”

Lucy’s trance was broken. *All those months of waiting for secret desires, for nothing. Joe would get away.*

Mark looked excited. “Okay here’s what I found out yesterday.”

I can’t believe how long I waited. I should have asked him sooner. One way or another, in a few days he’ll be gone. I’ll never see him again.

“It seems they are tuned to your blood type with this variable.” He pointed to the screen.

Lucy was still frozen where she stood. *He doesn’t even see me. He’s already moved on. She couldn’t hold it in anymore. Her eyes started to cry. Why can’t I stop crying.* Lucy hid her face and ran back into the office.

This is crazy. What am I doing. He’s just a kid. The door closed behind Lucy. Of course he picked some adventure over an older woman. She started sobbing.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned around and there he was. She tried to push him away, and he pulled himself back to her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were there.”

“I don’t even know why I care so much.” She sniffled looking down.

“I didn’t know how I felt about you, until now,” Joe mumbled.

“Why not stop? It’s so cruel.”

“I can’t.”

She looked up into his eyes. “I wish we had started sooner. Why do I feel this way now?”

He turned away and stared into space. “I love people when it’s too late.”

It hit her like a ton of bricks. *He’s thinking about his mother. I’m being so selfish, I thought it was just me losing out.*

“It’s not just you. I didn’t know either.” She held him close.

Chapter 26

Joe's eyes watered as he stared at the computer screen. His eyes scanned over the lines of text Mark had input into the computer. He was methodically testing the nanites with slight variations of each command.

The amber text jumbled along the left margin of the monitor. Long rows of sequentially incrementing strings flowed by, briefly followed by flurries of what looked to be less systematic text. *That must be where he found a different response*, Joe thought. The only constant in the terminal was a large number in the upper right hand corner of the screen. *That number must be this nanite's address. Nice hack, Mark.*

Joe pressed the down arrow as he perused the lengthy history of Mark's all night session at the computer. *I don't have any idea what any of this means*, Joe thought.

"Hey Mark." Joe nudged him.

Mark put his hand up to signal stop, and pushed his clarks up on his head.

Joe wasn't offended. He knew that the motion was meant for his clarks.

"I don't understand what you are doing. What can't these things do?"

"Oh lets see. There's about two megabytes of storage in each nanite, so you can do anything you can fit in two megs of 7 bit."

Joe stared at him blankly.

"Basically it seems like there is a simple high level robotic language, and a simpler pseudo command shell. Most data needs to be separately coded into a simple hex database which seems to be a straightforward 128 character set with a simple linked list. The 128 character stuff threw me, international letters didn't seem a concern in the character map. It's only memory though, all communications are a variant of ASCII."

"Uh, secret US government military project."

"Oh right, I guess they wouldn't care would they." Mark nodded his head and

opened his eyes wide. “So it seems Propensky gate has been expanded from the famed failed design. It now can suck in or spit out not only carbon atoms but hydrogen, oxygen, and two more I haven’t figured out yet.”

“So Propensky was right?”

“Definitely, and he is smarter than people originally thought. These nanites logically string up to thirty two Propensky Gates together so you can set up a lock for a particular molecules key. It already has built-in routines for glucose, adrenaline, and dopamine.”

“Right, glucose, cool.”

“Joe, think about it.”

“What?”

“You don’t see?”

“Don’t see what?”

“It’s so obvious!” Mark sounded a bit smug.

“What!” Joe was getting agitated.

“Joe these things can cure you! Right now.”

The hairs on the back of Joe’s neck stood straight out. *No more building gadgets just to do my job. No more joint pain. No more days of frantic worrying every time I bump into something too hard.*

I don’t have to be the sick guy anymore.

“You’re kidding.” Joe’s face lit up like a ten year old at Christmas.

“Think about it, your problem is that your body can’t produce a certain type of protein. Those proteins are just groups of molecules. If I create a file describing a grouping of thirty two unique atoms describing only that protein, the nanites in your blood can absorb all the clotting protein like a very absorbent sponge.”

What was Mark thinking? “Uh that would make it worse.”

Mark looked indignant, “They could release them at the same rate your body could produce them. You could get a shot once a year and be perfectly normal.”

The gears in Joe’s mind were grinding away. “Wait how about other diseases?”

“Diabetics with no pancreatic activity could live ordinary lives. Liver failure a joke. Sickle cell anemia, respiratory disease, any bacteria or virus, clogged arteries. A few hours of programming for each, well maybe a few more for AIDS.”

“Why not sell them?” *How long has MIR been sitting on this,* Joe wondered.

“You could tell them to absorb pieces of healthy tissue too. They’d make a great weapon since they can survive room temperature.”

“Terrorism.”

“Probably.”

“Maybe they were trying to release a more fragile version?”

Mark sounded sarcastic, “Right that’s why the first programs they wrote were adrenaline and dopamine. Just what every ailing grandma needs.”

Joe stared into the space. He tried to imagine what boosted adrenaline, oxygen and dopamine would do to his physiology. *I’d be strong, angry and complacent. You could hurt me and I’d live.* The grim picture lit up Joe’s brain.

He mumbled a single word, “Supersoldiers.”

The young men were silent.

“So we have to blow this wide open.” Mark looked unusually angry.

“We have to test it first.” Joe smiled.

“How?” Mark looked befuddled.

“On me.” Joe surprised himself.

“Joe that’s crazy. What if there is a side effect? If something goes wrong and we bring you to a hospital, you’ll wake up in a jail cell.”

“We could call my aunt.”

“She’ll go along with it?”

“It can’t get any worse for her.”

Mark’s face reflected his skepticism. “Uh yes it can, hello jail?”

“She’ll go there if we blow this open.”

Mark looked remorseful. “Oh, sorry. I just thought...” He trailed off, visibly thinking.

Joe wondered if his aunt had thought about the company her efforts were helping. *Maybe she knows. Maybe she thinks this will cure me? What if she’s in on it? Even worse what if she doesn’t know? Why would she work with people like this? I need to tell her to get out, now.*

Joe turned to him. “You’re right, people need the truth.”

He wasn’t so sure he believed the truth was more important than his aunt.

“So what do we do?” Mark looked concerned.

“How many nanites have we grown?”

“About 100 million.”

“How many do we need to inject in me.”

Mark pulled his clarks over his eyes, and motioned in the air, “Lets see That drop of blood had about 10000 nanites, times 1440 drops per pint times 5 pints times 10000 nanites. We need 72 million nanites. Our goo is about 20 percent nanites at this point and we have about 3 pints of it divided by twenty percent is about two giant horse needles full of nanites.”

Joe winced.

“One small problem.”

“What?”

“They are floating in the chemical equivalent of cyanide drain cleaner right now.”

“What is cyanide drain cleaner?”

Mark just shook his head. “Nothing we can inject you with grease monkey, that’s all that matters.”

Joe realized Mark wasn’t being literal. He turned a little red.

“Nerd.”

Mark smiled.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter because they might just kill you. What if I set something wrong.”

“Then don’t change anything.”

“Huh?”

“Copy the info from mine, they were already in me.”

“I still need to separate the nanites from their birthing fluid.”

“Ewww.” Joe made a face.

“I need another pair of eyes. I need to call my cousin.”

Joe winced and looked down his nose at Mark. “Remember, he doesn’t like us?”

“No he thinks we’re young and foolish, it’s different.”

“Kento doesn’t.”

Mark stared into space. He turned to Joe shaking his head. “Do you ever complete a sentence?”

“No.”

Chapter 27

Kento could not even hear Joe breathing hard over their footfalls. *I can see his cheeks are flushed. His lips are slightly open and I see his breath. But he doesn't seem tired at all.* Kento slowed his jog from Joe's pace and examined the twenty two year old's posture. *He's slouching too much but his feet are falling evenly. He seems to be completely unfazed by the exercise.*

Kento switched his half broom stick to his left hand. He ran out in front of Joe as he spoke. "Joe, watch me." Kento pointed to Joe's right hand. "You are bending your wrist too much on eight. Imagine your sword is trapped between two parallel boards. You've only got two inches in the third dimension. Right now your hand would be raw meat covered in splinters."

Joe began to swing his half broomstick more evenly.

"That's good, but you are still slouching. You change the shape of your back when you slouch."

Joe straightened up. He looked at the A-Team van as they jogged by the front gate.

"Were you looking at the van or at your sword. You just sliced your thigh open, to look at a van you just jogged by one hundred times."

He looked as sheepish as he could while running and swinging a stick.

Kento switched the stick back to his right and began to count aloud in tune to his hand motions.

"One, Two, Three."

As they jogged around the old warehouse, Kento tried to keep his mind focused on counting aloud and performing the basic sword exercise flawlessly.

Joe spoke as they ran and swung. "So what did you do to separate the nanites?" His stick began to wobble along its path as he spoke.

"Focus Joe." Kento warned his student. "I have to warn you, I do not have a complete filtering technique down yet. This may take some time." Unlike Joe,

Kento's stick seemed to operate independently from his mouth.

"Mark said you were almost done." Joe was staring forward.

"Mark is very excited." Kento couldn't help but smile.

"How long?" Joe slipped out of his routine.

Kento glanced at Joe. "Well it all depends on the programs we wrote this morning."

"What did you write?"

"Joe, watch your extension on five."

"Okay."

"We actually wrote two routines. First we ran the soup through coffee filters. The nanites pass right through. We had to replace the filters many times though, they kept melting."

"Mmm soup." He gasped a little.

"Then we spun the whole batch through the centrifuge. We had to run it a couple dozen times."

"Okay."

"Now the nanites are back in the bowl, mostly decontaminated"

"Okay"

"About one percent have been programed to push all non water molecules and atoms into large blobs"

He took a deep breath and looked at Joe. "Switch" He switched his stick to his left hand.

Joe grabbed the stick with his other hand.

"What about the other ninety nine?"

"Counterclockwise first with the left hand."

"Oh." Joe awkwardly switched directions. He turned a little red.

Kento noticed the change and complemented him. "You're swinging a deadly weapon while jogging for twenty minutes, and holding a conversation on molecular chemistry. You're doing fine."

"Sure." He was beginning to even out his pattern again.

"The other ninety nine percent are programmed to absorb all glucose they can find, and swim away from the other one percent," Kento breathed.

"We are hoping that after enough time, all contaminants will be collected into visible floating blobs."

"How long."

"Today maybe, perhaps as long as a week away. We'll keep checking a sample every few hours in the Microscope."

Kento simply said, "Slouching!"

“Okay.” Joe stood up straight as he ran.

“How do they swim?” Joe breathed.

“They seem to have some jet system, but we can’t see how the inside works. Stuff goes in holes in one end and out the other. I don’t really understand how they don’t get jammed.”

Kento grimaced as he jogged. *I have to tell Joe*, he thought. *He may not realize how different things will be now.* “Joe I’m going to mail some nanites around today.”

Joe’s broomstick made a smacking noise as he crashed it into his thigh. He stopped running, eyes wide.

“What?” He asked rubbing his leg with an absent mind.

“You okay?” He hoped Joe hadn’t bruised himself.

“Shouldn’t we hide first?”

He kept jogging in place, no longer practicing his forms. “I understand most people don’t think like me, but we need as many people as possible to know about this. So far we have the only hard evidence of a military cover up, a fraudulent government agency, a bogus study paid for by a mysterious budget, failed scientific analysis of a valid theory, and a secretly developed mature technology that could cure disease but is instead being tailored to build supersoldiers.”

“The second they know we know, we will either disappear or die. Unless we can tell enough people that they can’t jail them all, this secret will die with us.”

“Shit!” He was still rubbing his leg.

He began jogging again, faster than before. Swinging his arm through motions that Kento taught him earlier that day.

He sped to catch up. He saw the fear and anger in Joe’s motions.

“Sometimes it’s better to hold back.”

Joe ran faster.

“You need to save that energy for the people that deserve it. Don’t let it go now.”

He stopped and faced Kento.

“How can we fight them?”

“We can’t alone, but if the news gets out there is a chance.”

“If this gets out my aunt goes to jail.”

“Who’s to say that wouldn’t happen anyway. Joe, in total sincerity, do you believe she is a smart woman?”

“Of course.”

“Why would she want to get involved in this?”

“I don’t know.”

“She did it to help you.”

He stood silently, clutching his stick.

“I bet she was working on a cure for you just like us. The difference is, she tried to work with MIR, but we see her collaborators for what they are. This is why I’m telling you to save your rage. It’s righteous, and you will need that power in the near future. Justice is to reason, as strength is to victory. Do not waste the power your sense of injustice affords you on fury with no good end.”

“I need to talk to her.”

“Now that is a good place to start. I think we are done for today.” He bowed forward. “You did well with the sword.” Kento started walking but then turned. “When you talk to her you should get a lot more medicine, who knows when you will have health insurance or even a normal doctor again.”

He nodded and looked back at Kento. “How long until your soup test?”

“Should be another hour.”

He was walking fast now. Joe turned back to him as he opened the gate to the parking lot. *He looks distant, a little more adult right now*, Kento thought.

“Thanks for the lesson.” Joe half smiled.

“My pleasure.” He smiled back and waved.

He noticed a familiar car at the far end of the parking lot. It was Amman’s. *Something doesn’t add up with Amman. How does a nuclear scientist even get out of Iran alive, much less into the United States.*

What are the odds of Amman finding us by chance? He wondered. *I had better get those packages out soon. Too many variables. Too much left to chance.*

Chapter 28

Teressa was alone in her office staring at her laptop, the faint hum of florescent lights the only noise. The whole wing has been practically abandoned since Joe was injured. A shrill ring pierced the silence. Teressa jumped out of her seat. *I'm really on edge*, she thought. *I have to put this behind me.*

"Hello, Dr. Graceland speaking."

"Aunt Teressa." It was Joe's voice on the phone.

"You were supposed to call me yesterday."

"I'm sorry. I was tired after the meeting." He mumbled.

"How did you know I was here? It's Thursday. You know I don't usually work today."

"I tried your house."

Several voices were audible in the background.

"I need to get more medicine."

Strange, he's not due for three more months, she thought. *I shouldn't mention it. This is a perfect opportunity to talk to Joe away from others ears.*

"I'm on my way home I can meet you there?" Teressa lied, she wasn't planning on going home for three more hours.

Teressa heard loud voices through the phone.

"Joe, who is that? Where are you?"

"I'm sorry Aunt Teressa. I can't meet you today."

Oh great, who knows how little protein Joe has left. "Joe if you need more clotting protein, you should meet me today."

She heard yelling in the background. She could swear she heard an Arab accent say the words, 'Stupid children, you're playing with fire.'

"I'm sorry I can't. How about tomorrow night?" Joe's pitch rose with the noise behind him.

The accented voice yelled again. "Stop taking chances then!"

Teressa realized her hands were ice cold. “Joe what is that yelling?”

“I’m at work!” He was yelling over the ruckus. “Some argument over hydraulics!”

Teressa didn’t believe him. *Those people are really angry. It sounds more like an ER than a robot shop.*

“Are you sure everything is okay?”

“I have to go. See you tomorrow night. At your house.”

Click. Teressa held the phone to her ear long enough to hear the dial tone.

Joe has never hung up on me. Somethings not right. Teressa pressed a button on her phone. *He called from the warehouse, she thought.* She pressed the call back button.

The phone rang eight times. *He was just there, she thought.* She dialed his cell phone number. It rang four times and his voice mail answered.

“Hey Aunt Teressa, I’ll call you soon. Leave a message.” She didn’t.

Damn. What if he hurt himself? What if he is on his way here?

She dialed again.

“Hello,” a gruff voice answered.

“Sergio. Something’s wrong with Joe.”

“Oh no, not again.” His voice lifted an octave with stress.

“He called asking for more medicine, and there was some sort of argument going on at the robot garage.”

“He has two months’ worth here,” Sergio reported.

She paused to think. “Maybe he hurt himself?” she wondered aloud. “He might have been trying to go to my place because it’s the closest.”

A risky injury would explain the admonishment she heard.

“Are you there now? Is he coming over? I’ll be right there.”

“No wait,” Teressa said. “He knows I’m at work, so if he has protein there, he’ll come home to get them. That’s the next closest place. I want to make sure he is not really hurt. I’ll be right over.”

It will be good to see Sergio again. And even if Joe is not hurt, I’ll have a chance to talk to him. Find out just what he knows and who he’s told.

“I’ll see you soon. I’ll try Mark’s cell,” he suggested.

“Keep him there. I won’t be long.”

Chapter 29

Kento looked Amman in the eye as he spoke. “Okay forget the governments and terrorists. What would you do then? Would you use the nanites to heal yourself? Or would you just throw them away?”

Amman just stared back at Kento. Joe could swear he saw him twitch.

“Okay, so then why are you here. Why are you helping us? Why did you even show up that first day?”

“To stop my cousin from hurting himself.”

Mark shifted in his seat.

Kento raised an eyebrow, “So blood is what’s important to you. Okay. What if your son was dying? What if your son could die from something unless you had them handy to save him?”

“It’s not worth the risk. They would be taken from me. Allah’s armies cannot be stopped until they are all dead. They answer to a higher calling.”

Joe’s eyes opened wide and his stomach churned. He had never heard the Iranian mention Allah before. He looked at Mark and he looked unfazed. He was angry and confused.

Kento continued his cool questioning of Amman, “Of course they could be stopped. If everybody knew about nanites and how they worked, the fanatics could be stopped. It would be just another arms race and the better economics would win.”

Amman responded bitterly, “The US government is not the best economy anymore. All of Islam would win that arms race. Americans are dumb idealists. They don’t actually know how anything works.”

“You can’t know that, so instead of fighting this battle yourself, you put your faith in elites that exclude you and everyone else. You are the one who is arrogant. So certain that you can judge people to handle your affairs for you. Assuming that the people around you are incompetent, and people you don’t know more wise.”

Kento sounded more driven as he talked.

“I will not listen to this any longer.” Amman threw his chair down as he got up. He grabbed his notes off the table.

“No, they stay here.” Kento motioned to his notes. “I don’t trust you.”

Joe started walking toward Amman. *Damned if I’m going to let him get away.* Mark looked stunned.

Amman looked at Joe. “What are you going to do sick fool? I only have to hit you once.” He scowled as he talked.

Kento reached across the table next to him and grabbed his sword. “I’d be more worried about me.”

Amman blinked. He dropped the papers on the floor and walked to the door. “You will regret this day the rest of your lives!” he yelled.

Amman slammed the door behind him. Joe felt his blood boiling.

Mark’s head was in his hands. His cell phone was ringing, but he ignored it.

“That was inevitable,” Joe said.

“Unfortunately, I think you may be right,” Kento said.

“What will he do?” Joe wondered aloud.

“I don’t think there is much he can do. We don’t know enough about how they are built.”

“What if he has some nanites already?” Mark looked unusually pale.

“I don’t think it changes anything,” Kento said. “It just means we need to get more people involved. I’m mailing those samples tonight.”

Mark looked nervous. “Tonight? I guess we had better get packing.”

“I’ll have to mail the nanites that are still in their soup.” Kento looked distant as he spoke. “Could one of you stay and finish filtering the rest?”

Joe looked at Mark. Mark was sitting with his head in his hands, oblivious to Kento. *He looks completely destroyed,* Joe thought. *Here was his cousin claiming to protect him and acting like a terrorist in the same breath. He probably can’t do a good job tonight. It’s up to me.*

“I’ll stay,” Joe volunteered. “I’ll crash here.”

“Thank you Joe.” Kento smiled. “Mark can show you how.”

Mark looked up and nodded his head.

Kento walked over to the diminished bowl of toxic nanite soup. He spoke as he walked. “If anything happens, if we get separated, we should meet at my dojo in Queens.”

They nodded in agreement.

“Say at the eights. Eight am or eight pm. Whatever is next.”

“Okay.” Mark’s eyes looked bloodshot.

Kento picked up a box of Joe's syringes. He pulled a colorful stack of stamped, labeled envelopes from his pocket. Joe could see there were no return addresses.

Chapter 30

Teressa reached though the door into Sergio's darkened living room. She put her arms around him. "I missed you so much this week."

Teressa held on with all her might. She smelled Sergio's musky smell and realized it was only mixed with a little alcohol. *He's not totally drunk.* Teressa smiled. Teressa held Sergio's hand and led him to his couch.

She sat him down and turned his face by his chin. Staring into his eyes she asked, "Sergio how are you doing? Are you okay?"

He blinked. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm worried about Joe. He's always getting hurt."

Sergio's accent is lite tonight, Teressa thought. *It usually gets worse when he gets drunk.*

"Have you heard from him?"

"No." His eyes widened.

"We should wait for him." Teressa said.

She paused to look into his eyes. *How could this kind gentle man end up with such a raw deal,* she wondered. *His wife dead at a young age. His son detached and sick. His career in ruins, trapped in a country with no more opportunity. Worst of all, I know he loves me.*

"I am involved in some very serious stuff at the hospital, and now Joe is too."

"How?" Sergio looked worried.

"I signed up for an opaque government program to do nanotech research. Once I was indoctrinated, I realized what a terrible mistake I had made."

His eyes were wide.

"Sergio, they have fully functional working nanites. They've had them several years. They claim they want to control the technology and keep it from terrorist hands. I'm not sure I believe that anymore. That's just the beginning."

Her eyes were welling up. She started bawling.

“Oh god I’m so sorry,” she sobbed. “They’re coming after Joe. I just know it.”

“What have you done?” He grabbed her shoulders. His face changed.

“Sergio, you don’t understand. They kept telling me ‘We’ll announce to the public soon.’ I knew the great things these robots can do.”

“Who cares!” He was getting more angry. She could barely talk she was crying so loud.

He knows I love Joe too, he doesn’t get it.

“They can be programmed, to cure Joe.” Her makeup was running.

His face went blank.

“I thought if I was on the inside I could make the release happen faster. These things can cure or ease the pain of many diseases with only a little work.”

He stared at Teresa, he looked ashamed.

“I don’t think they were ever serious about releasing the nanites to the public. They keep complaining about not having fast enough CPUs in them to do serious encryption.”

“Meanwhile people die.” His voice was flat. He was staring into space.

“Exactly,” she sniffled. “I’m beginning to wonder if they will ever be fast enough. All they care about is their ‘property’.”

“I’m sorry I got angry.” He looked down. “How is Joe mixed up in this?”

“I put nanites in him to save him after the accident.”

“Oh that’s just crap! They can’t touch him.”

“I think they can. A doctor on the project disappeared a few months ago. All investigation has been pushed up to at least the FBI, who has discovered nothing. There is a rumor coming out of Guantanamo that he’s there. I don’t know if he’s there, but even if he is it may be legal anyway.”

“Why would they put a patient in jail?”

“If he knows what happened to him, if he knows about the nanites, he’s a terrorist.”

They both stared at each other.

“He knows.” Sergio sounded sure of himself.

“He does,” she said. “He told me so at the hospital, but I couldn’t find out how or who else knows. Our meeting with MIR interfered. I’m so sorry.”

“Your decisions saved his life.”

“They’ve risked it now too.”

“Do you think this has anything to do with the call about the protein.”

“I don’t think so.” She pulled a tissue from her pocket and wiped away her running mascara. “I haven’t been so confused since my sister died.”

“I miss Monica.” He looked broken up.

Seven years ago Sergio had always been there for her. I trust him, like I trust no one else, she thought.

“I was destroyed and you always talked to me as long as it took, until I felt better.” She smiled warmly.

“I couldn’t have gone on without your help. I would have died too.” His eyes wrinkled as he smiled.

She had to get through to him. *Now was the time. He almost drank himself to death when Monica died. If anything happens to Joe, even for only a little while, I don’t think he can handle it. I may lose him forever.*

I need him. I love everything about him.

Teressa grabbed him by his shoulders and looked into his eyes again. “Do you really think she wanted you to be alone? I don’t. I love you. I want you in my life. It kills me to see you hurting yourself for something that isn’t your fault.”

She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

She whispered in his ear. “We don’t have to be alone. Joe is grown. It’s okay now.”

He stared into space. *He looks totally lost,* she worried. *I can’t help it I need him now. I need to be closer to him. I can’t stand the loneliness.*

Sergio broke his trance. He leaned in and kissed her on the lips.

She started to cry.

“Oh no, I’m sorry.” Sergio looked worried.

She grabbed his arms playfully. She smiled warmly.

“No, no, it’s okay. It’s good,” she looked him in the eye, “I forgot what hope felt like.”

Chapter 31

Joe's hand hurt. *It feels like a zipper pushing against it*, he thought. Joe opened his eyes and stared at the glare peeking in the crevices of the pillow. He awkwardly pulled his hand free from the zipper on his leather jacket. He lifted his head and knew where he was before his eyes could see. He could smell the hydraulic oil.

I'm at the shop. I must have passed out.

He heard typing. *Only Mark types that fast. What is he working on?*

Suddenly he realized, *I never finished last night*. He sat up with a start, nearly falling off of the shop's cheap cot like bed.

Mark looked up from a computer at the disheveled Joe.

"Hi Joe. I went home last night and I couldn't sleep. So I came back here and found you passed out. So I finished filtering and grouping the nanites."

"Wow, you're done?" Joe went straight for the coffee machine.

"That's it. They are ready to go." Mark pointed at a pair of syringes on the table. On top of the syringes was Joe's arm PC, its indicator lights blinking like crazy.

"What are you doing to them?"

"Originally I started a routine for nanites to collect extra clotting proteins and disperse them as they get low. I couldn't figure out which were type eight or type nine clotting proteins with the nanites, so I had to give up on it."

"Oh." He was hiding his disappointment.

"But, I thought of something better. I programmed nanites to identify when they are caught in a zone of platelet build up, and to start building a modified ultrasound antenna. I set the nanites to chain together to form a two cell thick nearly impermeable surface. There are a hundred different ways the six Propensky gates can be opened into a male and female configuration to connect together. I even set it up so nanites can communicate upstream so they are ready to connect when they come flooding by."

Joe was in awe.

“Mark you cured me in one day.”

“Not really, the real problem is your body doesn’t make enough clotting protein, it still won’t. Your genetics are still the same, but the nanites can block holes in your injured vessels for you. The key is to use the platelet scabbing mesh as a roadmap for where to chain. Actually you may even scab and heal faster than ordinary people. Well, assuming it doesn’t make an accidental clot worse.”

He wondered if his cure would give him a stroke. *I’m as good as dead if it doesn’t work.*

He interrupted, “Mark.”

Mark kept talking. “Hey, I could still use my protein redistribution code to cure diabetes.”

“Mark.”

“You would just need to absorb glucose and store it as blood sugar went up.”

“Mark.”

“Oh wait, you could probably just modify the glucose fueling subroutine to just touch the glucose and...”

Joe had heard enough. “Mark!” he yelled.

He looked stunned and a little angry.

“Mark, could this ever block an artery?”

His anger washed away. He looked a little embarrassed, “I don’t know.”

“Okay, turn clotting off. Until we test it.”

He was completely thrown, “Yeah, yeah, okay. I think you’re right.”

Tiny hairs all over Joe’s body were standing on end. He felt his stomach churn.

He rummaged around in a small freezer under the table. He pulled out a frozen pizza unwrapped it and scanned its bar code into the microwave. Joe noticed the clock read eleven thirty. *Damn I was out for eight hours*, he thought.

I wonder if my stomach is queasy because of hunger or fear.

The door opened, and sunlight poured into the shop as Kento walked in.

“Good news!” he exclaimed.

“What is it?” Joe asked. He hoped to distract himself from his well of fear.

“We have someplace to go. When I wrote to one of the labs I sent the nanites to, they permanently invited us to stay.”

“Yeah in the basement.” Mark grimaced.

“For a week. Till they turn us in.” Joe added.

Kento shrugged. “I think it’s for real. I received a voice file from the director of the lab. That file could easily put him on the hook as well.”

“Where is it?” Mark asked.

“Rural Canada. The whole lab has been told en masse, so we could probably travel the building freely.” Kento paused. “Assuming it’s still open when we get there.”

“How will we get there?” Joe asked.

“I don’t know,” Kento replied. “I’d say as quickly as possible. Those letters should start arriving in a couple of days.”

I have to say goodbye, Joe thought. Oh no. I forgot to call my aunt back last night. I have to go see her tonight and warn her. Joe thought about Lucy crying on his shoulder. Will I ever see Finny again? How about my father?

“I need to sleep a couple of hours. Please wake me at two o’clock.” Kento walked toward the cot.

“You didn’t sleep?” Mark asked.

“No I was riding all night. I had envelopes to mail.”

“Huh?”

“I wanted to be certain so I mailed two copies to each location. I mailed one copy from random mailboxes around here and rode to Jersey, Pennsylvania, upstate and Connecticut to mail the second copy.”

Both Joe and Mark’s eyes were wide. Joe smelled Kento’s body odor as he walked by.

“They would have to stop all northeast mail delivery today to stop every letter. I even used different style envelopes. With luck that won’t happen. I even overnighted a few to be safe.” He sat down on the cot and took his boots off.

“That must have been cold. You could have used the van.”

“It’s okay. I have good gear, and gas is too expensive. We need every dollar.”

Man he is tough, Joe thought.

“Kento, it’s done. The nanites are ready for me.”

“Interesting choice of words.” He raised an eyebrow. “You sure you want to do this?”

“Yeah. If I’m going to die in jail, I want to be cured for a day.”

“You won’t go to prison. We will get out of the US. I have guaranteed the cat is out of the bag, so I’m responsible for your safety.” Kento’s voice was a little hoarse.

“I thought you said you could trust your contacts,” Mark reminded Kento.

“I thought you said we could trust your cousin,” Joe said to Mark.

“No. I said I can trust him. He didn’t threaten me last night.”

“Likewise, I said we can trust my contacts,” Kento said. “I have no idea about their coworkers, or their families, mail departments or their I. T. people. I mailed

hundreds of samples last night and sent encrypted messages to as many people. Somebody somewhere will go to the police.”

“That’s better than airmailing nanites to 1–800 terrorist,” Joe remarked.

Mark’s accent got thicker. “Amman hates those religious fanatics. If he did anything, he probably went to the cops.”

“He told you he hates religious nuts?” Joe asked.

Mark sat silently.

“If he went to the cops last night we’d already be in jail.”

Mark did not respond, obviously brewing.

Joe knew Amman was up to no good. He knew that the only reason he had not yet spread mayhem was a lack of opportunity. Joe had seen that pride in men before. Last night’s demonstration was bravado, and that never ended well.

Mark broke the silence. “Your Dad called me last night looking for you.”

Joe sighed, “Thanks.”

They sat silently with their heads down, thinking. Kento started to snore.

Chapter 32

“Okay Joe. Just like the last one.” Mark’s voice was tense.

Joe’s arm was propped up on the table. Mark inserted the syringe into Joe’s arm and pushed the plunger down.

What if this doesn’t work? I’ve killed my friend and sent us to jail. My family will be questioned and endlessly shamed. I’ll be mistaken for a Muslim fanatic in jail.

What the hell am I doing?

Mark felt as if he were a prisoner of his own body. All his logical faculties were overwhelmed by one loud persistent thought.

I must know how these work.

At least Kento is an accomplice.

“I’m not sure exactly what is going to happen when I activate the oxygen routine. I suspect that you will actually feel short of breath for a while as they recharge. It seems that after they are some percentage full of oxygen atoms, they will start releasing oxygen to your cells as needed.”

“How long till I’m better and not worse?”

“I’m not sure but I’d guess a couple of hours.”

Mark pulled the empty syringe from Joe’s arm. He gave Joe a cotton ball to hold on the wound.

“You said you had a shot recently right?” he asked.

“Yeah a few days ago. I’ve still got at least two weeks.”

“Hold that tight.” He pointed to the cotton ball.

Mark grabbed Joe’s arm computer. He strapped the computer onto Joe’s arm, and handed him his clarks.

“I’ve set up a shortcut for you. Just draw a circle with your finger on the computers LCD, and tap it once to turn the nanites on. Same thing toggles them off. It will take some time for all the nanites to go on or off line as they only get

the signal as they pass by the ultra sound panel behind your computer as they are pumped through your blood stream.”

“Cool,” Joe looked a little nervous.

“So go ahead turn them on,” Kento smiled.

“He can’t yet.” Mark shook his head.

“Here goes nothing,” Joe boomed. He tapped the nanites on.

“Joe wait!” Kento sounded panicked.

“No it’s okay. His PC can send the signal, it just won’t be received. It takes a few hours to build the antennas on his vein walls.”

Kento looked relieved. “I forgot about that.”

“As soon as an antenna happens to built in range of the panel we’ll be able to find out how far oxygenation has come along.”

“So they are on already?” Kento asked.

“Of course.” Mark smiled.

Kento opened his mouth to speak, but instead just shook his head.

Kento you worry too much.

“Put your clarks on,” Mark instructed Joe.

Joe obeyed.

“See that little zero in your upper right hand corner. That’s the percentage of nanites that have received the command to collect and redistribute oxygen.”

“There are two zeros,” Joe observed.

“The number in the upper left hand side is the percentage responsive to the platelet redirection command.”

Joe and Kento stared at Mark, eyebrows raised.

“It’s off, don’t worry, but don’t do the circle and a double tap. That toggles the protein simulation on and off.”

Joe’s jaw dropped.

“That is the dumbest interface ever.” Joe shook his head.

Mark was insulted. “What do you mean?”

“I’m one wrong twitch from death?”

“Oh yea.” “I forgot to fix that.” “I guess that’s pretty bad.”

Great thinking genius, Mark insulted himself.

“Okay I can fix it tonight. But I don’t want to take any chances yet. It will have to wait until, until I’m sure we can communicate with the nanites.”

They were still staring at Mark.

“The ultra sound driver is really unstable. I hacked it to work with our model. If I change anything it may lose contact with the local antennas. I need to watch what is going on.”

This is going to be a couple of long hours. Mark felt flush with fear.

Chapter 33

“You just asked me.” Joe hung his head forward. “I’m fine.”

“Sorry. I, I, just want to be really sure. We’re at one hundred percent. There might be some sort of numeric identity bug.”

“I do feel one thing.”

“What?” Mark looked worried.

“Annoyed.”

Mark leaned back and crossed his arms.

Actually I feel kind of sharp, Joe thought. *I think I like this*. Joe cracked a smile.

“It’s been a half an hour at one hundred. How about we try a test?” Kento suggested.

“You want to bleed Joe? What if it doesn’t work?” Mark looked shocked.

Kento smiled. “Joe, why don’t you hold your breath.”

“Oh.” Mark turned red.

Sometimes it really scares me how Mark thinks, Joe thought.

He began to hold his breath. He stuck his thumb up in air.

Mark shuffled over to his computer to watch the numbers.

“It’s like watching the grass grow,” Mark commented. “No change here.”

Kento looked at his watch. “Forty five seconds, fifty, fifty five, one minute.”

Kento looked up from his watch. “Joe can you normally hold your breath this long?”

Joe shook his head.

“How do you feel?” Mark asked.

Joe shrugged and stuck his thumb up again.

“One minute fifteen seconds.”

“Still one hundred percent.”

Kento looked up at the motionless mechanic. "Try moving around," Kento suggested.

Joe started to do the twist.

Mark and Kento shook their heads.

"How about jumping jacks?" Kento asked sarcastically.

Joe shrugged again. He began to do jumping jacks.

"One minute forty seconds."

Joe resisted the urge to move his diaphragm in tune with his body. The air in his lungs felt hot.

"Two minutes." Kento's eyes widened. "That's my meditation record."

"You didn't breathe for two minutes?" Mark sounded impressed. "The most I can do is thirty seconds, and I meditate all the time."

Joe stopped doing jumping jacks. He gasped for air.

"Wow. Two minutes and twenty seconds with jumping jacks." Kento smiled.

"I wasn't dizzy or out of breath." Joe was breathing a little heavy. "It just." Joe hesitated, "I had to breathe."

"Maybe this is the wrong kind of test?" Kento wondered.

"Why did you stop? It didn't register on the ultrasound." Mark sounded perturbed.

"It was like a reflex," Joe said.

"Perhaps we need to give you air without oxygen," Kento wondered.

Joe imagined himself suffocating in a black trash bag while Mark cheered him on. He shuddered.

"I could run," Joe suggested.

"You're used to running, that might work better," Kento agreed.

"Do laps around the building so I don't lose contact," Mark suggested nervously.

Mark grabbed a LCD tablet and touched it to his PC, which summarily beeped. The contents of his computer's screen and a small graphical keyboard appeared on his tablet as he followed the guys outside.

I wonder how fast I can run? Joe felt his heart beating a little faster. My fastest sprint in school was about an eleven second, one hundred. Can I beat it now or will this just let me run longer? Maybe it won't have any effect at all.

"Nice night for a run. I can barely see my breath." Kento took a deep breath. "Take it easy. We don't want you getting a heart attack because your blood is too heavy or something crazy like that."

"Right." Joe wasn't planning on restraining himself.

Joe walked up to the gate surrounding the parking lot. Purple light from the sunset reflected off of the endless gray concrete and steel. *Now this I'm built for*, Joe thought smiling. He pulled the clarks from his head and put them on.

“Do a walking lap first,” Kento shouted.

Joe wasn't listening. He started jogging clockwise around the building. Within half a minute he reappeared on the opposite side. Kento gave him the thumbs up.

As Joe passed the gate, he thought, *it's time to finally test these things*. Joe picked speed up to a total sprint. Joe felt his legs strain as he pushed forward as fast as his muscles allowed.

Ten seconds later he barreled around the building again.

As Joe came around the building a third time, he realized he wasn't even breathing heavy. He was having trouble keeping his balance, so he began following a larger circle.

Will they give me some kind of signal if I go out of range, Joe wondered.

The percent full indicator in Joe's Clarks changed to ninety nine.

Joe looked over to see Mark and Kento jumping up and down just as he turned the corner. Realizing he was slowing down, he began to strain his thighs again. The blurry backside of the building drifted by as his long sprint continued.

He rounded the corner and noticed Kento was at his motorcycle. Mark was yelling something but a gust of wind filled his ears. He felt his tendons throb as he zipped by the gate.

He heard Kento's motorcycle start as they slipped out of sight again. He was starting to tune out the pain in muscles as he worked to stay upright on his tiny track. *I seem to be going as fast as I ever did*, he thought.

The vector triangles displayed in Joe's clarks jumped to Kento and his motorcycle waiting at the gate. He started to slow down. Kento waved him on frantically.

“Keep going, keep going,” Kento yelled over his racer.

Kento pulled away and rode next to him.

His clarks read back ninety eight percent. He stared at the thin film on his lenses trying to see past his own footfalls.

He looked over at Kento.

“Eighteen miles an hour,” Kento yelled over his exhaust.

Joe smiled, nineteen was his record.

Kento pointed forward with his left hand as he rode. “Run straight as fast as you can.”

He must have seen Joe's battle to stay upright in the sandy parking lot.

He broke away and ran from the shop. He searched for something to drive his legs faster. He cycled through high school bullies and shady relatives. Joe imagined their parkway attackers. Playing the scene through his mind like a movie.

They would kill me for a car.

Then he remembered his meeting with Nathan Jones.

He would kill us all for pleasure.

He felt his adrenal gland pouring fire into his veins. His legs no longer felt strained.

He sped up. He heard Kento's engine rev as he switched gears. He thought he saw his indicator click down again, but Joe couldn't tell for sure. His legs were numb. He watched the ground for potholes as he ran. Joe's chest was heaving, but he didn't feel out of breath. He never ran his fastest, without consciously thinking about breathing.

He saw the entrance to the industrial park coming up fast. *How fast am I running*, he wondered. *I've walked this, it takes fifteen minutes*. He felt fear and exhaustion come over his body as he burned his adrenaline away

Joe slowed his pace to a jog.

Kento stared at him, his motorcycle coasting, mouth agape.

"What?" Joe managed to ask.

"Twenty five miles an hour. You just ran a two and a half minute mile." Kento looked around "I'm sure that's a record."

"I wonder if anyone saw," he wondered.

"I hope not," Kento replied.

Chapter 34

“Mr. Byrd why do you think I picked you for our team?” Scott Conner asked.

“Because I understand the mission sir.” Byrd glanced down away from Scott’s gaze.

“What is that mission?” Scott looked skeptical.

“To, um to build,” Marcus Byrd stuttered.

Scott leaned forward and spoke quietly. “To protect. To protect our patriotic scientists. To protect our way of life. To protect people from themselves.”

“Yes sir,” Marcus exclaimed.

Marcus knew what to say now. Scott smiled to himself. *Here I am, in case he forgets his place.*

“We didn’t push technology to this point. We don’t organize to threaten legitimate governments. But we need to keep the law on the side of the people.”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you know why I’m telling you this?” He spoke quietly.

“You are teaching me sir.”

“Not exactly. I am honing your focus. You will be confronted by many people who have no foresight. They question your motives and accuse you of a thirst for power. We have thought it through and they have not.”

“Yes sir we have.”

“Have you been told about your first mission yet?” Scott asked with his twang.

“No sir.”

“Your first year here will be spent working with the patent office. You will be given full access to all of the superior technologies at Datahold and expected to use your knowledge to identify potential leaks. Do you know how you will do that?”

“No sir.”

“You along with a dozen other lawyers from MIR will pose as patent officers and review all pertinent applications. You will forward a copy of all potentials back to us and intercept all applications clearly in violation.”

“Has anything leaked from MIR before?” The young apprentice looked worried. “I hadn’t heard anything about this.”

“We have an understanding with the DOD and Joint Chiefs of Staff. Betraying MIR is akin to treason and handled in a secret war trial.”

Scott paused and stared at his younger subordinate.

“Are you comfortable with that Mr. Byrd.”

Marcus looked down.

“Yes sir.”

“In that case you are a fine man. I knew you were the best candidate when I saw your service record and your final paper from Yale law. MIR and the United States are lucky to have you helping fight terrorists and terrorist states. The rule of law will prevail.”

“Yes sir.” Council Byrd was grinning.

“How soon until you take your bar exam?”

The phone on Scott’s desk interrupted, buzzing once. “Council Conner, Nathan Jones is here to see you.”

He pressed a button on his substantial phone. “Send him in.”

Nathan has been failing at pinning down Vallone. He had better have some handle on the situation, Scott thought.

The mahogany door swung open as Nathan Jones strode in the room.

“Council Jones. This is council Byrd our latest addition to Datahold. Council Jones is our top lawyer at MIR on criminal action, and war crimes.”

Nathan Jones shook his hand.

“Nice to meet you. Welcome aboard team DH.” Nathan smiled weakly.

Nathan looked right at Scott.

“Mr. Byrd our time is up. Please see Abigail, and she will guide you through the next step.”

“Sir it was a pleasure.” Marcus Byrd smiled while shaking his hand.

“The pleasure is ours.” Scott smiled thinly.

The men watched intently as Marcus walked to the exit.

“Nathan, what the hell are you doing.”

“Scott.”

“We know Vallone knows about the nanites, we know he hates you and MIR and we can’t stop him?”

“The laws in...” Nathan was cut off.

“I don’t care what the law says, we will find evidence when we search! It won’t matter anymore then!”

Nathan stared at Scott.

You better not be glaring at me boy, I’ll put you in a coffin, Scott thought.

“I came here to tell you, I think I’ve got him.” Nathan paused. “I’m pretty sure we can get the warrant now. Its premise is weak legally, but it should be enough for a raid.”

“What’s your angle Jones?” Scott was seething.

“There were a couple of phone conversations. Joe was asking for more protein for his hemophilia ahead of schedule. We know Joe got a shot two weeks ago. Dr Graceland went to his father’s house to wait for him but he never showed.”

“So?”

“Dr Graceland wouldn’t get involved unless he was sick. Vallone has full medical insurance through his aunt.”

“So?”

“So why didn’t he go to the hospital? Maybe he still has nanites in him.”

Scott raised his eyebrows. “He doesn’t still have nanites in him, he wouldn’t know where to start.”

“But with his aunt involved in it he might, and the court doesn’t understand that anyway.”

Scott’s face lit up. “It might just be enough. In case it’s true we’ll need a full swat team at his house, Graceland’s house, and that shop.”

“Yes sir.”

“Don’t let this be a cluster-fuck like that Greenly idiot,” Scott spat.

“Greenly?” Nathan looked confused.

“He’s that dumb fuck who let the UNC carbon servo patent through. Now we’re two patents off from a working public nanite. We have people there, we could have stopped it.”

“I didn’t hear about that sir.” Nathan grit his teeth.

“Of course you didn’t, because you’re nobody.”

Nathan looked furious. “Sir maybe if you let people go home for a weekend and see their family, people wouldn’t make dumb mistakes.”

Scott got red in the face as he yelled in southern slang. “Who the hell do you think you are council. The fate of the world is at stake. We can’t maintain superiority, and all you can think about is what video you’re going to rent this weekend? We need a commitment from you or there will be nobody left to rent it to you, much less to watch it with. You get down to the courthouse now and get that warrant.”

Say no, I dare you, Scott thought. His adrenaline was flowing freely.

“Yes sir.” Nathan was rigid as a board.

“Now get to work and earn your exorbitant pay.”

“Yes sir.”

Chapter 35

Lucy was stroking Joe's hair and kissing his ear. Her soft sheets covered his nude body. Joe felt the small hairs stand up on the back of his neck as she laid her head on his chest. He looked deeply into her brown eyes and felt his heart skip a beat. *Could this be love? It was more than just his boyish yearning, much more.*

Thump. Joe had walked right into a sign post.

That was some daydream, he thought. I nearly smashed my Clarks.

He shook his head. Who knows when I'll get time alone with Lucy again.

Joe's cell phone rang. He looked at the number, it was Kento's cell.

"Hello?" Joe kept walking as he talked.

"Hey Joe, we're here. We ran into a little delay so I'd say it will be an hour and a half before we can meet you back at the shop." Kento's voice faded in and out.

They must be having trouble sneaking the microscope back into storage at the lab.

"Okay. I'll see you at midnight."

"Don't be late. You can plan your backpack while you wait for us."

"I won't," Joe stuttered, "Be late I mean."

"I knew what you meant." He heard Kento's smile.

He hung up.

What will I tell my Dad, Joe wondered. He's going to be disappointed. He'll be so lonely, I may never see him again. What about my aunt? She will be destroyed.

He felt the shame of his actions wash over his body. His nearly teenage mind and body couldn't cope with the weight of how this would change her life.

He decided to think about Lucy and Finny instead. He walked in a daze, thinking about the quiet family life he secretly wanted. Like his parents, he would never have it. *I love Finny so much, he thought. She is such a sweetheart. I could be a good step-dad. I know I could.*

If Lucy and I could have had tonight, I could have convinced her to come with me.

Joe strode on in a mindless morose, on the verge of tears.

As he approached the shop's industrial park, he could swear he could see their building in the distance. A light was on. He pulled his clarks off and rubbed the budding tears from his eyes.

All the lights were on.

"What the hell?" he said to no one.

He slapped his clarks back on and tapped his arm computer. His clarks' HUD came into view. He began to run across the stretches of moonlit parking lot.

A figure hurried out of the shop with an armful of stuff. He broke into the fastest sprint he could. *I have to hold back in case there is a fight, he thought. I wish I hadn't eaten so much dinner.*

The figure climbed into a small red car. Joe recognized him. It was Amman.

Damn that bastard. Now it's on.

Amman started his car and began to drive out of the shop gate. Joe doubled his pace. *It's now or never, he thought.*

His oxygen gauge ticked down.

His ears were filled by the sound of the air rushing by them. He ran so fast his thigh muscles felt as if they were ripping in two. The green arrow displayed in his Clarks, the red car's speed vector, grew longer.

He was losing Joe. He slowed to a jog.

Damn, what is Amman up to, he wondered. He turned around and jogged back to the shop.

He was shocked when he ran through the door. The shop was turned upside down.

Amman's notes. All their slides with nanite samples. The ultrasound equipment. The computers. Even the bowls the nanites were grown in were all gone. Every light was on. Every door opened. Every drawer was emptied on to the floor.

Oh my god, he thought. The lawyer was right. The extremists will stop at nothing. His stomach sank to the floor. It's my fault. Who knows what he'll do with it. How many people will die.

He was starting to sweat.

Okay Joe keep your cool. Where did he go?

He started rummaging through the contents of the empty drawers. *What am I doing, he thought. What am I looking for?*

How long has Amman been planning this?

He reached for his phone. He dialed Mark.

“Hello?”

“Amman broke in. He took everything.”

“What?! When?”

“When I walked to town to get dinner.” Joe started rummaging through the piles again.

“Did he take my computers?”

“Everything.”

“Oh god.”

“Exactly.”

“Do you know where he’ll go?”

“I,” Mark paused, “Don’t know.” He trailed off in fear.

Kento’s voice came on the phone, “Joe what happened?”

“Amman robbed us.” Joe walked in circles kicking through piles of papers, wires and silicon circuit boards.

“How do you know?”

“The shop is trashed.”

“I mean how do you know it was Amman?” Kento’s voice was cool and even.

“I saw him leave.”

“Did he see you?” Kento asked.

Joe paused and raised an eyebrow. “No he didn’t.”

“Do you know where he is going?”

He recognized a pile as the contents of his personal drawer. *My roll of cash is missing. Where are my tickets*, he wondered.

“Joe, stay with me.”

Joe hunched over and sifted through the pile. Throwing things across the room.

His throat felt dry. Guilt washed over him. In seconds his guilt turned into fear and then rage. *How can I be in this situation*, he thought. His mind raced searching for anything outside himself. *The whole thing is not logical*, he thought, *how can curiosity lead to something so terrible*.

“Joe?”

“The Olympic trials.” His blood boiled as he spoke.

“How do you know?”

“I’m missing my tickets. They start tonight.”

His voice was excited. “How far are you?”

“I’m not sure, maybe an hour.” He raised his voice a little. “Don’t jump to conclusions.”

He trotted over to the key table by the door. One set of keys lay beside Kento's motorcycle helmet.

"I need your bike."

"Joe you don't know how to ride it."

"I rode once," he paused, "In a parking lot."

"Riding around the parking lot does not prepare you to chase down a car on a parkway. No. You'll get hurt and arrested. You'll be shipped off to Guantanamo for life. We'll never see each other again," the sound of his voice changed as he changed to speaker-phone.

"I have to try."

He sounded parental, "Joe you don't know he is going to attack anyone. How could he make them into a weapon in a half an hour?"

Mark chimed in, his Indian accent thick with stress. "What if he planned this? From the beginning? He'd have the same time we did. He could even draw on our progress and add to it."

Kento said, "That's possible. But why strike so soon?"

"Surprise," Joe said flatly.

"Nobody even knows nanites exist yet. He could destroy trust in the government. The Feds couldn't protect people from a nanite attack without telling them the truth. Total chaos would ensue..." Mark trailed off again.

"How did he know about the tickets? Why didn't he take them sooner?" Kento inquired.

"Surprise. He could have found them when I brought them here." Joe's voice trembled slightly.

"Something's not right." Kento seemed to be thinking out loud.

"I'm so sorry." Mark sounded ashamed.

Joe was convinced. He grabbed Kento's helmet and keys. He flicked the lights and pulled the door shut behind him. Joe paused and remembered the night Lucy quit. *Like the shop mattered anymore*, he thought cynically.

Chapter 36

I've ridden a motorcycle a little. I test drove a 454 in a foot of snow for Sun Auto. I can do this.

“Kento, I need your bike.”

“Joe don't. That bike is dangerous. It really is a crotch rocket.”

“He must be stopped.”

“What will you do if you catch up to him. How can you stop him?”

“I'll think of something.”

“Riding a bike in first gear in the parking lot is different than weaving through New York traffic.”

“Clutch, shifter, brake, gas. Same as a car.”

He was hunting around for where to insert the key as he talked.

The phone was silent.

“Okay Joe. Listen to me very carefully first.”

He tried to clear his mind. It didn't work.

“On the left you have a shifter and clutch. The clutch is the bicycle style lever on the left handle bar. Held down it's out of gear, released it's in gear. Try it now with the bike off.”

He grabbed the clutch and released it.

“Okay.”

“That is the most important control on the bike. It is a wet clutch, you won't wear it out. Accelerate and decelerate with the clutch, not the throttle. If you forget, you will launch the bike into the air. To control the bike, control the clutch. If you launch the bike into the air it will land on your head. If you must crash, lean the bike over and lay it down. Do you understand?”

“Yes”

“On the lower left is the shifter. Down is down, and up is up. Neutral is between first and second gear. You should only let go of the clutch, when the

stopped bike is in neutral. On the right the pedal is the rear brake and the lever is the front brake. The right handle grip is the throttle. Do you understand?"

"Yes"

"There is an emergency stop switch which is currently off. You'll need to press it. It's a red button."

"Okay," he pushed the button.

"Can you repeat that for me?"

Joe's mind was buzzing.

"No."

"The most important thing is?"

"Baby the clutch."

"Right," he sounded encouraged.

He turned the ignition key. The bike's paint faded from yellow to black, red and yellow flame graphics started dancing across its tank fairing and fenders. The motorcycle looked alive.

"Nice flame job." He was impressed.

"I leave it off. You pressed the wrong switch. The switch at the center of the handlebars toggles the graphics, the kill switch is on the right."

Mark's voice chimed in. "He's going to die isn't he."

"I'm not going to die."

He pushed the button on the right.

"Wish me luck." Joe smiled.

"Keep your cool. Try to wait till he parks before you try anything. Call for help if you track him down."

"Later." Joe hung up the phone and put it in his back pocket.

He pulled the pair of gloves out of the helmet and put it on. He climbed on the flickering bike. He put his foot on the brake and his hand on the clutch and turned the ignition key.

His heart stopped, but nothing happened. Eventually his heart started beating again.

He pushed the foggy visor up and adjusted his Clarks. Joe's eyes floated around landing under the kill switch.

"Oh." He shook his head cartoonishly. "The start button."

The engine roared as Joe revved the throttle way to far.

Okay. Ease the throttle and slowly back off the clutch.

The bike went nowhere.

What the hell is it now, he wondered. He looked at his watch, ten minutes had passed and he hadn't driven a foot.

Joe noticed a green “N” lit up in his speedometer.

Oh, it's in neutral. Okay I'm stupid. Maybe this whole thing is stupid, he thought.

He clicked the gear shift down with his left foot. He slowly eased into the throttle and the clutch. The engine slowed a little as the gear started to catch. He compensated with more throttle. He felt his heart starting to beat faster.

The rear tire squealed, the kickstand clanked into place under the bike, and Joe took off into the night like he was shot from a gun.

Chapter 37

Sergio had a look of pure bliss on his face. Monica Vallone was sitting beside him on the couch stroking his hair. He was upset about something just one minute ago, but it didn't seem to matter now. He was happy.

Joe wanted to be happy too. He ran from the stairs to them. He wanted to make his father smile. He wanted to be touched and loved by his mother. Joe imagined himself as a boy running to them. *I can reach them*, Joe thought.

A horn honked.

Joe was riding Kento's motorcycle on the Grand Central Parkway. He snapped back to reality, ashamed of his childish longing for comfort.

I'm so cold, he thought. He shivered.

I don't know where Amman is. I don't see his car. I think I know where he is going, but can I get there before him? If I want to catch him, I had better start passing in between cars.

This guy doesn't know what he is doing, he thought. A green triangle pointed towards his lane, indicating a change of direction. *I'd better swerve around him.*

The motorcycle drifted into the breakdown lane as it accelerated.

He noticed three cars lined up pacing each other up ahead. He decided to pass in between the left and middle lane. *Those two aren't paying attention.* He felt the front wheel lift a little as he pushed it up to ninety.

He spooked one of the drivers, a blue compact twitched as he passed.

This is seriously dangerous, he thought, *I hope I can stop him.* His heart was pounding.

He saw a blue triangle headed right for him. With a quick glance he swerved into the middle lane. Then just like that the triangle was gone. He checked his mirrors. Nothing. No cop, no car at all. *Am I tired?* He paced the traffic around him. He wiggled his toes and fingers as he rode. They were cold, but not numb yet.

He felt adrenaline shoot through his veins. That wasn't the Clarks, but the bike. My eyes were tricked by the flames. He reached his hand forward through the wind and hit the graphics button. The bike turned yellow and black.

Now I can trust myself a little more, Joe thought.

He looked up from the motorcycle's body and saw a flash of red light to his left. He immediately swerved into the right lane of traffic. He was staring at the brake lights of a blue Volvo. He reached for the front brake and felt some loss of control as he slowed. His foot reached down for the back brake.

The rear tire locked up.

His mind screamed in fear as the bike screeched to the left and the right. He struggled to control the sliding bike. He took his foot off the rear brake and the motorcycle began to whipsaw. He felt the bike lurch, and he had sudden memories of the Camaro going end over end.

He leaned the bike onto its side, and slid.

He tried to hold his leg to the underside of the bike as he slid along the road. He shifted his weight onto his shoulder where his leather jacket covered him. His Clarks lost understanding of the now sideways road and all vector marks turned to X's just like his last accident.

He saw the red light as he slid. It was a transparent graphic audio analyzer LCD film on a red Nissan's rear window, just like his Clarks and the bike. *I must have seen the Nissan's bass booming,* he thought.

Damn it, what a stupid way to die.

He slid to a stop on the shoulder. He immediately reached for his cell phone. *It's in my pocket,* he thought. *At least I can tell them to leave without me.*

He climbed out from under the bike and was relieved to see it was still running and in gear.

Several cars stopped as Joe pulled his gloves and helmet off. His right leg was bleeding where his jeans ripped. He could feel the soreness in his right shoulder under the leather. He walked over and pressed the emergency stop button. The engine shut down, and the rear wheel stopped spinning.

So that's what it's for, he thought.

"Are you okay?" One woman asked getting out of her car.

He was confused. Usually he wouldn't be okay. He was bleeding pretty bad from his leg and he was sure his shoulder was hurt too. Joe rubbed it.

A man shut his car off and asked as well. "Son, do you need help?"

I am okay, he thought. *I don't even think I'm woozy.*

"I think so," he grinned.

Joe felt his meekness drain away.

“In that case, you were driving like an asshole back there. Somebody gonna die? What’s the big idea buddy.”

He recognized the twitchy driver’s car.

The man started walking toward him. “What could be so fucking important that you have to swerve through us like that.”

He spoke without thinking, “Terrorists,” he paused, “are going to blow up the Olympic trials.”

“Then call the cops. Why be a hero?”

Great. Now what do I say?

Joe continued his confession, “They will arrest me.”

“Are you telling me *you* are a terrorist?” The large forearmed man approached Joe.

“I’m calling the police.” The woman shouted from a distance. She got back in her car.

Oh great, that helps a lot lady, he thought. His mind was racing.

“I am not a terrorist.”

“How do I know that?” The man was red in the face. He was inches from Joe.

He felt almost panicked. *I don’t have time to tell him the truth. He wouldn’t understand even if I did.*

He felt a strange calm come over his body. *This is bigger than me,* he thought. *I know what I have to do. A thousand, no ten thousand lives depend on me. I must do this. He flexed his muscles to ready himself.*

Joe’s phone rang.

“Hello,” he stared into the man’s eyes as he picked up his phone. He felt the man’s hot breath on his face.

“Joe, I know where Amman is,” Mark was yelling, “He just stopped at my Dad’s apartment ranting about my last chance to get out.”

“Is he still there?”

“No he just left. He’s probably not even on the parkway yet,” Mark sound like he wanted to cry.

The man started to back away with fear on his face. The man seemed to realize he was serious. Joe figured he heard.

“I’m on my way.”

He hung up the phone and lifted up the bike. He looked it over. The bike was gray where the LCD film was scraped away, but it didn’t seem to be leaking anywhere. The damage seemed superficial.

He felt a tickle on his wrist. He looked at his hand as drop of blood ran into his palm. *How long will I last before the nanites don’t help anymore.* He looked

down, his ripped blue jeans leg was soaked with blood.

If I lose consciousness I'm as good as dead.

He sighed to himself. *I guess I have to trust you Mark, don't let me down.*

He reached his right arm across his body and performed a circle and double tap motion on his arm computer.

He put his helmet back on and slid his Clarks into it.

The second HUD read four percent.

I wonder what that means, he thought.

He started the damaged bike and launched back onto the parkway.

Chapter 38

Nathan Jones was standing backstage just out of sight of Scott's audience. He was sure Scott saw him. Just a few minutes ago he looked straight at him and gave him a wink. He peered around the curtain at the audience of fifty top ranking Generals and Admirals, all in full dress. They sat under a red white and blue banner on the far wall that read "Welcome to the MIR Age."

He needed to talk to Scott right now. He thought about interrupting the whispering speech reciter behind him, but imagined Conner repeating his warnings about Vallone verbatim. *I've seen what happens when Scott's teleprompter goes dead, and it isn't pretty.* Nathan smiled to himself.

All he could do was wait and listen.

Scott spoke with a pronounced twang. "Traditional rules of warfare no longer apply. American soldiers wearing our exceptional armor and fully populated with our latest blood enhancement serum is no mere chemistry, but a directed machine capable of enduring heavy small arms fire for weeks, injured, and with no supplies. Severely injured men will be able to hibernate for three hours with no heartbeat until help arrives, and with Datahold's latest developments men could fight in an enhanced physiological state without drinking fresh water for three days and not eating for two weeks."

Scott paused while the crowd murmured. He swore he heard someone laugh out loud.

He talked over the murmurs, "Gentlemen, the United States armed forces will be unstoppable. It will be as if the lord himself will guide our bullets and cast our many enemies aside."

He wondered what God really thought of Scott and MIR. He shuttered and forgot it.

"In just a few short months, I will call upon you to each volunteer some of your best men, to train in the new techniques required to realize the full potential

of the enhancement serum. In the meantime I must remind you this is top secret and repeating anything you heard here tonight to the uncleared is akin to treason.”

Scott looked as stern as he could muster.

“Once again, thank you for agreeing to push this meeting up. I still expect to meet at our original time in a few weeks to begin planning initial testing, and to fill you in on some of the details I have omitted as a courtesy to your time. Please extend my apologies to your families for any disruption and inconvenience this may have caused, but as you can see this can be a deadly tool in the hands of the enemy. Good night and safe travel home.”

Scott smiled and waved as he walked off stage. His audience applauded.

As soon as he had walked past the curtain the smile dropped off his face. He grabbed Nathan’s arm and began pulling him away from the stage.

“You tell me the reckless son of a bitch that caused me to wake up every four star General in the world is dead or in jail.”

“Close enough sir. We’ve got a panicked call to Vallone about an Iranian named Amman.”

“What?” Scott looked intrigued.

“I did some digging, It seems Mark Mavdavi has an Iranian cousin.”

“Go on.” He was smiling.

“Amman Ibrahim is a political refugee. He was a nuclear scientist for the Iranians. He cut a deal with the US for political asylum. He was practically a slave in Tehran. Vallone and Mavdavi seem to think he’s some kind of terrorist threat.”

He was grinning now. “Is he?”

“Most likely no. This is a man without a country. The Iranians hate him. He needs the US more than we need him. He has had access to a couple of CIA honeypots after all ties were cut and did nothing. He probably panicked when he realized what they were involved in. I’m checking now to see if he has turned himself in yet.”

He whispered letting his language slip. “Just wonderin, how’d ya find him?”

“Amman stands out like a sore thumb on the list, once I had his name.”

“Well done Jones. Get up there and kick some doors in.” He turned to leave, paused and turned back. “No wait, get the locals on it now and catch up later. When the dust settles, take a week of R and R.”

“Sir, what if they are using the nanites? They could be a threat.”

“Don’t be an idiot Jones. A mechanic? They don’t have the balls or the brains. Never believe your own bullshit, Jones.”

Nathan nodded.

He split off from Scott walking further backstage. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed. "Laurence, bag them all. Oh and make sure you make 'armed and dangerous' crystal clear."

Chapter 39

Lucy was sitting behind her computer, squinting at the ledger on her desk. She was determined to leave with a pile of money. *I want to leave with Joe*, she thought, *but I can't leave at a loss. Finny was supposed to go to kindergarten next year. I wonder where we will be. Can I send her to school or will she need a tutor?*

The doorbell rang. *Damn it, they'll wake Finny.* Lucy hustled to the front door trying not to lose a slipper. Conscious of her sheer nightgown, she peered through the peephole. Mark and Kento stood on the front porch looking shifty.

She opened the front door.

Kento raised one hand and gave her an awkward wave, eyebrows raised. Mark ogled at her breasts.

Lucy felt tiny arms wrap around her leg.

Somebody was missing.

"Where's Joe?" Lucy asked.

Both Kento and Mark began to speak, but Mark got the jump.

"We're not really sure," Mark said. He was talking to her breasts.

Kento shot him a look. Mark looked up and started blushing, eyes wide.

That was too awkward. Lucy knew something was wrong. She felt weak, but held herself up by the doorframe.

"Can we come in," Kento inquired.

"Sure." Lucy calmed her breathing.

Lucy picked up her sleepy daughter and slung her over her shoulder.

"Have a seat." She pointed at the living room.

Lucy carried Finny to her bed and tucked her in.

"Mommy, where's Joe?"

"I don't know."

"Is he okay?" Finny asked.

This girl has a sixth sense, Lucy thought. She shuttered.

"I'm sure he is." She lied. "Goodnight." Lucy kissed her forehead.

Lucy was very careful to close the door as quietly as she could.

She turned to Kento and Mark. "Would you guys like anything to drink?" She was trying to feel them out.

"Do you have cola?" Mark smiled awkwardly.

"Sure." She smiled.

She heard Kento whispering behind her as she walked into the kitchen. "We don't have time for a drink."

She came back with Mark's cola. "Thanks," he said sheepishly.

Kento broke the quiet. "Lucy we need your help. We need a ride to my dojo."

"Why didn't you follow Mark like you planned?"

"Joe has my bike."

Lucy felt faint again.

"So an accident prone, macho, hemophiliac, that doesn't know how to ride a motorcycle, is at large with your sport bike?"

She felt surprisingly calm as she said it.

Kento replied, "Yes."

"Actually we know where he is. He's trying to chase down Amman on Grand Central Parkway," Mark volunteered.

Kento just shook his head.

She could see there was more.

"Oh no, go on," she could feel the tears welling up.

Kento continued with tired eyes. "Amman ransacked the shop. Joe saw him leaving with everything he could stuff in his car. Joe thinks he's going to the Olympic trials to perform some sort of nanite terrorist attack."

"What do you think?" Lucy didn't really care.

"It's too soon for Amman to launch an effective attack. I think Joe's just feeling guilty."

He's feeling guilty about me, she thought. Tears were flowing down her cheeks.

Mark hung his head. Kento's brow was furrowed as she started to cry.

Mark's phone rang. He looked stunned. He pulled the phone from his pocket and looked at the number.

"Is it Joe?" Lucy asked.

Mark didn't answer, looking stupefied.

Lucy grabbed the phone from Mark. "Joe is that you?"

"Lucy."

"What stupid thing are you doing now?"

“I’m at the stadium. I think I see Amman’s car in the parking lot.”

“Forget it. Leave. Even if you stop him you’ll get caught doing it.”

“Lucy, I can’t let him kill these people.”

“You can’t stop him either.”

“I can.”

“Joe what about us?” She started sobbing.

The phone was silent.

“Joe if you don’t turn around right now, we’re though.”

Kento’s and Mark’s jaws were open.

“It’s my fault.”

She cared for Joe now more than ever.

“Fine, then we’re through.”

She hung up the phone.

The room was silent as she fell to the floor and sobbed.

Eventually she stopped crying. She handed Mark’s cell phone back to him.

Kento spoke up. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.”

“Kento, it’s okay we already talked about this. My priorities are still the same.”

Lucy lied.

Mark looked terrified, as if he saw a ghost. “You and Joe, and you broke it off just like that.”

She wiped her eyes, “That’s what I need the cops to think.”

A moment of recognition blinked across Mark’s face. “Oh.” He stared at his phone in a new light.

She knew her tears were real. She worried about how strongly he made her feel.

She wiped her eyes, and took a deep breath. “We had better get going if you don’t want to be arrested where you sit.”

Chapter 40

Joe slipped his cell phone into his pocket and crouched down next to Kento's bike. He pulled off his gloves and held his hands next to the bike's exhaust pipes, rubbing them furiously.

He hid the scraped up bike and the helmet behind a dumpster. He crouched down near the alley's exit and examined the stadium. The parking lot was surrounded by a fifteen foot fence. A security guard in a red pickup truck was driving up and down the lanes of the lot. There were many parked cars, but few people were walking around. *The trials must be almost over by now*, he thought.

Joe stood up and casually walked toward the fence. He crouched down again, this time between a double parked car and a van. He laid on the cold ground and watched the security truck cruise toward him under the van. He felt the weight of exhaustion as he stared at the truck. He ran Lucy's words through his mind as he waited. "It's over."

Damn it Joe, focus. He was furious with his longing for Lucy's forgiveness. *You don't get to be distracted, not you.* He imagined himself more fragile than he was. He remembered fighting exhaustion at Sun auto and thinking to himself 'You're not like the other mechanics. You don't get to be tired. You don't get to make mistakes.'

When Amman gets here he won't waste any time, Joe thought. He peered around both sides of the van into the vast parking lot. *I don't see his car. There is still another quarter of the lot I can't see.*

The truck was driving away from him. He decided it was now or never.

He jumped on the fence and quickly scaled it. He hopped over the top and practically fell to the ground. He walked casually toward the far end of the parking lot. He donned his clarks as he walked, careful to tuck the wire into his leather jacket. *They usually confiscate cameras at these things*, he thought.

He surveyed the lot as he walked searching for red paint among the black,

white and gray cars. Joe noticed he was now walking toward another security truck.

I'm going to get caught out here, he thought. *I need to take a look inside in case he is already here.* He walked in a different direction while still examining the sea of cars.

Joe came across a secondary gate on the side of the stadium. A single gaunt security guard was asleep in a chair, next to a row of turnstiles. Rather than counting his blessings he cursed the guard's slumber. *That's just great*, he thought sarcastically. *Amman didn't even need the tickets, he could have walked right in.*

He slowly opened the door as little as possible, as not to let a cool breeze blow over the slumped man. He snuck past the man's folding chair and hopped the turnstile.

"Hey!"

Joe's heart skipped a beat.

"Hey you! No cameras! Come back here!"

He felt the adrenaline flow through his veins. Sprinting away from the man was practically instinct for him. He ran through the doors and up the main corridor. No guards were in sight. *He has no idea how fast I am*, he smiled to himself. The guard's protests trailed off quickly as he ran past the first seating gate. He rounded the exterior hallway, and opened the door to the next gate he found.

It's good I didn't break a sweat, he thought. Two ushers flanked the doorway he had walked through. They largely ignored him, focused on their tunneled view of the lanky runners making their way around the track. He veered left and casually walked up the stairs to the higher seating.

He emerged on the sparsely populated second level and sat down. He noticed a few empty seats on the first level. *They probably won't even look for me up here*, he thought. *Anyone filming would want a seat on the first level. It's amazing how a guard can care so much about a camera. The real danger was far beyond him.*

Joe read at the number printed on his arm rest, R-2E. *I'm not sure what seat, but I remember I was in H on the second level*, he thought. *Maybe Amman is there.*

He signaled for his keyboard HUD, and began rummaging through his computers files. Filenames scrolled down his HUD, obstructing his view of the track as he typed in the air. Apparently satisfied, he typed stereomag and pressed his pinky down. The semi transparent view of the track was obstructed by a blurry HUDless magnified view.

He held his head very still and the view improved. He panned slowly over the second level and found the section marked with a giant "H". He examined every empty seat, no Amman.

Maybe Amman needed a closer seat, he thought. He looked around the rest of “H”. Nothing. He had just moved on to “G” when his right eye caught a glimpse of a hand reaching toward him. He jumped out of his seat sideways and sliced his hand horizontally through the air to clear his clarks. Two guards were awkwardly lunging toward him. He jumped over the empty seat in front of him, handily dodging them.

These guards were wearing holstered guns. He wondered if the guard at the gate was as well. He couldn’t remember. He jogged up the aisle, away from them, and toward the far staircase in the “R” section.

“Stop!” The guards were drowned out by the cheering crowd.

He tried not to smile. It sounded so desperate. He flew down the stairs and casually followed the inner hallway behind the second level seating. At “B” he climbed down the stairs to the first level. There were no guards checking tickets. *Maybe they were all on the other side looking for me*, he thought.

He found an empty seat on the aisle in the second row. *I can’t turn stereomag back on*, he thought. *I can’t see what’s coming*. He started looking through the audience around him for Amman. *This is like finding a needle in a haystack*, he thought. *Couldn’t Amman wear a turban and robes instead of a T-shirt, oh wait, the Hindis do that. Or is it the Muslims also? I don’t know*. He absentmindedly reached under his jacket to scratch his injured arm.

The scab was hard as a rock. *No wonder I’m itchy*, he thought. *This scab is pulling my skin taught. It feels like strips of steel are welded to me*.

He looked back and noticed a guard had returned to the entrance he had used. No make that two, and three more on the other side. *Crap, I’m cornered*, he thought.

He subtly signaled for his keyboard again. More commands scrolled by the screen and his nanite HUD returned. Then vector arrows appeared on the outside edge of each lens. Then the edges of the clarks’ lenses blacked out, and Joe could see their wide angle images though the clarks peripheral cameras.

They were five rows back. Four. Three.

He jumped up just as they reached the row right behind his.

“Get him!” A distant guard yelled.

It seemed to Joe like time slowed. He squirmed out of reach as he jumped out of his seat. He sprinted forward and leaped in the only direction left to go, over the three foot wall and onto the grass.

“Freeze!”

As he ran he saw their distorted images raising their guns behind him.

He thought he heard a guard cock his gun. *How did I hear that*, he thought. Things seemed to move in slow motion as he started to run. He noticed there was something missing. He realized the stadium was silent.

He jumped on the track next to the Olympic hopefuls. They did their best to ignore his strange participation in the race. Realizing the only reason he hadn't been shot was his proximity to the runners, he accelerated to his fastest sprint.

His heart was pounding.

He spotted the main entrance to the track floor dead ahead. There were no guards in sight ahead of him. He heard the runners breathing, and their shoes lightly scuffing the track as they raced next to him. They seemed to be accelerating. They seemed to be trying to get away from him, the best way they could, by running from him. *I can't let them get ahead*, he thought.

I have to get to that exit before it's blocked, or I'm dead. The realization sent a chill of fear down his spine.

His oxygen HUD blipped down to ninety nine percent. He picked up his pace as fast as he could.

His thighs began to strain against his blue jeans as they pumped. His calves felt unnaturally restrained, bulging in their cotton covering. He began to push himself harder than he ever had. He struggled just to keep his back straight and his body balanced as the speed pitched his body toward the ground.

His diaphragm ached from exertion. Barely able to breath, he saw some very surprised Olympians from the back of the pack in the side of his clarks.

He felt adrenaline flow through his blood like fire. For every two steps the hopefuls took, he took three. A giant grin swept across his face.

I'm beating them.

The stadium was still quiet as he tore past the runners, and toward the large exit off the stadium floor. He could swear there was a second when he was open to a clean shot from the guards as he broke away from the runners. He waited for the desperate shot, but it never came. Joe imagined the stupefied guards staring at him with their mouths open.

He smiled again.

He worked his legs as he tried to slow down. He half stumbled down ramps, and through a mostly empty mens locker room. A few half dressed athletes stared as he ran by in his scratched leather jacket and ripped bloodied jeans. *Great, I really blend*, he thought. *The cops must have been called. I need to get out of here, now.*

He ran down a couple of nondescript hallways. He stopped short as he started to round a corner. A New York City cop was talking on a radio. He was fac-

ing down a parallel hallway to Joe's. He was guarding a double door with an emergency exit sign.

A way out, he thought. He must not think I could have gotten this far yet, or his gun would be pulled out, like the others. His stomach churned with fear as he started toward the cop. A New York City will shoot me, he thought. That's no security guard.

He was hurdling towards the door behind the distracted man. *I'm going to run right behind him, he thought. One of his feet stumbled a little. One sneaker squeaked. The cop turned just as Joe was in arms reach. The cop dropped the radio as he reached for him. He twisted in mid air sliding just out of his grasp.*

"Ooofff." He slammed into the bar in the middle of the emergency door, opening it. The over extended officer fell to the ground. Falling back into a run, he darted up the stairs. He heard rustling and the safety on the cops gun click, but he was already out of sight up the stairs.

"Freeze!" The cops order was already trailing off in the distance.

He ran up two flights of stairs and came to a fire door and paused. *If I go out this door the alarm will sound and they will know where I am, but the stadium will empty out and give me cover.*

He caught his breath, reared back, and kicked the fire door open. He broke into a sprint in the open parking lot. He could swear he heard the air he displaced whoosh as he ran by the nearest aisle of cars.

No alarm, he thought. I guess they trap it before they send out the evacuation signal. Damn. He heard screeching tires in the far side of the parking lot. He glanced at the rearview displayed at the edge of his clarks. A tiny red pickup truck was growing larger fast. Vector marks appeared with sharp angles, indicating the truck would catch up soon. His oxygen count blipped down to ninety two percent.

He felt very tired. *I can't give in. I have to keep going.* He felt one of his legs start to cramp up. He saw a second red pickup coming from the other side of the stadium, speeding toward him as well.

He slowed to a jog. The cramp in his right leg was getting worse now. *I've got to keep running. I wonder if I was hurt in the motorcycle wreck. It had been years since I cramped up before I was winded.*

"Hey, you stop!" A tall black cop was running toward him from his side about one hundred yards away. His gun was drawn, but Joe was pretty sure he couldn't hit a billboard at that range.

A loud noise pierced the night. Screeching tires ended in a hideous crash. Foregoing his display, he turned his head as he jogged.

The trucks had crashed into each other. It seemed obvious what happened. They could both see him running, but their view of each other was blocked.

“Yes!” he yelled.

Inspired, his pain melted away. He pushed himself up to a run. He was nearing the tall fence and putting distance between himself and the cop. He jumped five feet up on the fence and climbed to the top in two seconds.

At the top of the fence, he hesitated. A lifetime of his fragile nature overshadowing his ability, had conditioned him to think twice.

He jumped from the top of the fence to the ground, landing on his hands and pulling into a roll on the concrete sidewalk. He sprang to his feet and ran to the ally where the bike was stashed.

He saw the distant cop in the side of his now crooked clarks as he ran across the street and into the ally. Now he had fifty yards and a fifteen foot fence between them. *He never had a chance*, Joe thought. He smiled a crooked grin.

Chapter 41

Joe was sitting alone in the poorly lit parking lot behind Kento's Dojo. There was almost no background noise, pretty strange in metropolitan New York. The motorcycle was parked on its kickstand next to him. The long shadows would be eerie if he didn't welcome the cover so much. The cops had to be looking for him now. He hoped they didn't spot Kento's license plate on his way here. If not there was no connection he could think of to look for him at the Dojo.

He was leaning against the Dojo's steel back door. He had given the secret knock to no avail. Kento and Mark never arrived.

Where was everyone?

Amman wasn't at the stadium, and Joe was sure he intended to betray them in the biggest way he could. Somebody would die this week because of Amman, Joe was sure of it. He'd be there to stop it if he just knew where to look.

Where were Kento and Mark? We were supposed to be skipping town tomorrow. They should have been here hours ago.

He pulled his phone from his pocket. He called Mark's phone for the twentieth time since he arrived. It rang four times and went to voice mail.

"Hello, this is Mark. You must be one of my many fans."

He hung up.

His cell phone beeped twice, indicating a message. The phone's LCD read 'Sergio Vallone called.' *It was four in the morning, what could Dad want,* Joe wondered.

He called his voice mail.

"Hello, Joe" Only Joe's father's voice grumbled like that. "I need to talk with you. It's, well it's about your aunt and I. Please understand, I love you and I miss your mother."

His stomach dropped. His Dad sounded very drunk.

"Joseph, your aunt and I love each other. Please come and see me. I need to

talk to you. Please be my son. We need you.”

He pretended not to understand what the message meant, while the news sunk in.

A cheerful voice taunted him. “Press seven to delete this message. Press four to save this message. Press five to.”

He stared into space as he pressed the button to hang up the phone.

For a second he felt happy for them. Then he hated himself for it.

I never want to talk to my dad again. Joe was breathing heavily. Why did he do this? Why is he doing this to me. Why would he wait all this time just to torture me with this?

It dawned on him.

What if they were waiting all this time, just to tell me now? How long did my Dad feel this way? Why didn't he tell me?

He stood up and started pacing.

Can't they find someone else? Why didn't Aunt Teressa and Dad date other people all along?

He stopped dead.

Did Dad just marry my mom to get to her sister? That dumb drunk!

He punched the door. The metal door rattled loudly.

“Fuck!”

He reached for the helmet and gloves.

That's it, I'm going over there.

He shook with anger as he setup and started the bike.

As Joe tore out of the parking lot, he saw Lucy driving the team van around the corner.

He saw her eyes light up as he whizzed by her. His rage and the bike's throttle ebbed for just a moment. He almost hit the brakes, instead he shook his head and nailed the throttle.

Chapter 42

Joe pulled up to the boarded up house where he had given the beggar fifty dollars just a couple weeks ago. He wondered if the man was sleeping in the house tonight. He shut the bike off and pushed it through a broken fence into the backyard. He pushed it behind an overgrown bush, and tossed the scrapped up helmet behind it.

He heard a siren and peered through the bush at the road. A state trooper raced by. *What is a state trooper doing around here*, he wondered. *County cops handle the local stuff.*

He decided to play it safe and traveled through backyards rather than walk on the open sidewalk. He hopped the fence into the next yard. He slipped on his clarks as he trotted through the yard. His HUD read one hundred percent, and ninety six percent. He suspected that meant four percent of the nanites were used up in his bizarre high tech scabs but he couldn't be sure.

He glanced at his ripped bloody jeans as he walked through the dark backyard. What would his Dad think of his obvious injuries? Could he calm him without fully explaining?

Who cares. He won't even notice when I'm done with him. He was furious with himself for feeling any concern.

He snuck from yard to yard as he made his way to his father's house. He only had to double back once when an attentive dog started barking through the back door at him. Surprisingly, no one woke up despite setting a half dozen motion lights off.

He thought to himself, *The motion lights don't help if you don't wake up.* He smiled a little. His ten minute journey reminded him of sneaking home after all night drinking binges in high school. *Nothing ever really changes*, he thought comforting himself. His smile grew a little broader.

Joe noticed the flashing lights a couple of blocks away. The red and blue lights

reflecting off the trees were still visible against the near dawn sky. He sped up as he darted across the street to his block. He craned his neck and stood on his toes, but couldn't see over the tall fences in the neighboring back yard.

I have to find out what is happening. I have to get closer.

He hopped the neighboring fence into the corner houses back yard. He followed a winding path along the back of the house and ducked behind a shrub on its side.

Across the street were ten cop cars and a SWAT van in front of his Dad's house. Fifteen different cops were crouched behind patrol cars pointing guns at the front door. Glowing spotlights highlighted every crack in the houses aging paint. He counted four visible SWAT team members crouched on the side of the house.

A man with a megaphone stood up enough to clear the police cars hood. "Joseph Vallone, this is the police, come out slowly with your hands up."

Nobody called Joe, Joseph, and it happened twice in one day. *Weird*. He was relieved to hear his name. At least Dad didn't do anything stupid when he was drunk.

A minute passed as Sergio came to. His progress through the house was obvious, as the trail of lit windows slowly wandered down to the front door.

Twenty guns adjusted their aim as the wooden front door opened. Sergio looked totally disheveled. His hair was practically standing on end. His shirt was buttoned cock-eyed. He blinked twice in the blinding light. He was stumbling a bit. He was still drunk.

"Sir we need to see your hands right now."

Sergio pushed the screen door open with his right hand. He lifted his left hand to shield his eyes from the spotlights. It was holding a bottle.

It seemed like all twenty guns shot him three times each.

He stood up screaming, "NO, DAD!"

Joe's voice thundered up and down the street like the voice of god.

Blood sprayed everywhere from Sergio's wounds. He could swear he looked toward his voice before his head fell.

He was frozen in place while his brain rewired itself, trying to cope with the bizarre horror.

The police stared at him with strange recognition.

One distant officer yelled out, "That's him."

His tear stained eyes blinked to life with purpose, just as the guns all turned toward him.

"Halt!"

"Don't move!"

“Police”

The voices overlapped each other. He didn't care what they said. They were just pawns, of no consequence.

Just like his Dad.

He turned around with a start, and began to run.

Guns started to fire from the crowded roadblock. Joe heard bullets hitting trees and cars.

Blood sprayed from his left shoulder. A bullet had passed right through it. It didn't matter. He was really good at one thing in battle, running.

I'll just run until they kill me. That's how I'll die with honor.

His wound was pouring blood down his chest. He picked up his pace.

His clarks, still configured with the wide angle rear cameras, showed he had run out of their sight. The gunshots promptly stopped.

He pounded the pavement, he heard parked cars whoosh by as he ran. He heard squealing tires. A patrol car came flying around the corner.

Joe darted into a backyard on the next block. The car screeched to a stop in front of the house. The doors opened as two cops got out and ran after him.

“Freeeezeee!”

Any second the shock will hit me, and I'll fall over dead, he thought. He hurdled the chain link fence separating the yards guiding his jump with his hurt arm. He noticed it was very stiff. *I shouldn't have used that arm. That was dumb.*

He returned his focus to running. The cops were falling behind.

He bolted down a strange driveway and flew up the street. *Cover is important, but speed is my advantage. I need to use it,* he thought.

He was surprised that he didn't see any cops for that entire block. He looked at his wound as he ran. The blood from his shoulder soaked the top of his jeans, but seemed to have stopped there.

His clarks read ninety one percent, and sixty seven percent. *That can't be good.*

He heard sirens in the distance. *I have more distance than they could imagine. I need more cover.* Joe ran up another driveway. He kicked a rickety wooden fence open, splintering it.

He sprinted across the yard. As he raced past the house a pit bull chased him. *This was the house with the dog,* he remembered. The dog lagged behind by ten feet. He leaned on his right arm as he hopped the fence. He had trouble moving his left arm for balance.

The bike was only two blocks away. He was in a haze as he ran. He felt numb.

Joe heard a man cursing and a gunshot followed by a yelp. The police had found the dog and probably killed it in self defense.

He looked down at the pavement behind him for droplets of blood as he ran. There were none. *My clothes seem to have soaked it all up. If I'm lucky, the cops won't even know which way I ran*, he thought.

He stumbled over the final fence. He felt cold from the lost blood and stumbled a little as he bent over to pick up the helmet. He backed the bike up a little and decided to start it in the backyard. He was too weak to push it any further.

He sluggishly climbed on the motorcycle. He went to reach for the clutch and found he couldn't lift his arm. He felt his muscles straining but it would only move an inch from his side.

The bullet wound had scabbed, immobilizing his shoulder. He leaned forward so he could start the bike with his forearm bent up to the clutch.

He started the bike and clicked it into first gear with his foot. He revved the engine and simply let go of the clutch. The bike spun its back wheel kicking dirt and four foot grass up. It slowly inched up forcing him into the seat. Finally the rear wheel caught and he almost fell off the bike as he backed off the throttle.

He pulled out of the backyard and the adjoining parking lot, and clicked the bike into second without even touching the clutch. The whining motor had its rotation speed cut in half. It was not a subtle clunk. He hunched over as far forward as he could. He could work the clutch so long as he was moving.

His head was pounding as he headed for the parkway. His clarks read eighty four and, and fifty six. He tasted blood. Joe hoped it wasn't from his lungs.

He zoned in and out of consciousness as he rode the speed bike to the dojo in the early dawn. He fought hard against the urge to sleep, enhanced by the wretched shivering coldness that pierced him to the bone. When he felt especially weak, he replayed the image of his father being gunned down, triggering his diminishing adrenal gland like a switch.

When he arrived at the dojo a couple of Kento's students were standing outside the front entrance in their sparring gi. He knew he would be safe if he could just fall on the small patch of grass in front of the karate studio. The students would run in and tell Kento, and he would find him. He rolled the bike up on the sidewalk and hit the kill switch with his good hand. The silent bike tipped over on the grass as it lost momentum. He didn't even remember hitting the ground.

Chapter 43

Joe was laying on a simple cot pale and sweating. Kento tilted his unconscious head up and poured a small disposable cup of water into his mouth. He gently lowered Joe's head. Kento's mind raced as he stood up and looked around at the badly lit storage room.

My students have pledged their lives to the government as a proxy for the people, Kento thought. Now that the government has failed, they need to understand that distinction. His brow furrowed with distress. Miscommunication will end our journey right here, but more importantly it will be fatal for more than just us three. MIR's ultimate goal is self promotion, in which they have the upper hand.

He walked out of the Dojo's storage room past his office and toward the exercise room in the front. He walked past Mark. Mark was moving like a blind man, furiously hacking on his arm computer's HUD from behind his now opaque Clarks. He could smell Mark's sweat as he passed by.

His Tuesday morning students milled about nervously bathed in eastern sunlight. Men and women of every race and age were there for an early morning workout. Kento walked to the front of the white padded exercise room.

"Class take your places." He spoke with an unusual authority that contrasted his age.

He waited for a minute while his unnerved students settled into their places. He watched their faces and hands for cues. *At this point it can't hurt to try*, he thought.

He paced sequentially up and down the rows of students as he spoke. "People are eminently practical which is good, but they are easily swayed."

"One of societies oldest roles is to stop attacks on life. When in doubt, people err on the side of caution, for actions they cannot take back. This is born of a practical limitation, that of worldly justice. People simply do not have all the facts and therefore cannot judge with certainty."

He felt a breeze on his body hair, a young student behind him stirred.

“Sometimes a group of people can put the cart before the horse. Sensing opportunity, the group convinces society that their value on life is born from ideology and not a practical limitation. When they succeed, life’s value becomes subject to rhetoric. Lives are revalued like those of slaves or livestock, and blood is shed.”

He saw the shadow of a kneeling man dip. He worked his way back to the front of the room.

“Be cautious. You are surrounded by people who do not understand injustice. You can identify them by their arrogant conviction and willingness to judge. Seek humility as you would seek shelter in a growing storm.”

He turned to the students as he talked. A half dozen students with blank faces changed their posture. The stationary students looked dismayed.

“The man in the back room is a fugitive. In his quest for knowledge his talent has offended those who would turn loyalty to an ideology, into their own engine of destruction. I only ask that you forget what you have seen today. When you weigh the virtues of honoring my request you only have your knowledge of my honor and sense of purpose to sway you. If you do not trust my sincerity at that level, may I humbly suggest that rather than immediately acting, that you postpone judgment until he can again speak for himself. Then you may ask him.”

The dipping man crossed his arms as Kento spoke. *Damn*, Kento thought, *so much for that*.

A middle aged white woman spoke. “Sensei, when will he be well again?”

He paused reading her expression. “I am not certain, but you may stop each day at this time if you like.”

A teenage boy asked, “What is he accused of?”

He bowed his head slightly. “He will be accused of treason. But he simply benefited from a crime his aunt committed.”

“What crime is that?” the boy asked.

He seems sincerely concerned, he thought.

“Patent and copyright infringement, through breach of contract.”

The crowd murmured.

The dipping man laughed. “Did she download a song? They shot him for that?”

“I had better let him tell you the details.”

He waited a few seconds for more questions. “It has truly been an honor being your teacher. You have taught me much as well. I may not be able to continue, so please know my thoughts are with you. Any debts owed to me are forgiven. Please see me in my office now for any debts owed to you.”

Kento bowed deeply. He turned and walked to his office. He watched his students reflections in the office window glass as he walked. Most of them stayed seated, clearly overwhelmed with what to do next.

Mark was waiting for him by the door. “Kento what the hell were you doing telling them all that.” Mark’s accent was strong. He sounded angry and afraid.

He turned in the doorway and watched his students file out of the Dojo as he spoke, “Mark, the police will not find you here without help. They will need someone to tell them where you are. My students, without understanding what they are doing would definitely reveal what they knew, although perhaps indirectly. You would expect an explanation in return for the burden of a secret like that, why shouldn’t they?”

Mark harrumphed.

A petite Chinese girl walked past Kento and through the office door.

“Sensei Robert, can we help you?”

A second slightly taller Chinese girl walked into the office as well.

“Anything you need master.”

“Mark this is Dong.” He opened his palm to the first girl. He moved into the office as he spoke, glancing toward the office window as he walked.

The girl smiled warmly and said, “I prefer Dragon.”

Mark nodded his head. His eyes were open wide.

“And this is Lin.” She smiled as well.

Kento noticed the dipping man glance back at him. He hung his head, and turned to Mark.

“They are my best two students.”

“Oh.” Mark seemed surprised. He turned to Dong, “Does your name mean dragon?”

“No, but it should.” Dragon smiled with confidence.

Lin scowled.

He turned to his students. “We will be leaving the Dojo in a few minutes. Lin, Douglas trusts you. Go stall him.”

Dragon and Mark looked surprised. Lin was stone faced.

He calmly elaborated to Lin, “He will betray us. He has no doubt.”

Lin turned and ran after Douglas.

“I thought you said we would be safe here.” Mark looked worried.

“I was wrong.” Kento looked disappointed. “First, I thought Joe would be well. Second I believed that I would be able to pretend that we were not here, hiding you two in the back room. Joe’s announced arrival and new found fame

made staying nearly impossible. I hoped that I had built up a report with my students in that they would trust me above the law on this.”

Everyone stood quietly in the office, engrossed in their own thoughts.

Kento spoke up. “We can’t stay here. We have to move Joe.”

“Where would you go?” Dragon inquired.

“We can go to my apartment,” Kento offered.

“Uh, what will that buy us, a half an hour?” Mark asked sarcastically.

“Nothing points to my apartment. All my mail and paperwork are sent here. Nobody knows where I live.”

Dragon looked very pleased.

Mark’s face relaxed a little. He looked at Dong. “Do you drive? Does Lin? We don’t have a car.”

“I can borrow my parents’ minivan,” Dong offered.

“No. Too out of the ordinary,” Kento said.

The group was silent again as they thought. Lin walked in the room and stood next to Kento. She looked glum.

Mark suddenly spoke up. “We can call a cab!”

Kento raised his eyebrows. Mark seemed to have no volume control. He looked through the glass. *No one seems to have heard that*, he thought.

“That seems like a really bad idea.” Dragon scowled.

“You don’t understand.” Mark seemed proud of himself. “My uncle co-owns the Three Sixes Cab Company.”

Fate has been kind to us today, Kento thought.

“Call him.” Kento raised his eyebrows.

Mark picked up his cell phone from the office desk and walked toward the back room.

“Sensei, can we come with you?” Dragon’s voice was more flat than usual. “Your purpose seems greater than anything I can imagine doing here.”

“You should finish school,” he replied. “Coming with me at your age would be reckless. You can see that we may all die.”

“Not me,” Dragon raised her eyebrows.

Mark walked back in the room. “It’s done. They will be here in twenty minutes. They are going to meet us around back.”

Kento looked at Dragon. “We will talk about this more later.”

Kento grabbed a pad and wrote an address and a grocery list on the paper. He ripped it off and handed it to Dragon.

“A case of baby food? Three glass bowls? Four bottles of Drano? This is very weird stuff.”

“You and Lin meet us at my place with all these items. Knock once hard and twice lightly.” He opened his wallet and gave them money.
He noticed Dragon’s hesitation. She looked awestruck and dreamy.
“Do not let anyone follow you. We have powerful enemies.”

Chapter 44

Scott stared at his trophy case from his desk. He took a sip of his coffee.

This coffee is old, he thought. How dare Melinda, she mocks me.

“Melinda, you idiot! This coffee is from this morning.”

“Yes sir.” A Hispanic woman in a formal blazer and skirt walked in the room.

“Fresh coffee. Now!”

“Yes sir. Sorry sir.” Melinda took the mug and carried it out with her.

Scott pressed his fingers into his temple, hard. He rubbed his head until Melinda returned.

She placed the mug on the desk without saying a word. The phone rang in the waiting room.

“I’ll get that.” Melinda scampered out of the room.

Of course you will, who else would you idiot. The phone on his desk rang, he felt a chill of frustration shoot up his spine.

“Yes, Melinda.” Scott spoke through his teeth.

“Sir, it’s the Secretary of Defense.”

Scott’s anger was sucked out of him. Total fear overwhelmed him.

In a tiny voice he said, “Give me twenty seconds, then put him through.”

That little twit was ruining everything. My plans, they were perfect.

Scott’s eyes were wide, he looked crazed.

The phone rang. A wash of calm overtook Scott’s features as he picked up the phone.

“Hello, this is Scott Conner.”

“Hello Conner, this is Jackson.”

“Hi Lenny, long time no.”

Secretary Jackson cut him off. “Don’t Lenny me.”

“Sir what’s wrong?” He was immersed in his lie.

“I just heard from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. You know what he told me? He told me that you gave the entire senior ranks of the military a sneak preview of the nanites MIR has been developing. Do you know what’s wrong with that?”

“No sir.” Scott was in the army again.

“That means that you have been developing nanites behind my back. As far as you are concerned I am the president. The leader of the free world. Do you get that? And you just pissed me off, big time.”

“Sorry sir.”

“You know what I heard? I heard that a public blood testing facility had a small problem with a routine test. It turns out they were unable to record the genetics of this, this, blood sample because of some contaminants,” he stuttered, “Do you know what those contaminants were?”

His heart sank to his stomach again. “No sir.”

“They were full blown nanites. We had to shut the whole town down.”

Vallone still had nanites. Graceland is dead. Scott scribbled “destroy Graceland” on a notepad on his desk.

“We have two hundred lab techs in DOD facilities for interrogation. Do you have any idea what that costs? What are we going to do with techs that saw those nanites firsthand?”

The phone was silent.

“Conner you there? I’m not done with you yet.”

“Yes sir.” Scott grit his teeth.

“Your purpose, Datahold’s purpose, is to grind nano research to a halt by any means necessary. Your own research is included in that. That is the will of the people. That is the will of the president.”

“We spend billions on anti-nano messages every year.”

“Conner, how do I spell this out for you? I should never have to call you first. That indicates surprise. If I thought that you were developing nanites, the secret service would be in on it. The CIA would be in on it. The NSA would be in on it. Not your shadowy pet project. How do I know you don’t aim to take the president’s job from him?”

Scott twitched. *That hit a little close to home.*

“Now. God help me if you lie to me. Is MIR developing nanites on its own?”

Scott had lost control.

“Sir all the pieces were right there. It was too easy. You need to understand.”

“What you are charged with is insulating and protecting the intellectual property of the United States. You have failed that.”

He recalled his years of scraping and sucking up to unworthy sycophants. *That's it, he thought, I own this from now on. I have nothing else to lose.*

"Sir, you have been deceived."

"What?"

"Intellectual property doesn't work any more than Keynesian economics. Who fed you that crap. Did you learn that in public school? I thought you were ivy league?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Sir, do you think the Chinese give a crap who owns the patent? What scientist thought of it first? For a gentleman's game you need gentlemen. Who are you kidding? This is war just waiting to happen."

The defense secretary was silent.

"The bottom line is, the only way to force people to play this game is guns and lawyers. Consider us both. You may not have realized it at the time, but when you commissioned Datahold you were admitting our weakness, the weakness of the United States. You asked for a new three letter agency to deal with the threat and you got it, MIR. Now get out of the way and let us get it done." Scott's drawl was stronger now.

"I don't like your tone."

"And I don't like your convenient denial. I'm doing this for America, no amount of silly patent rules and silly secret databases will protect us from foreign nanite warfare. The only thing that will do that is other nanites, superior nanites. Now we are a step ahead, and this leak is only a bump in the road."

"And who says you are the best man for the job?"

"You did. And now you have to live with me, since it takes years just to learn how to operate these things."

"I need to speak to the president about this."

"You do that. You'll let me know. I'm ready to serve, if you'll let me."

Scott hung up the phone.

Scott grinned like he hadn't grinned in twenty years. It made his face hurt.

Chapter 45

Joe hurt all over. His head was pounding. He felt a cold sweat dripping down his forehead. His shoulder throbbed and ached.

My Dad.

Joe lay awake for an hour listening to strange voices and the sound of a keyboard typing. Kento and Mark's voices were familiar in the sea of subtle noise fading in and out. Joe couldn't face anyone yet. His eyes just kept playing the horror of watching his dad die in front of him. No not in front of him, because of him. In his place.

What did he want to say to me? How long had Dad hidden his feelings for Aunt Teressa? What would I have said to him? To Aunt Teressa? What would he say about my nearly being cured? What would he say about stealing the nanites? About Aunt Teressa's sacrifice? Would this have pulled him out of his slump?

"No Dad!" Joe closed eyes were tearing and his teeth were clenched.

"Joe." Kento was kneeling over him. "I'm so sorry."

It was him that bastard. That monster made me take those nanites. He knows it too. Kento knows he put that gun to Sergio's head.

He felt the rage drain out of him. *That's crazy. It wasn't Kento, he was trying to help me. My curiosity was to blame. I had to know how they worked. I had to feel healthy again, like that day in the hospital. Building robots on TV wasn't good enough for me. I had to be a part of something larger. Dad had to die for my giant ego.*

His fingers felt numb to the knuckles from clutching the bedding.

My pride, bigger than anything. Bigger than Aunt Teressa. Bigger than Robert. Bigger than my love for Lucy and Finny. Bigger than Mark. Bigger than Dad. Bigger than Nathan Jones. Bigger than the that scumbag in charge of MIR.

He remembered Nathan's mocking sneer at their meeting. He remembered

Scott's condescending tone toward his Aunt. *Their lack of regard for my life. No, not caring about the lives my aunt was working with, is as bad as it gets.*

If I'm evil, those guys are Satan.

He felt a surge of adrenalin, his eyes opened wide.

"Joe, you're back," Mark sounded relieved.

He just stared at him blankly from the bed. Rage brewing under the surface.

"Are you okay?" Kento asked.

He turned his head to look around. They were in a simple studio apartment with as many milk crates and bean bags, as legitimate pieces of furniture. Muted daylight streamed in through uneven blinds. Two oriental women sat with a young boy with light brown hair at a simple kitchen table, and turned to watch Joe quietly. Ten blinking beige PCs lined up in a row were attached to a single monitor. Mark sat in front of them, with a wireless keyboard in his lap. An ancient TV adorned with rabbit ears sat in the middle of the room. Joe noticed three large glass bowls with familiar colored goo.

He just looked at Kento. *I'm still clutching the bedding,* he realized.

Kento spoke quietly, "It's not much, but it doesn't leak."

He suspected he was trying to be sensitive.

"We heard about your dad on TV," Mark looked sad. *It must be bad,* Joe thought, *Mark is not exactly sensitive.*

Kento looked back at Mark, eyebrows raised.

Good old Mark, never follows the plan. He let his head fall back and stared at the ceiling. He heard rain hitting the window. He wondered if it just started or if he just noticed.

The whole room was silent. Joe was enjoying the awkward silence, until he thought of his aunt.

He looked up, he felt a jolt of pain in his shoulder.

He scowled as he talked. "Aunt Teressa?"

"We're pretty sure she's in jail. She doesn't answer any of her phones," Kento spoke slowly.

Maybe she was protecting me by avoiding my calls, he kidded himself. Scott, that voice from the hospital, dragged her off to some secret prison. Joe was sure of it.

"They're all gone," Joe grumbled, voice shaking.

"Well technically she's not dead like your Dad. We know where she is, well I mean, we don't know exactly where, but she's still alive." Mark sounded upset.

"Mark that's enough." Kento stared at him now.

"No, it's not." He was enjoying Mark's childish innocence for a change.

Kento looked at Joe blankly.

“Rob, you don’t even sound upset.” He tried to drag some kind of emotion out of Kento.

“I am. We need to keep level heads.” Kento didn’t waver from his soft spoken, even tone.

“You can’t know what I feel,” Joe said as coldly as he could.

“No, but I lost my father too.”

Emboldened, Mark pursued Kento’s confession. “What happened?”

“He abandoned my mother, to honor her I abandoned him.”

He wondered if Kento’s revelations were driven by guilt or his cause.

The room was quiet, except for a faint noise of the rain.

He turned his head to Kento, and then to the three quiet figures sitting around the table. His shoulder ached as he leaned up.

“I’m sorry. My father just died.”

Kento spoke up, “Joe, this is Dragon”

“Hi.”

“Lin”

“Hello”

“And John.”

“Hi”

“They are my best students.”

Lin spoke up. “Sensei, we should go. We are intruding.”

She moved as if to get up.

Kento began to respond, but Joe cut in.

“No, it’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

He was more angry than ever, but not at them. His shoulder gave and he was forced to lay down.

“They have been running errands for us. We’d already be out of food and supplies. That reminds me,” Kento got up and walked to the kitchen area. He pulled a Tupperware container out of the cabinet.

“Lucy gave this to us for you.”

Kento extended the container to Joe. He reached out for it with his stiff arm and immediately pulled it back. He was more mobile, but a jolt of pain shot up it.

“It hurts to move it?” Mark asked.

“A lot.”

“We think the bullet may have grazed a nerve. You’re lucky you can feel it.”

“Not really.” He wasn’t feeling lucky, nor did he want to feel it.

Kento put the container on the floor next to the low bed.

“Its scab is weird,” Joe said.

“It’s nanites attaching to each other. It seems to have worked perfectly except I didn’t set up any flexibility between their bonds. Your scab is harder than most steel.”

“Not very comfortable.” He felt tired from the pain.

“Sorry, I didn’t think that through. The nanites are still alive and active and capable of breaking the bond on the command. I used the ultrasound panel to dissolve about two thirds of the cast based on signal strength. You know, based on the proximity,” Mark hesitated. “But then you started bleeding. We think your body is totally out of that clotting protein it needs. So we can’t shut them off until you totally heal.”

“Oh.” He felt as if the room was spinning. *Mark sure talks a lot.*

He closed his eyes. “How long has it been?”

“Two days,” Kento said.

He never heard the answer. The room dissolved away as he dreamed of his aunt. She was wearing prison orange.

Chapter 46

Joe started to fall over sideways, he woke up just in time to catch himself. A jolt of pain shot up his bad arm into his shoulder when he leaned on it.

I must have fallen asleep again, he thought.

He was sitting on a simple futon in front of the fifteen inch analog TV on the floor in the middle of the room. He looked at the digital clock on the HDTV converter box. It was his last shot to watch the evening news. He had fallen asleep the past two times.

He could swear he smelled the iron from blood in his nose. He put his finger under his nose and looked at it. *No blood, at least not yet.*

He looked at the bowls on the counter. Clouds of nanites were swimming from toxic clumps floating in their birthing fluid. *I'd give all three up for a shot of blood protein,* he thought. They had all agreed that Mark's clotting hack was impressive, saved Joe's life, and was way too dangerous to use any more than necessary.

The catchy jingle came on to signal the beginning of the evening news. He clicked the volume up with a simple remote.

The reporter looked serious as he spoke, "Our top story today, the White House held a press conference about the recent bioterrorism scare."

A clip was shown of a tired press secretary, "In response to new threats to the welfare of the American people, a new agency specialized in both biotech counter intelligence and emergency response will be formed to help coordinate federal and local officials."

The serious looking reporter came back on screen. "Sources say, the new agency MIR, was originally a private corporation, working in conjunction with the DOD to develop new vaccines against bioterror attacks."

"Bullshit," Joe grumbled to no one.

"They are the parent company of a better known organization Datahold, a patent clearinghouse and the current contract holder of the recently outsourced

patent office.”

The image of Scott Conner standing behind a podium came on the screen. Joe could hear Mark inhale as his name came on the screen.

Scott spoke in a heavy down to earth type drawl, “MIR is dedicated to protecting the armed forces and citizens of the United States. We are specialized in dealing with biotech when designed to be used as a weapon, something the CDC has not had the resources or expertise for thus far. In a short while America will be much better prepared to face the eminent biological threat,” Scott leaned forward, “Especially now that we have information that Iran may be involved in this attempted attack.”

The serious reporter reappeared behind his desk.

“Oh come on. Ask him questions!” Mark was standing next to Joe.

“I wonder why it’s eminent,” Joe grumbled.

“The Association for Modern Medicine and the American Medical Association filed suit in federal court against the White House in response to the adoption of MIR as a high level intelligence agency. They claim it gives one private corporation unprecedented powers. AMM president Ralph Lorenz stated simply, ‘We’ve been expecting this for a while.’”

“Judge Harryharma ruled no other information will available on the sealed court proceedings until a decision has been reached.”

The camera panned over to an angry woman news anchor. “In other news the terror suspects are still believed to be at large in the metro area. WBLA news now has information that there may be a third suspect involved in the incident at the Olympic trials. Robert Greenblatt.”

A picture of Kento filled the screen. He looked about seventeen and had dark hair and a dress shirt on. It looked like a high school yearbook photo.

“May be with Joe Vallone, and Markus Mahdavi.”

Mark looked at Kento. “You’re Jewish?”

Joe hushed him.

“Joe Vallone was last seen in Nassau county, four nights ago during the now infamous shootout.”

“Shootout? I didn’t shoot!” Joe was turning red.

“Your hair is brown?” Mark was still staring at Kento.

“Anybody with information about these three men should call our anti-crime phone line.”

The screen panned out to show two much more accurate pictures of Joe and Mark from their Cyborg Wars photos.

“These men are considered armed and very dangerous. You should not approach them yourselves but instead immediately contact the authorities.”

The three young men stared at the TV with slackened jaws.

“In our latest coverage of the war on urban violence, what should you do if a homeless person attacks you?”

Kento clicked the TV off.

“What if there is something about Lucy and Finny? Or Aunt Teresa?” Joe sounded annoyed.

Mark sounded remorseful. “There won’t be. I watched the same thing an hour ago.”

“Nothing?”

“Not even a story about Amman,” Kento said. “The Iranian thing was the first I heard of it.”

“Who cares.” Joe was distant.

“I care.” Mark sounded incensed.

“They have both been buried alive in some military prison.” Kento looked horrified.

Kento didn’t look horrified much, Joe thought. He felt his stomach sink.

“We have to do something,” Joe said.

“There’s nothing we can do.” Kento shook his head.

“We’re leaving tomorrow.” Mark looked down. “Shotgun is going to help us.”

“Can we even trust him?” Joe wondered aloud.

“I think we can...” Kento paused, “We have no choice.”

“We know he can stick his neck out for people.” Mark wore a weak smile.

“My experience has taught me when you get into real trouble, that many people are an explanation away from sticking their neck out for you.” Kento raised an eyebrow.

“What?” Mark stared at Kento.

“What what?” Joe asked Mark. He was confused.

“He has an idea. I can see it.”

“If we could only... Get Joe’s story out. It would take some of the pressure off the manhunt, and help Lucy and Teresa.”

Mark looked gloomy again. Joe felt gloomy.

Kento seemed lost in thought. “If the public was asking more questions, the truth would resolve itself.”

“Did you see that?” Joe pointed at the TV. “It’s a dead end.”

“Joe’s right. The TV news won’t pick up our story. They just read the press releases back at us. I emailed the TV stations and two dozen papers, and nobody

picked it up. I contacted some people over at NYN but they have been silent. There's probably a Fed in every NYN building waiting for us now. I've emailed a few news groups but the posts disappear as quick as they appear." Mark stared at the floor.

Kento replied. "I think they choose not to cover it. We sent WBLA a picture of Mark with the newspaper yesterday. What do they expect from wanted men?"

"It's pretty unbelievable. We must sound nuts." Joe was morose.

"It's not like they can confirm anything with MIR. Maybe I can convince one of the foreign researchers to go to their press with the nanites."

"Don't do that, the world needs them. Even if they don't get in any trouble themselves, MIR may figure out that you sent out all those nanites. You can forget about anything getting cured then..." Mark trailed off.

The group was quiet.

Joe asked Kento, "Where are we meeting Shotgun?"

Mark cut him off. "I've got it!"

"Shhhhhh." Kento and Joe both hushed Mark.

"Got what?" Joe asked.

"Joe I need you to tell your story one last time." Mark put his clarks on, and looked around. "Stand over there by that empty wall."

"What have you got in mind?" Kento asked.

"I bet you a hundred bucks Lucy will be free in a week." Mark smiled smugly.

"I think I have ten bucks." Joe shook his head.

"You haven't opened that package Lucy left for you yet." Mark grinned.

"You did?"

Joe was sure Mark's curiosity would be the death of him.

Chapter 47

Kento walked up beside Mark. His shadow blocked the light from the colorful sunset outside.

Mark didn't look up.

"I have a confession to make." Kento's voice sounded strained. "I am weak." Mark stuffed some clothes into a thick plastic bag while he listened.

Mark looked up. He couldn't imagine what Kento was going to confess to him. He smiled. "You are everything I'm not. Disciplined, balanced, motivated."

"I'm claustrophobic." Kento hung his head.

"Claustrophobic," Mark continued.

"I don't think I can get in the trunk." Kento's eyes were darting from side to side.

"Did you wait until Joe went to bathroom?" Mark asked amused.

"I don't think he can handle this. He's very angry right now."

"Not at you," Mark scoffed.

"I wouldn't be so sure."

The toilet flushed, and Joe emerged looking grim.

Mark shrugged his shoulders.

"Hey you ready Joe?" Mark asked.

"Yeah sure. Your jeans don't fit right," Joe grumbled, tightening his belt.

Mark turned to Kento and smiled.

Kento's eyes grew wide.

"Kento, would you ride shotgun? My uncle's friend is in denial about his eyes. He might not make a good lookout."

"Sure. It should be hard to recognize me with that photo circulating."

Mark turned to Joe, "Is Kento really a blond?"

Joe shook his head no.

"You're Jewish?" Mark was smirking.

“My grandfather. If I’m anything I’m a Taoist.”

Kento is starting to make more sense, Mark thought.

Joe finished strapping on his arm computer. He picked up a laptop in one hand and a small plastic bag in the other. He checked his head for his Clarks.

“I’m ready,” Joe announced.

“Hold on.” Mark lowered his clarks over his eyes. He logged into Kento’s cluster and checked on his hard drive scrubbing routine. It was on its third pass. Mark checked the wireless network between their three arm computers and their three laptops.

“Kento, turn your computer on.”

Kento grabbed his streamlined armband off the counter and tapped its readout.

A red light blipped to yellow and then green in a sea of lights and numbers in Mark’s clarks.

Mark pushed the clarks on top of his head.

Kento was strapping a sword to his back.

“You’re not going to bring that are you?” Mark asked. “Not exactly subtle.”

Joe grinned a crooked grin.

“If someone sees me, it will be because I wanted them too.” Kento was deadpan serious.

“Okay, okay.” Mark butted out.

Mark grabbed his backpack and shopping bag.

“Joe, how are you feeling? Is the new batch okay?” Kento turned to Joe.

“Much better, now that I’m fixed up.” Joe didn’t smile.

Mark felt a chill run down his spine. *Joe sounded just like a junkie. I’m sure he’s kidding*, he thought.

Kento pulled an envelope from his pocket and taped it to a blank wall with a note. It read, “Outstanding Rent. Thank you. Sorry for the trouble.”

Mark sighed.

“Let’s do it.” Joe scowled.

The trio left the apartment and walked downstairs. Mark was relieved when they didn’t see anyone in the stairwell. They walked to the back of the building through a sixties style hallway. He was thankful for its state of disrepair. The lowest wattage bulbs were used to hide the broken tiles and stained walls.

A couple of people passed by as they waited in the shadows by the back door for their black Towncar. Nobody turned to get a second look. Mark hoped that meant they were scott free so to speak. Mark smiled at the joke in his head.

The car pulled up in the back parking lot under a broken light. He flashed his headlights twice in the twilight. The group swiftly walked out in the parking lot.

Kento got in the front seat while Joe and Mark climbed in the popped trunk. They pulled the trunk closed on top of them.

“Hey, there is a glow in the dark handle. Cool.” Mark thought out loud in the blackness.

The car started to move.

Joe broke the silence. “What’s the plan?”

“Oh, right, you fell asleep.”

Mark realized that Joe might not be too proud of his mediocre health after he said it. He put his hand on his forehead in the dark.

“We went over your video, from the coliseum and from your Dad’s house.”

“Okay.”

“It’s actually pretty good. We were able to stabilize the bouncing from running a lot. That new video autocrop thing is a lot better than the last version. It doesn’t seem to cut out as much of the picture. I think it does some kind of estimation for objects on the edge of the frames.”

Joe cut him off. “The short version.”

Mark could make out Joe’s features by the light from his clarks. His eyebrows were raised.

“Right. Sorry. A friend of mine is an engineer at NYN. He used to work over at WBLA. He’s always complaining about how bad their security is. So I wrote him and told him the whole story and showed him the videos.”

“Oh.” Mark could hear Joe smiling.

“He was pretty pissed about how slanted their coverage has been. So we talked about their security for a while, and he told me all their broadcast gear is HDTV now and there is some sort of flaw in the distributed file system authentication on their internal network.”

Joe’s dim face stared at Mark blankly.

“Distributed file system? People use them for unusually large data that needs to be redundant fast and affordable? That’s where they store their movies?” Mark was exasperated.

Recognition came to Joe’s face, he nodded.

“They wrote it in house, but then they tried to write their own encryption algorithm for access to it or something dumb like that.”

“Sounds dumb.”

“That’s not the half of it. There wasn’t enough time for me to learn the details so he agreed to break in for us and play the video.”

“What did you offer him?” Joe inquired.

“Nothing he said it would be an honor.” Mark smiled.

I've got great friends, Mark thought.

"So where are we going?"

"We need to break in through their wireless network. I did a little digging, there are several open wireless points accessible in the park across the street. I am going to bridge the Internet and your and Kento's laptops from there. Once I'm on, I'm going to send him a few packets so he can find me and he's going to break in for us. Apparently there is some sort of race condition if you connect to two access points simultaneously, they allow access to the internal network."

Joe smiled devilishly. "You'd think they'd be more careful."

"He tried to explain it to his boss, but he didn't get it."

"So what do I do?"

"Simple. I've set up this laptop with two network cards. One internal and one in the slot. It has a login for Buddy."

Joe cut him off. "Your friend's name is Buddy?"

"And?"

"You have a buddy named Buddy."

Mark stared blankly.

"Okay. Nevermind. Go on."

"So the laptop has a local copy of some scripts to generate the attack, and the movie of you explaining what happened."

"You're using that video you took?"

"What did you think we were going to do?"

"I looked terrible."

"You say you've been shot."

"I thought you were just using audio."

"Joe, out of all of us you're the celebrity."

"I'm all pale."

"You're always pale. I'll tell them to skip Manhattan if you want." He hoped Joe wasn't seriously upset.

The duo was silent.

Joe broke the silence. "So what do I do?"

Mark breathed again.

"Simple, carry the laptop to the middle of the ally we drop you in. Move it around until the external network card glows green. Then hide, put your clarks on and wait for the word that we are ready to roll."

"That's pretty easy."

"It's important, it needs to work. Lucy and Dr. Graceland need us."

“Oh and Joe, make sure to grab the laptop on the way out. These guys actually have a war driving security team ready to go. As soon as that video starts playing, they’ll be looking to find it, and then Buddy.”

Joe smiled.

They waited in the dark listening to noises all around them. The pavement changed its pitch as they rolled over the bridge. The driver blew his horn a couple of times, locking the brakes up once.

Joe looked solemn. At one point he picked up a spray can bonking him on the head, and held it up to the light of his clarks. Apparently satisfied, he put it in his leather jacket.

What’s that all about, Mark wondered.

The car came to an abrupt halt. The trunk popped. Joe followed Mark into the blinding artificial light. Mark pointed toward an ally. Joe flipped his clarks down and ran toward it with laptop in hand. Mark ran toward the park across the street. A quick glance around revealed two mounted police who seemed to have little interest in Mark. Mark did notice a dozen Triple Six Towncars idling around the WBLA building.

I wonder if my uncle sent all those cars here, Mark thought.

Mark found the park bench he was looking for. It happened to be marked with a white “X” He sat down and powered his laptop on. Mark thought he saw the tip of a samurai sword and a sneaker fly down an ally when his eyes snapped back to the cab.

I guess he wanted me to see him, Mark thought sarcastically. He wondered how much of Kento was for real and how much was talk.

Chapter 48

Scott should have been fired, not promoted. MIR should be under any of a dozen different lawyers and Scott should be sitting in front of a congressional committee. Just sending that SWAT team to the Vallone house in the middle of the night, without confirming that Vallone was nanite free was gross incompetence.

Nathan Jones was sneering.

Instead I'm in NY after the fact, trying to clean up his mess. At the least the joint chiefs should have seen his recklessness. They should have called up Secretary Jackson, and set him straight. They should have dragged the president into the war room and not let him out until he saw the truth. Joe Vallone is the most dangerous man alive. He could melt people from the inside in minutes. He could extract Uranium from seawater and enrich it as he saw fit. He could make Kevlar from dirt or turn every vehicle in this city into a time bomb that no one could hear tick.

Nathan stared at the Mayor's top aide, two Police Sergeants, a Lieutenant from the New York National Guard, an FBI rookie, and a couple of New York City Hazmat officers.

The stupidity is boundless, Nathan thought to himself.

"Council Jones?" The first New York City Police Sergeant was calling his name.

Nathan stared at the crowd milling about their makeshift command center. He hung his head. *I always suspected, but now I know,* Nathan thought. *Scott is not up for this job. For something this important, it should never come down to luck.*

"Do you think we should call it a night?" the first Hazmat officer asked. "We haven't slept in three nights and we can barely stay awake."

Nathan ignored his question.

"So FBI forensics ran the matter from the karate studio's toilet."

"Yes sir," the first police Sargent replied, "No matches against the database so

far. Just the students we sampled.”

“And none of the students know where they went?”

“No sir,” The young FBI man answered.

“How about the taxi? Did anyone see what company it was?”

“No sir, a newish black Towncar is the best description we have,” the second Sargent answered.

“Any luck with the dispatch interviews?” Nathan asked growing impatient.

“No, it may not even matter though, because it could have been a private vehicle,” the FBI rookie answered.

“When are we going to get some answers? This is life and death.” Nathan’s voice was hoarse.

The second Hazmat officer asked, “When are we going to get some answers? We don’t have any information on the pathogens involved. We might be able to trace some part of them.”

“When it’s cleared.” He stalled.

“How can we prepare for an epidemic when you give us zero information?” The first Hazmat officer stood up, knocking his chair over. “No specimens. No background. No models. It could be the rhino virus for all I know. I’m beginning to think you made it up.”

“It’s very real.” Nathan stood up too.

The other Hazmat officer pushed his chair away. “Look, we honestly don’t care when we can get started on an antidote, since most vaccines take years to gear up production for. But common sense should tell us that we at least need a quarantine, and or an evacuation plan.”

“We can’t evacuate, the trail will go cold. He’ll get away,” Nathan sneered, “Then no one will be safe.”

Years of practice only go so far. Three days without more than an hour of sleep is too much. Damn it Scott, I’m painted into a corner here, declassify something. Nathan’s skills for rational thinking were breaking down.

The mayor’s aide spoke up. “Mr Jones, the Mayor concurs with Hazmat and the CDC, the trail has gone cold. It’s time for models.”

“The CDC has no power here.”

“No, but they do have sense and experience.” The aide looked exasperated.

The door burst open. A detective in plain clothes looked around and reached for a remote control on the table.

Nathan lost his temper. “Who are you, get out!”

The detective glared at Nathan and turned a TV hanging from the wall on.

Joe Vallone was on the TV. “car accident. It should have killed me.”

Holy shit.

“I’ll have their license. What station?” Nathan stared at the detective.

“B.L.A.”

“Call them. Tell them to shut down.”

“Off the air?” The mayor’s aide asked, surprised.

“They were all told, no interviews.”

He felt like a cornered animal.

“Where is it?” Council Jones was on the verge of panic.

“BLA’s about twelve blocks north of here. On 41st.”

He pointed at the first Sergeant. “You, give me a squad car now!”

The detective tossed him his keys. “You break it, you bought it.”

“Which car?” Nathan blurted out. He was poised by the door.

The detective spoke slowly. “The brown Impala, it’s out front.”

Nathan was already out the door. The mayor’s aide and the second Sergeant followed his quick strides.

“Should I send any local cars there?” the officer huffed.

“No. He might be there. They’re not ready.” Nathan growled practically jogging.

“How many officers should I send with you?” he inquired.

“As many as you can spare.” He smiled.

“You realize he may not be there? This may have been pre-recorded.” The mayor’s aide easily keep stride.

“I’m not an idiot. I know that,” Nathan snarled.

“Sidearm?” the chief offered his upholstered semi-automatic pistol.

Without thinking, he turned it away.

The two other men slowed to a walk.

He broke into a full sprint down the stairs. He heard several men running behind him. *I assume that they are coming too*, he thought.

I doubt they can keep up.

He was a soldier again. His vision began to tunnel as he barreled down the six flights of stairs. His blood was boiling.

Nathan burst through the front doors of the precinct and immediately spotted the brown undercover car. He hit the remote start button on the keychain. The car started and loud mufflers let out a grumble.

He flung the door open, and put it in drive. The door quickly closed itself as the tires squealed and then caught. He saw the confused laggards just finding the front door.

Weaklings. No drive.

He fumbled around for a siren first on the roof and then by the radio. It squelched and then started howling.

He yanked the cell phone out of his pocket, nearly throwing it across the car. Nathan pulled a forty mile an hour power slide through a red light. A woman crossing the street dove for cover.

Nathan pushed a button on the phone. "Conner, speaker," he yelled into it.

The phone rang out loud. A voice-mail service with a women's voice picked up. "You have reached the office of Scott Conner."

"Crap."

Nathan slammed on the brake. The intersection ahead was blocked.

"Hangup," he yelled.

The message stopped.

Nobody was moving out of Nathan's way. *I hate New York*, he thought. He spotted a single small car blocking a path through a small park. He drove the Impala right up against its bumper and pushed its dismayed driver right out of the way. Its brake lights were still glowing as he scraped past it.

He pushed the button on his phone again as he sped down the dog walk in the little park.

"Laurence, speaker," he barked.

The phone rang once. "Hello Scott?" Council Laurence sounded serene.

"Call the FCC, shut down WBLA, now!" He yelled over the sirens at the cell phone in his lap.

"What's going on?" Laurence's voice cracked a little.

"They're interviewing Vallone right now." The tires squealed as the Impala slid back onto the street.

"Oh shit."

"Send a decontamination team to WBLA on 41st."

"How many?"

"Everyone!"

Nathan yelled, "Hangup" as he pummeled someone's grocery cart.

He read the street sign. *37th, three more streets and you're mine sick man.*

Nathan's car came to a screaming halt behind two other squad cars parked in front of the BLA building.

Four other officers were squatting behind their cars, guns drawn. *They look ridiculous*, he thought.

He introduced himself, "Nathan Jones, number two at MIR." He towered over the hiding men.

"We heard," one crouching cop said.

“Come on, you wimps, he won’t shoot you from the window.” Nathan mocked them. He started walking toward the building.

“Sir he’s not inside. He’s in the alley.”

Got him.

“You didn’t engage him?” he breathed deeply.

“No sir. He hasn’t seen us yet.”

“You two go around the back, so he doesn’t escape.” He pointed the two far officers. “You two with me.”

He jogged toward the ally with the two NYC cops in tow. They rounded the corner and he immediately recognized Vallone’s silhouette.

Vallone was holding a wick lighter. It was lit. He tossed it to the ground and ran.

One of the cops yelled, “Stop.”

A three foot flame erupted from the ground. Both cops hit the deck. Nathan Jones flinched but knew better. He ran toward the flame.

“Sergio” was written in flames across the width of the alley.

Vallone had already darted around the corner.

Nathan ran after him. He rounded the corner and looked after Joe to the left, and then to the right.

Nathan felt himself break into a cold sweat as he ran from car to car looking inside. He was stopping black cars and yelling at their drivers.

The cops followed him from the ally and did the same. No Vallone.

Nathan banged on the window of a Towncar, “Did you see a man running?”

The middle eastern man started rolling down the window.

“What is the big commotion. He went that way. He got in a cab.”

Nathan saw a cab rounding the corner on the other side of the park. He couldn’t make out the plate, it was too far.

The far cops ran around the corner. Nathan looked over at them and realized there were a hundred black livery cars in every direction. And they were all driving away.

“Fuck! I had him.” Nathan fell to his knees.

He felt like crying.

Chapter 49

WBLA's current sitcom was interrupted with static. After a couple of seconds, a film with poor color flicked on. A pale Joe Vallone looked angry and frustrated.

"Well here it goes."

"My name is Joe Vallone. You might know me from Cyborg Wars on NYN. Probably more recently from the supposed bio-terror attack. I need you to know that there was no attack. I need you to know that, for my team owner and friend Lucy Kane. I need you to know, for my Aunt Teresa, whose only crime was helping her sick nephew. They have both completely disappeared since the so-called attack. Lucy did not even know the nanites existed."

Joe stared to the side of the camera for a second and nodded.

"This started three weeks ago when I was in a car accident. It should have killed me. I am a hemophiliac and was badly cut up. I was an inch from death when I arrived at the hospital my Aunt, Dr. Graceland, works at. To save my life she injected me with blood-borne nanites that she has been secretly helping MIR to develop. They helped get extra oxygen to my brain while my body repaired itself."

Joe swallowed. He lifted a piece of notebook paper into view and started reading.

"That is where her part ended. Mark and I started fiddling with nanites we extracted from my blood. We got them to reproduce. We injected me with them to test them."

"Nanites may be illegal, but they are real now. MIR has been lying."

The video cut from Joe, to the view from Joe's clarks at the Olympic trials.

"Here is what you didn't see from the "terrorist" attack at the Olympic trials. I was looking for a terrorist myself. I believed Mark's Iranian cousin Amman may have planned on attacking the trials."

The video showed Joe jumping the railing, and running from the guard's drawn

guns. He clearly outran the athletes on the track.

“That same night, I went to see my father.”

The video cut to Joe hiding in the shrubs at his fathers house.

“MIR had told the police I was armed and dangerous,” Joe’s tone changed,
“My father was drunk and was shot down for having a bottle in his hand.”

The TV displayed the roadblock from Joe’s view and the front door opening.
WBLA clicked off the air.

Chapter 50

Skyler puffed on his cigar to keep from gritting his teeth. The cold grave he was sitting on was starting to tire him out. A light coat of snow covered the small bare trees scattered throughout the Kingsland Cemetery.

I should have left my tree-stand and cammo here on my last run. I'd be lounging in comfort from the woods. Skyler looked back longingly at the tree line behind him.

Skyler Truman stood up and held his rifle in front of him and scanned for traffic through its magnified scope. He instinctively thumbed the safety as he trained the gun on a passing truck.

No A Team. Just another rig.

Frustrated, he sat back down on his grave. He was hidden from the view of the road by a mausoleum.

We're going to miss our window, and then things are going to get weird. We've got three more hours, tops.

He racked his brain to come up with a viable plan C. His thoughts returned to longing for his hunting camouflage.

Who am I kidding, Skyler thought, *I'd be asleep up in the tree.*

The radio on his hip squelched lightly. A woman's voice with a southern accent echoed softly. "SG you there?"

He unhooked it from his belt and tapped the button.

"No CB, I'm asleep in a tree," he retorted.

"You're going to miss your window." The woman's voice was a little sarcastic.

"I know what I'm doing." He replied.

The radio was silent for a few seconds. He stared at a field of snow covered graves some of them more than a hundred years old. He thought about the many enemies of the United States he had dispatched with machine like precision. A cold breeze sent a shiver down his spine.

“Maybe I don’t know exactly what I’m doing. The TV? Maybe they’re not righteous, just dumb,” Skyler said sheepishly. He wondered if he was being vague enough, even for their illegitimate frequency.

“You’re doing fine hunny bunny.” The women’s voice soothed him. “You know the right thing when you see it. If anything they made it easier for you. You’re not the only suspicious one now.”

“Yeah right. People could care less,” he replied, “I’m watching for the eagle, you’ll see him when he lands.”

“Everybody uses that for everything,” she replied.

“Exactly.” He grinned.

He clipped the radio back on his belt, and lifted the rifle to scan another passing truck.

It was a cop car.

What would a cop be doing all the way out here. You’d be lucky to get one in a half hour if you called them. Relax Skyler, he thought. Somebody must have started a brawl at the bar. He unclipped the radio from his belt.

“CB, you there?”

“I’m here sugar.”

“What’s doing at the hornets’ nest.”

“They seem pretty calm, a little ruckus out front, nothing new.”

“A big TY.”

“I love you SG,” she purred.

“I love you CB,” he replied.

He clipped the radio back on his belt, and lifted the long rifle to scan another passing truck.

A new set of headlights crested the distant ridge. He stood up and scanned the road through his sight.

It was a black Lincoln Towncar. *That has got to be them. Nobody up here has that kind of money.*

He watched as the Lincoln suddenly slowed down by the side of the road. *They must have just realized they were here.* The trunk popped and Joe and Mark climbed out, small bags in tow. A third man got out of the passenger side door. Robert’s face became clear as he trotted around the car. Skyler watched as he slung his sword across his back.

The rifle’s sight trained on the horizon again. No trucks yet.

Robert tugged Joe’s jacket and the two of them started walking quickly toward the middle of the graveyard. He noticed the light shadows from their footprints in the moonlight.

No clouds, fucking snow and they are all wearing dark colors, he thought. *I would pay fifty grand for light fog. If we're interrupted, I'm going to have to start shooting people or leave them here.*

Skyler growled under his breath and resisted the urge to flick off the safety.

He trained back on Mark and the Towncar. *Come on dummy,* he thought, *you're in the open.*

Mark shook the driver's hand and started jogging toward the others.

Not up the middle, this is all wrong.

His radio squelched.

"SG, baby, the exterminator has come and gone, he's headed your way."

Oh crap.

He glanced at the not so distant tree break on the west side of the highway. He saw headlights reflecting off the furthest trees.

Not just headlights, sirens. We've got ten seconds, he thought.

Skyler scanned over to the taxi. He was just finishing a three point turn and beginning to accelerate east.

He pointed his sight toward the boys. They weren't walking fast anymore. They were casually reading gravestones as they strolled along.

I told them the back of the graveyard. So much for the plan.

He stepped out from behind the mausoleum. The boys didn't see him.

How do they not see me?

I have no choice. Skyler yelled to them.

"Hit the dirt, five oh," his voice echoed across the graveyard.

Joe immediately jumped to the ground. Robert dragged a confused looking Mark to the ground behind a small grave.

"Baby you read me?" The women's voice resonated.

He crouched down behind the mausoleum again and watched the cop whiz by with his lights on. He saw oncoming headlights as the cop disappeared.

He scanned the boy's positions and saw Mark start to get up.

"Wait!" Skyler yelled.

A truck approached and zipped by going in the other direction.

He crouched next to the edifice, and scanned both east and west though his sight. Satisfied he stood up.

"Get up and get back here *now!*"

He saw them get up and start trotting.

"Run, this ain't no game."

They broke into a sprint.

Satisfied, he unclipped his radio.

“The eagle has landed.”

“I was wondering,” she answered.

The trio ran up to him as he waved them behind the Mausoleum. He towered over them. Their light urban jackets and smaller shoulders made them seem small compared to Skyler in his quilted nylon winter coat. Mark was panting.

“So glad you could make it,” he smiled and shook their hands.

“Thank you,” they all said in turn.

“Not a big one.” Skyler lied.

“What’s that for?” Mark pointed to the rifle placed on the mausoleum’s ledge.

“That’s the best pair of binoculars I own.” He lied again.

“Nice belt,” Joe grumbled. He pointed to the shiny cross on his belt buckle.

“Thank you, it’s my second favorite.” He smiled.

“You a Christian?” Joe inquired.

The smile dropped off his face.

“Why you asking?” Skyler looked mean.

Joe looked a little scared, “Sorry, it doesn’t matter.”

He looked at Joe’s face and realized he had caught him completely off guard. Skyler’s anger drained away.

“Sorry. It’s just every time somebody wants to know what I think about God, they’re trying to tell me what God thinks. They don’t know of course, they’re just trying to manipulate me.”

“We wouldn’t dream of it.” Mark smiled nervously.

He thought about who he was talking to. *Scared kids make mistakes, I had better calm them down.*

“Let’s go.” Skyler tried to beat back the awkward silence.

He started walking into the woods perpendicular to the road, the boys followed sheepishly.

“I was a Baptist, but I’m not sure what I am now. I can’t imagine they’d take me back,” he continued the conversation.

“Why not?” Joe inquired, still hesitant.

“Cause I don’t take no shit.” The trucker grinned. He ducked and pushed some small branches out of his red curly hair.

“How about you Joe? You’re Italian right? So you’re probably Catholic.” He stomped some low brush.

“No, not really,” Joe replied.

“Catholic?”

“No, Italian. If I was Italian, I could run to Italy. They might have stuck up for my Dad, but not me.” Joe paused “Like it or not I’m American.” He gritted

his teeth.

“I know the feeling.” Skyler nodded.

The group of four were silent except for the snapping of twigs and crunching of snow as they walked. Joe and Mark were shivering and Robert was a little blue. They approached a lit clearing which turned out to be a large parking lot. There were dozens of eighteen wheelers and truck cabs parked behind a homey looking bar.

Skyler motioned down with a flat hand, palm down. They got the message and kept low. A truck pulled up in front of them blocking the view of the parking lot. They climbed the chrome monogrammed step into the near white cab. Skyler tossed his cigar in the snow as he climbed aboard.

A black woman with long wavy hair sat in the driver’s seat. She was wearing a T shirt and shorts and nothing else it seemed. Mark immediately started staring at her protruding breasts. Robert tapped his shoulder and gave him a look.

She smiled a wicked smile. Skyler guessed she might have giggled had she been just a bit younger.

“That’s okay Robert”, he can’t help looking. He gazed into his wife’s eyes. “I tried to come as close as humanly possible to the girl on the mudflaps.”

“Oh stop it, Skyler.” She clearly didn’t really want him to.

Skyler patted Mark on the back hard enough to make his head shake. He hung his rifle on a rack with two shotguns.

“Boys, meet my wife, Anna Belle Truman.”

“It’s a pleasure.” Robert held out his hand. Anna Belle shook it.

“Hi.” Joe shook her hand as well.

Joe is a man of many words, Skyler smiled.

“Hello. Nice to meet you,” Mark said still wavering a little.

“We love your show” Anna Belle spoke to Mark with a little extra twang. “What part of the cyborgs do you build?”

“The control sisters,” Mark stuttered, “I mean systems.”

“So you’re a computer geek?” she asked.

“Yes, and an outlaw.” Mark smiled.

Joe laughed out loud.

“Okay all you folks get to the back, we’ve got a schedule to keep if we want to actually get you boys across the border.”

Skyler smacked Anna Belle’s butt as she climbed into the back part of the cab. *She knew exactly what Mark did, she was playing with him.* He shook his head and smiled.

“CB, did you switch the crystal back?” Skyler called behind the curtain separating the front and the back of the cab.

“No baby, I was sleeping in the back.”

Skyler pressed a button and picked up the receiver on the CB radio.

“SGT calling Little Fish over.” He shifted the truck into first as he talked.

The radio was silent for a few seconds.

“Hey SGT, it’s Little Fish.”

“Get ready for us, cause we’re a commin.”

“That’s a ten four.”

Chapter 51

The truck had made a left, two rights, and another left. Kento tried to imagine a map of upstate NY. It was getting light out now, and sunrise was about thirty minutes later here this time of year. Driving at sixty miles an hour on the most direct route, we would have passed the border into Canada by now. We must be traveling parallel to the border, Kento thought, or we could be driving back to the city for all I know.

Kento wished he could have peaked through the curtain to see what road they were on. Instead he was sitting on a bench facing the back of the truck in the corner of the rear compartment.

Joe was snoozing on the upper bunk in the back of the cab. Mark absent-mindedly typed in the air as he stared longingly through his translucent clarks at Skyler's wife on the other side of their shared bunk. Kento wondered if he had ever seen a woman before, well before Lucy that is. *In any case Mark had made up his mind he likes them.*

Skyler's wife watched a movie on the cab wall with headphones, about an abused child coming of age. Kento didn't recall the title.

Skyler pulled the curtain back and talked into the back. "Okay we're going to be there in about five minutes," he turned to look at the road and turned back again, "What ever you need to do so you don't need to breathe, you had better start it up."

Mark immediately started rummaging through his bag.

"Skyler, what are you talking about?" Kento slurred a little from exhaustion.

"Mark said the nanites meant you could be sealed up tight. You don't need to breath for a while," he turned his head, "So we're going to smuggle you out all sealed up in some drums."

The back of the truck started spinning, Kento thought he might vomit.

"I wasn't sure what I would be hauling, so this was the only way I knew would

work.”

Kento held onto a handle bolted to the wall of the cab. He imagined a lid being closed on top of him sealing him in a drum. His heart was pounding. He managed to lift his head and look at Mark.

Mark shrugged his shoulders and mouthed, “I didn’t know,” while shaking his head.

Kento put his fist over his mouth to try to hide his heavy breathing.

Shotgun hit the brakes as the truck bumped over a small curb. They were obviously here.

Maybe I can cross on foot, Kento thought to himself. I’m sure I’m tough enough. I’d need to get Skyler to lend me that puffy jacket though. It’s too cold out.

“So where are we?” he asked voice wavering.

“We’re here,” Skyler answered smugly.

Can I ask again without seeming desperate, Kento wondered.

Joe’s head craned down from the top bunk.

Mark pulled six large needles from a protective case. They were already prepared with filtered nanites.

Mark talked as he worked, “We’ll need about twenty minutes of fresh air to get these guys to one hundred percent, barring physical exertion.”

He looked right at Kento as he spoke.

Mark depressed the plunger on a needle labeled “me” and flicked it to get a small bubble out. He plunged it into his own arm.

Mark talked as he injected himself. “I’m not certain I’ve set them correctly for our blood types, immune system profile, etc, there is a chance Kento or I could have a bad reaction. If our vitals get too bad I’ve written a simple program that will randomly change a factor per nanite every ten minutes. This is combined with a simple proximity election system where unmolested nanites advertise their configuration.”

“That sounds crazy.” Joe had bags under his eyes.

“It will avoid certain death.” Mark smiled.

Kento could barely follow the conversation. *I thought those nanites were for emergencies,* he thought. Kento felt his eyes cross a little.

“Replacing it with what?” Skyler poked his head in the back.

“Potential death?” Mark smiled weakly.

Everybody stared at Mark.

“Great.” Joe jumped down from the top bunk and held out his arm.

“When you are dead...” Joe looked at Mark and Kento. “Will they know me at the school?”

“We won’t be dead. We are all networked together. I’ll be watching your vitals and Kento’s. You’ll be watching mine and Kento’s and Kento will be watching ours.”

I won’t be watching anything after you seal me up in a tuna can, Kento struggled to act rationally. I am not going to die. I am not going to die. I am going to live. I cannot act weak.

“Okay Kento, give me your arm,” Mark said paternally.

Kento extended his arm so Mark could inject him.

Mark put a cotton ball in Kento’s left hand and placed the arm on his right hand.

Kento felt like he was swimming in fear.

“Coast is clear,” Skyler waved them into the sunless dawn.

The three young men trotted through the cold up a ramp next to the loading dock Skyler had backed up to. A lanky Native American in a flannel and a baseball cap greeted them.

“Hi, I’m Little Fish.”

Skyler walked in a moment later.

“Guys this is Little Fish. The most trusting man alive.” Skyler smiled a gigantic smile.

“You don’t need to advertise it.” Little Fish grinned.

“I’m going to unload the truck.”

“We’ve got a half an hour.” Little Fish looked at his watch.

“At least an hour.” Skyler smiled.

Kento saw a rolling chair near a desk by the entrance. He grabbed it and sat down before he fell down.

“Make yourself at home,” Little Fish raised his eyebrows. He was standing over Kento.

Skyler zoomed around in the background driving a tiny forklift. He looked far too big for it.

“He may not be well, we just injected him with nanites.” Mark seemed to cover for Kento.

“That’s right, you guys are some kind of terrorists.”

“If you count curing cancer and AIDS as treason then yes.” Joe spoke with authority.

“Well technically.” Mark started to correct Joe.

Joe shot Mark a look that could kill.

Little Fish saw Joe's look and asked, "Why would they do that?"

"They're too lazy to do more security work." Joe's words rung out with anger.

"So they are too lazy to secure the cure for cancer?" Little Fish frowned.

"Or incompetent." Joe growled.

"Hmmm, government lazy and incompetent." Little Fish paused thinking.
"I'll buy that." He smiled.

"Hey, where are the pallets?" Skyler's voice yelled from behind a wall of boxes.

"On the side." He walked toward Shotgun's voice.

Mark came over to Kento offering him a hand up. Kento took it. They all followed Little Fish.

Kento felt his heart pound harder with every step.

When they got to the pallets Kento nearly fell over. He caught himself on the nearest skiff.

"I'd better check his vitals." Joe flipped his clarks down off his head.

"No he's fine. I just checked him." Mark covered for Kento again.

Joe looked at the pallets stacked with looseleaf paper and pens.

"Where?" Joe asked simply.

Little Fish pointed at the top. Joe pulled himself up and winced when he leaned on his bad arm. Once he climbed on top of the loaded pallet, his frown changed to a smile of recognition.

He stared and smiled. Finally he spoke up. "It's a big drum in the middle."

Mark flipped his Clarks down on his head. And typed in the air.

"We've got to wait about ten more minutes. We're just about at fifty percent."

I'm not going to last that long, Kento thought.

"Did I hear you say you're networked?" Skyler asked.

"Yeah," Joe replied.

"You have to shut it off. They scan for radio signals at the border, encrypted or not. For bombs and the like."

"Can we just pull the drums shut when we get there? We need to watch Kento," Mark asked.

"Nope. Sometimes they have dogs. We've got to seal you up here." Skyler looked at Mark.

"Look at him." Joe pointed at Kento. "He's a mess, he could die."

"Look, twenty five minutes after the truck leaves the bay, we'll be at the border. When you feel me jerk the brakes three times shut em off."

"Okay." Joe seemed satisfied.

Little Fish and Skyler walked to the back of the warehouse, discussing some drunken exploits at someplace called Horny Henry's.

Joe wandered off toward a very cold looking bathroom.

"Mark, I can't handle it." Kento looked unraveled.

"We don't have a choice." Mark frowned.

"I do. I'm going to pass out once I'm in there. I know how to force myself." Kento's eyes were wide.

"I understand. Don't worry, I won't think you're dying."

"What about Joe?" Kento asked.

Mark smiled. "I wrote the program, he'll see what I want him to see."

"Thank you." Kento wheezed.

It felt like a year as Kento waited in silence for the most terrifying experience of his life. He imagined himself restrained and suffocating when he closed his eyes. Instead he stared blankly at the pallets. He was barely able to stand. He stopped himself from hyperventilating several times.

"Okay, we have to go now." Skyler yelled as he strode up.

"Eighty eight percent on Kento."

"It will have to do."

The room started to spin again.

Mark and Joe climbed up on the pallets and stood up in their drums, bags in hand.

Kento just watched.

"Hey this is bigger than I imagined," Mark said.

Kento guessed he was trying to help.

"Those are one hundred ten gallon drums," Little Fish said, "Useless for anything but terrorists and toxic waste."

"I kinda like it." Joe smiled darkly.

Kento hung to every word.

Everybody was looking at Kento's pale shaking form.

I have to do this, Kento thought to himself. He climbed up the pallet backwards and stood up tall in the center of the large drum. He looked around at the perplexed audience.

"Okay, down you go." Skyler went to close Kento's lid first.

Kento felt like a cornered dog. He found himself rearing around to punch Skyler but redirected the swing to the inside of the drum at the last second. Kento winced at the loud thud. His legs gave and he fell over backwards as the lid came down, eclipsing the florescent light from the warehouse. Kento wanted to scream

but instead bit down on his hand. He tasted blood as the rapid breaths left him. He barely saw the inside of the barrel go dark.

Chapter 52

Terror.

Skyler could not let these kids get caught. *I don't want to kill a bunch of border guards either.* He pulled a handgun out from under his seat and tucked it in the back of his pants and pulled his shirt over it. Skyler squinted to blur the empty road. White snowy trees blurred into streaking lines in the light of the early dawn.

He recognized the last billboard before the border. He gave the brakes three distinct pushes.

Okay here we go.

Anna Belle looked at Skyler. "You okay SC? You look a little worried."

"We've never done this before. Who knows what we didn't think of."

"We smuggled this way before." She looked serious and ten years older.

"Yeah, heart medicine." He shook his head. "A few less consequences if we got caught."

"SG, you didn't read that link I sent you did you? Unless they execute you, you would have spent longer in jail for the cloned pills."

He smiled a crooked smile. "Unless they execute me."

He slowly steered the truck to the commercial side of the border guard house. He lined his window up perfectly with the shivering guard. Skyler handed him some papers.

The guard rubbed his gloved hands as he read the crinkled paper. "You're a couple of hours late."

"I had a few drinks down at Horny Harry's, I needed to sleep it off." Skyler felt his heart beating faster as he lied.

The guard typed at his computer terminal in a small booth. He watched the screen for a minute and shook his head.

"Well, now you're going to run even later. Your number's up." A second guard walked up on the passengers side. Hand on his holstered gun.

“Please step out of the truck slowly.”

Skyler felt fear *wash* over him. *I know these guys, I don't want to have to hurt them*, he thought.

He pulled his jacket on as he opened the door and stepped down.

“Does my wife have to get dressed?” Skyler asked shrugging his shoulders.

The guard looked at his T-shirt clad wife in the passenger seat.

“No, I think you’ll do.” He smiled.

Good, I still have control of the situation.

“Okay, we need you to open the trailer up for us.”

Uh oh, that's not routine. He thought of the Monopoly “go to jail” card. “Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars.”

“Really, do we need too?”

“Sorry Skyler, the alert level was raised.”

He walked to the back of the truck. *I hope Anna Belle is watching*, he thought. He unlocked the back swinging doors and opened them, revealing the line of pallets within.

Skyler felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up as a third officer emerged from the glare of the morning sunrise. He was walking a German Shepherd. He resisted the urge to pull his handgun.

He couldn't see Anna Belle, but he knew she was ready now too.

He looked on as the dog hopped up inside the trailer, and began sniffing around the pallets. His chest heaved as he tried to look bored and sleepy.

The dog paused at Joe's pallet and squeaked a little, but kept searching.

He prayed the dog was not tired. *If he sits down, people will die today.*

When the dog reached the back of the trailer, his officer turned around and lead him back out by the short leash. *I must have passed*, Shotgun thought.

“Okay Skyler, sorry about that. Just sign here and we'll see you again soon.”

His hand shook as he leaned down and signed the clipboard. He was grateful for the cold, it hid his fear well.

Chapter 53

“Council Frank, do you think your needs supersede the interests of the United States Government?” The judge looked annoyed.

“Not his, Dr. Teressa Graceland’s,” Lucy yelled out. She looked angry.

Her lawyer Lewis Frank turned to her. “Lucy be quiet, it’s not your turn to speak.”

The judge spoke, “You would be wise to listen to your lawyer. Unless you want to donate your bail money to New York State.”

“Your honor, I think what she is trying to say is while I have been retained by Miss Kane, I am not acting as her lawyer, but as Teressa Graceland’s.”

“Well you should tell your client that some very important people need to speak to her, and she should turn herself in to the nearest police precinct immediately.”

“That’s the problem, your honor. We don’t know where she is.”

“It sounds like we agree.”

“We have reason to believe she is being held in violation of her rights at a prison normally reserved for enemy combatants.”

“Those are serious accusations being levied,” the judge paused, “Being levied against somebody somewhere.”

A few people in the back of the packed courtroom chuckled.

“Except for the police report that says ten New York city police officers were assigned to a special task force that participated in a raid a week ago, and were indeed witnessed apprehending her.” Council Frank pulled a paper out of his briefcase.

The judge waved him up to her bench. He walked the paper up to her.

The judge scanned the paper. “Okay, so the precinct should be able to tell you who has custody of Dr. Graceland.”

“They deny having arrested her. According to Staff Sargent Tollhouse the police there were just serving as bodyguards for federal agents making the arrests.” Frank Lewis looked stern. “The report listed three FBI agents by name and two unnamed MIR lawyers.”

“I see that.” The judge was reading more carefully now. “So did you contact the FBI officers? They must have performed the arrest.”

“Yes I did your honor, but all three deny performing the arrest.”

“Really. Do you have that in writing?”

“No. I was told I will get it in the mail in two days. That was five days ago.”

“This is pretty serious council Frank, but I have one question for you.” The judge pulled her reading glasses off. “Why me?”

The courtroom laughed again.

“If any charges were actually brought against Teressa Graceland, she would have been charged in this federal circuit. Likewise any kidnapping case would be tried here as well.”

“Why do you think she is in a military prison?”

“At great personal expense, Lucy Kane obtained the flight plan of the private plane that the unnamed MIR lawyers used. She originally received a bogus flight plan which did not check out at the destination. Only by offering to pay an anonymous airport official did she get the real plan.” He pulled another paper out of his briefcase. “The plane’s next stop was Cuba.”

Council Frank brought the new papers to the judges bench.

“I think I see where you are going with this.” The judge put her glasses back on and squinted at the paper.

Members of the press were scribbling furiously in the benches.

“This court orders Staff Sargent Tollhouse to appear Monday. We are adjourned until then.”

Lucy grinned.

Chapter 54

When Amman opened his eyes, a dark figure in robes towered over him. He couldn't make out his face in the dim light.

"You know the woman doctor was here for a day," the man's voice was calm and confident. He had a middle eastern accent, possibly Iranian.

Amman braced himself for a fight. In a weeks time, he had only seen guards, soldiers and lawyers. Something wasn't right. *How did he get here?*

"For one day she was just like us. She ate the food. She breathed the foul air. She slept on the urine soaked bedding we sleep on. For a day she led the life of a noble man."

"Who are you?" Amman inquired. He slowly extended his legs across the cot to the wall of his prison cell. He felt his muscles tense as his feet found the wall.

The man continued speaking, ignoring Amman's question.

"She has known privilege few women could know. She wields power over men. Not the nurturing love, but a commanding power."

Amman was in serious trouble. He tried to keep a straight face, but he could not be sure his fear was not seeping through.

"Even the men you cower before ultimately bow to her will. They answer to her whims. They've already sent her back home. She makes them dance as if they were puppets."

"Guard! Guard!" Amman would not live out his life here for murder, nor did he want to die.

"Islam demands you follow Allah's will, and not only do you not walk the path, you've stopped all others. See what trusting the infidels does for you? Where are you now? Without God, who can save you?"

The man lunged at Amman. He pulled a shank from his robes.

Amman grabbed the man's hand with both of his. The larger man struggled to overpower him. Realizing Amman was braced against the wall, he shifted around

to lean over him.

Amman sensed his opportunity. He lunged away from the wall with his legs easily clearing the narrow cot. The man, clinging onto the shank, spun around and fell on top of him.

The six inch shank sunk deep into the man's stomach. He screeched as he impaled himself.

Amman recognized the man from his meetings in Tehran. He was an Iranian minister. *He must have heard the great betrayer was here*, he thought.

He scowled and looked deep in the dying man's eyes, "You tell me you know the path? Do you even know what a nanite is? You have to comprehend Allah's will to serve it. You serve only death."

He heard the guards coming, now that a death cry echoed through the halls. *How convenient*, he thought sarcastically.

"Infidel! Traitor," the man coughed in Farsi spattering blood in Amman's face.

"You betrayed Iran, Islam, and mankind Abdul. Apocalypse was not yours to start."

Two guards pulled Abdul's bloody limp body off Amman. Two more soldiers pulled him up on his feet and punched him in the stomach.

He tried not to laugh at the guards, he had endured much worse. *Abdul was right though*, he thought as the guards dragged him off. *Holy men, politicians, even friends ultimately serve their own ends. Only a family can share the kind of love that overcomes all.*

I hope Mark never regrets abandoning me, but I know he will.

Chapter 55

Joe's ears were hot. He could feel the blood boiling under his skin. He sneered as he rocked back and forth in his toxic waste tomb. He held himself as he rocked, trying to soothe his rage. Maybe it was the constant noise in his ears of the truck grinding over the decaying Canadian roads. Maybe it was persistent vibration every time his head knocked into the inside wall of the barrel.

Maybe it was because it was his first time alone since his father had been murdered.

Those bastards. First her and now him too, Joe thought. Those bastards, I could have fixed it. I could have talked with my sober father again. I could have told him about how wrong it has all gone. How much I love Lucy and Finny. Maybe I would have forgiven him for loving my mother's sister.

Now I can't. I can't strut around and pretend to be angry at him. I can't tell him how much I miss mom. They took that from me. You only get one insane screwed up family and they took that from me. You greedy, short sighted, power hungry monsters. They were mine!

He wiped his nose with his hand and realized it was wet. He hadn't even noticed he was crying.

Why did this happen to me? Because I'm sick? Because my body doesn't make some fucking protein? Because I was curious about a robot that was floating around in my own blood? Because my aunt wanted to cure immune disease? That bitch!

He kicked the inside of the barrel denting it slightly with a loud bong noise. His shoulder throbbed with the movement.

I'll kill them. I'll kill them all. I don't care if I have to dedicate my whole life to it. I'll do whatever it takes. They killed my family. They wrecked the A-team. They took Lucy and any friends I knew from me. They shot me. They should have aimed for the head. Big mistake.

Joe stared wide eyed into the pitch black.

I'll be done when Nathan Jones, no wait, I can't die until Scott Conner is dead. There can be no other, no greater purpose. You can lie to everyone else, but not me.

You're either with me or against me, he thought.

As he rocked himself, he felt himself choke. *I can't even go to his funeral,* he thought.

"Oh God, Dad," he moaned.

Joe sobbed and wept aloud.

